

Reading comprehension: Read the text and answer the questions

In this excerpt from the novel *Bridge of Sighs*, the narrator reminisces about "surfing" in the back of his father's milk delivery truck with his friend, Bobby Marconi. Read the excerpt and answer the questions that follow.

from **Bridge of Sighs**
by Richard Russo

- [1] There were no milk deliveries to residences on Saturdays, just to commercial businesses, and there were relatively few of these in the Borough. My father would finish his deliveries early, then swing by the house for Bobby Marconi and me so we could "surf the truck." The empty metal milk crates were by then stacked and roped off against the side panels to prevent them from sliding and bouncing around when he turned corners. His careful stacking left most of the back empty, and Bobby and I would stand in the space created, our feet planted firmly on the ribbed floor, and pretend to surf, our arms out at our sides to keep our balance as the truck rattled along the wide Borough streets. I always surfed in the forward position, an advantage because you could see the turns coming. Bobby, as athletic in the milk truck as he was elsewhere, surfed more or less blind behind me. Not being able to see what was coming made the game that much more fun, he claimed, though I did help him by calling out "Left!" or "Sharp right!" when a turn approached. The idea was to make it through these turns without grabbing the empty milk crates for balance or the rail that ran the length of the truck, my father chortling appreciatively up front in the driver's seat as we crashed about.
- [2] Of course my father wasn't supposed to take Bobby and me on his route, but the rules were lax and people did it all the time, was his thinking. There was no passenger seat, since there weren't supposed to be any passengers, so if my father braked hard, there was nothing to stop Bobby and me but the metal dash. My father would try to grab us as we flew by, and he was good at it, but you never knew what his big fist would grab hold of—an arm, your hair—and being saved from hitting the console sometimes hurt worse than colliding with it.
- [3] "No, you ain't gonna do no surfing today," he'd tell us first thing each Saturday. "Bobby's dad don't want him doing that no more." Mr. Marconi had made that pretty clear early on. Bobby had come home with a knot on his forehead, and his father had wanted to know why, so he'd explained how we always surfed the milk truck. It was fun, he said, and not really dangerous because my father never went fast. Which was true—you *couldn't* go fast in a milk truck if you tried.
- [4] But the next Saturday, when we pulled up in the truck, Mr. Marconi came out, too, and took my father aside. "Tell me about this surfing," he demanded, leaning toward him aggressively, his birthmark a bright purple. Lately, things had gotten a little easier between them, so much so that my father had remarked on it, even speculating that his neighbor had decided to bury the hatchet.
- [5] My father explained to him how devoted we were to our surfing on Saturday mornings, how we looked forward to it all week, how Mr. Marconi should hear how we laughed and shouted there in the back of the truck, how we hated it when he finally said that was enough. He said he was sorry about Bobby getting that lump on his noggin last week. "He don't like to grab on till the last second," he explained, which was true. It was Bobby's fearlessness, his refusal to grab on to the rail or the stacked crates to keep from going flying, that had caused the injury. "Don't worry," my father assured him. "I keep a pretty good eye on 'em."
- [6] "You better had," Mr. Marconi said. "Anything happens to my boy in that truck, you're responsible."
- [7] So the following Saturday, the new rule was No Surfing the Truck, but that made us miserable. There was no reason to be *in* the truck if we weren't allowed to surf. "Just a *little*," we pleaded. "Just five minutes? Just around this one corner? Pleeceeease?" And so it was that we wore my father down. Over time we went from No Surfing to No Surfing Till We're Headed Back Home, thus limiting the amount of time for an injury to occur, to Be Careful, You Two, Because Bobby's Dad Will Skin Me Alive If He Gets Hurt, and If He Don't Your Mother Will, because, truth be told, she didn't like the idea either.
- [8] Why so much worry about us getting hurt? Well, because that's what invariably happened. Otherwise, how would we know the game was over? Of course our injuries were not serious—a jammed finger, a skinned knee, usually—and most Saturdays we surfed until I cried, because Bobby, when he was injured, refused to cry, so my father didn't know he'd been hurt and the fun could continue. I deeply envied Bobby his self-control and tried my best to emulate him, even as I suspected I'd never master the trick. Why he never cried was an even deeper mystery to me than why he never had to pay the bridge toll back when we lived on Berman Court. Every Saturday I'd tell myself that I wasn't going to cry, but when the time came and I went crashing into the side of the truck, and my father, hearing the impact, turned around in his seat to check on us, my resolution would dissolve, not so much because of the pain as from his expression, which suggested that he knew I was hurt, that I couldn't fool him anyway, so why try? And then the tears would just *be* there, brimming over, no holding them back.
- [9] Still, before long we'd forgotten all about Mr. Marconi's solemn warning, and why not? He had to know we were back at it. One or the other of us always got off the milk truck limping or rubbing an elbow, but we were also in high spirits, laughing and

shouting and trying to get my father to promise we'd do it again next Saturday. Which wasn't hard work, since he enjoyed the whole thing about as much as we did. He never talked about his own childhood, but according to my mother it couldn't really be called a childhood at all, just an unrelenting series of chores, from sunrise to sunset, bleak and unending, which was why, she explained, he wasn't anxious for me to have a paper route like Bobby or to be overburdened with responsibilities around the house. I was to keep my room clean and study when I was supposed to, but otherwise I was simply to be the sort of boy my father never had a chance to be. The pleasure he took in our joy when we surfed his milk truck was purely vicarious, and his grin was ear to ear.

[10] My own Saturday morning happiness was more complex. It's true that I looked forward all week to our surfing. As I said, it was about the only time Bobby and I got to spend together. But as the summer wore on I became troubled by the knowledge that part of me was waiting for, indeed looking forward to, my friend getting hurt. It had, of course, nothing to do with him and everything to do with my own cowardice and jealousy. The jealous part had to do, I think, with my understanding that Bobby's bravery meant he was having more fun, something that my own cowardly bailing out had robbed me of. Each week I told myself I'd be braver, that this Saturday I wouldn't reach out and hold on for safety. I'd surrender control and be flung about, laughing and full of joyous abandon. But every outing was the same as the last, and when the moment came, I grabbed on. Gradually, since wishing for courage didn't work, I began wishing for something else entirely. I never wanted Bobby to be seriously injured, of course. That would have meant the end of everything. But I did wish that just once he'd be hurt bad enough to cry, which would lessen the gulf⁹ I perceived between him and me.

[11] And so our milk-truck surfing ended the only way it could. I didn't actually see Bobby break his wrist when he was flung against the side of the truck. I heard the bone snap, though. What saved me from suffering the same fate was my cowardice. I'd seen the curve coming and at the last second reached out and grabbed one of the tied-off milk crates. Bobby, taken by surprise, went flying.

[12] He must've known that his wrist was broken, because he went very pale, and when our eyes met and he saw my shock and fear, he immediately sat down with his back to the panel, cradling his hand in his lap against the truck's vibrations. I think what my father heard wasn't the terrible crack of Bobby's wrist but only the silence that followed, and he immediately called back to us, wanting to know if we were all right. When Bobby refused to speak, I said that we were, but he knew better. If we weren't whooping and hollering¹⁰ back there, something was wrong, and more seriously wrong than what happened every other Saturday morning. He didn't just pull over and climb back into the dark interior of the truck, but instead got out, came around and threw the big rear doors wide open so the light could pour in. After one look at the angle of Bobby's wrist, the blood drained out of my father's face. While I expected him to get mad, he didn't, and when he simply closed the doors again, got back into the truck and turned for home, it wasn't Bobby but me who began to cry.

[13] Mr. Marconi was sitting on their upstairs front porch reading a magazine when we pulled up at the curb, and he seemed to know something had happened even before my father opened the rear doors of the truck. On the ride back from the Borough, Bobby had gotten sick, and the front of his shirt now glistened with vomit.

[14] When Mr. Marconi emerged from the house, my father began "It was an acci—" but Mr. Marconi held up his index finger, as if to say *Wait a minute*, except that he kept holding it there between them, which altered the meaning of the gesture completely. My father seemed to understand that he was being told to hold his tongue and, for the moment, at least, he held it. Mr. Marconi then reached up into the truck, lifted Bobby down and helped him into the station wagon. "I—" my father began again, but Mr. Marconi again held up that index finger and waited until my father backed up onto the terrace, allowing him to go around to the driver's side and get in next to Bobby, who was by this time slumped against the door, having finally passed out from the pain.

[15] I was remembering what he'd said to me a few minutes before as we sat together in the back of the truck, everything quiet now aside from the rattling of the milk crates. "You didn't call the turn." He seemed less angry than curious, but it was an accusation just the same. I didn't know what to say, though as soon as he spoke those words, I realized they were true.

Glossary: *borough* = *quartier*
to chortle = *glousser*
noggin = *caboche*
emulate = *égaler, imiter*
gulf = *ici, gouffre*
whooping and hollering = *pousser des cris de joie et brailler.*

Comprehension: Answer the following questions about the text. Your answer should not be more than one sentence long. Reformulate the text. (Use your own words without copying the text.)

1. List all the characters who play a role in the story.
2. What do the narrator and Bobby Marconi do in the back of the truck?
3. Why can they only ride in the truck on Saturdays?
4. What does the narrator's father think about the boys' activities at the back of the truck?
What does Bobby's father think?
5. How differently are the narrator and Bobby raised?
6. How differently do the two boys react to their small "injuries"?
7. In paragraph 9, what is the main reason the narrator's father lets the boys play in the truck in spite of Bobby's father's warning?
8. What kind of childhood do you think the narrator's father had?
9. What can you guess about his social background?
10. Explain why the end of the passage is ironic.

Vocabulary: Use the context to explain the following words or expressions.

- a- beginning of paragraph 1: *swing by the house*
- b- end of paragraph 4: *to bury the hatchet*
- c- end of paragraph 9: *vicariously*

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Essays: Choose one topic. Write about 250 words.

- I. When you become a parent, will you be more like the narrator's or Bobby's father? What kind of education will you give your child?
- II. In the text, the narrator learns something about himself from having a dangerous experience. Have you ever had an experience, dangerous or not, that has taught you something about yourself?
- III. Do you think it is necessary to experience something like fear, pain, love or happiness, in order to truly understand it?