

## The Rockford Files

by Scott P. Richert

### A Road to Nowhere

"That's my toll booth," Tom Ditzler says, laughing when his wife, Jan, mentions the portable toilet that the county has left stationed on an island in the road. "Every car has to drop a quarter in as they pass by."

This November day is bitter, in more ways than one. After almost three years of legal battles and construction snafus, the Harrison-Springfield extension—a massive four-lane road that completes a loop around Rockford—has finally opened to traffic. Reports from the ribbon-cutting ceremony this morning caused a stir among local activists, when a caller to a radio talk show claimed that he had seen Tom embracing Kris Cohn, the Winnebago County Board chairman who has pursued the extension with an intensity bordering on the demonic. While the Ditzlers had received an invitation from the county to attend the ribbon-cutting (a slap in the face that is typical of Winnebago County under her current chairman), Cohn is more likely to reconvert to her ancestral Catholicism than Tom is to hug her: Cohn's "leadership" on this issue cost Ditzler, a veteran who lost his sight serving in the U.S. Army, more than half of his 17-acre homestead, which was taken from him through a particularly nasty form of eminent domain called "quick take" (see "For Keeps! A Christian Defense of Property," *Views*, April 2001). Now, the road runs a few dozen feet from his front door. One of his few consolations may be that his tollbooth is unlikely to bring him more than coffee money, since traffic—wildly optimistic estimates of 6,000 cars per day from the county notwithstanding—is extremely light here on opening day.

As Aaron Wolf and I commiserate with the Ditzlers, a reporter from a local TV station saunters across all four lanes and back again, not even bothering to watch out for cars. He has no need to worry; he's more likely to be struck by lightning in the middle of the road. The previous section of the Harrison-Springfield extension—a mile or so of concrete heading west-northwest from South Main Street—has been open for several years, and it is still so desolate that children could play football in the road without fear. The

concrete, however, is already beginning to crack—more proof of the quality workmanship of local public-works contractors such as Rockford Blacktop (whose motto is "Paving the Planet for Over 55 Years." As Dave Barry would say, I'm not making this up. See the logo on their website, [www.rockfordblacktop.com](http://www.rockfordblacktop.com)).

Rockford Blacktop has suffered several embarrassments during the construction of the Harrison-Springfield extension, most notably when a 66-foot stretch of pavement in the west-northwest lanes simply fell in after the marshy ground beneath it gave way, probably because of the winter frost melting. While Blacktop and the county tried to play down the trouble, the Ditzlers—who, unlike the county engineers, knew their own land and had predicted such problems—say that trucks were dumping fill in the hole constantly for weeks. Even now, the trouble spot is obvious, partly because the concrete is newer and lighter-colored, and partly because cracks have begun to appear in the eastbound lanes directly across from the hole.

Under Illinois' quick-take legislation, the county was able to seize the Ditzler's land without paying them in advance. After multiple court appearances, including the trial of their daughter, Christina, for supposedly throwing mud at a sheriff's deputy on the day that the bulldozers started tearing up their land (she was found not guilty), the Ditzlers finally grew tired and settled for about \$105,000—\$63,485 for the confiscated land, and another \$41,515 "in lieu of replacing a bridge over Kent Creek that was torn down during the highway construction," as the local Gannett paper phrased it. (Note the passive language: "was torn down." By whom? Did they have a right to tear it down? The bridge, as well as numerous trees that were cut down along the banks of the creek, was entirely on land not seized by the county. Let nothing and no one stand in the way of the passive march of progress.)

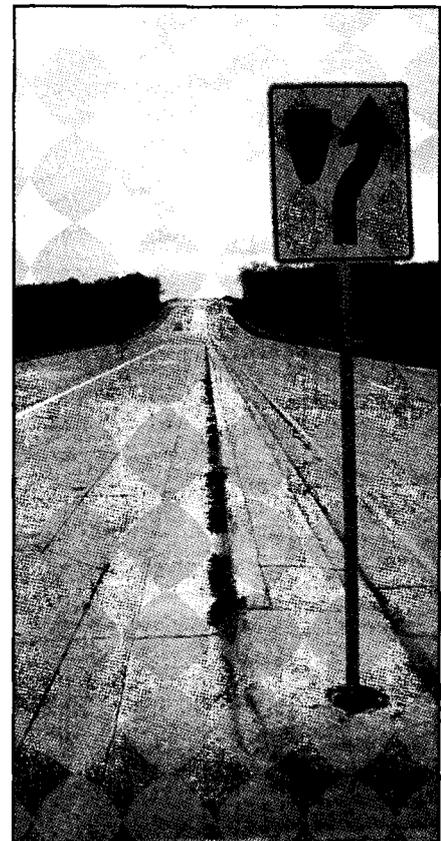
When Tom and Jan invite us inside, we are reminded of perhaps the greatest

*Traffic floods the Harrison-Springfield extension on opening day*



of their consolations: A constant stream of friends and well-wishers, many of whom rallied around them during their long battle, flows in and out of their door. While they thank us profusely for the national attention that *Chronicles* brought to their case, our actions were minor compared to the hundreds of hours that others spent in the vain attempt to help them save their land. The local politicians and land developers whose blind trusts control the property along the Harrison-Springfield extension may make a killing off of the new road, but their wealth will always pale alongside of the human riches that Tom, Jan, and Christina Ditzler enjoy.

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Scott P. Richert

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## Letter From London

by Andrei Navrozov

### A Way of Dreaming



Another eventful night at Aspinalls, and, somewhere between four in the morning and daybreak, for the thousandth time, I catch myself asking the same thing. How do I explain to a normal person, to a disinterested layman who has never walked down Curzon Street, what goes on in the gambler's soul? Doubtless this can be done, but as with just about every difficult question worth pondering, it would be best to begin somewhere far afield. At any rate, it would be good to begin *somewhere*, which is always the toughest part for anybody who wants to tell the whole perplexing truth, especially when what he's used to telling, for the most part, are the facile lies gangsters slip their molls in old movies.

There are people who spend their whole life in a state of agitation that they perceive as sexual, but which a detached onlooker regards as sad, mad, and manipulative. While a university student, I once had dinner with an inordinately plain woman whom her elderly mother, an internationally known scholar of Old English and among the few professors to give me the time of day, had implored me to meet. At the close of the evening, I had to throw the cunning madwoman out of my rooms by force and lead her across the road to her Volkswagen Beetle with her arms behind her back, like a prisoner. The car wouldn't start, of course, and, for the rest of my life, I shall treasure the malodorous memory of the contest twixt virtue and dignity, as I pushed the bloody Beetle for a block and a half along the leafy, and mercifully level, avenue of the moonlit New England town.

I submit that, in order to begin to understand what goes on in the soul of the man born to play, a layman could do worse than to enter the mind of the woman I so cruelly turned out of doors. Typically, a person of this sort is distinguished by what I would call obsessive semiotic confusion, in that he has eyes only for the so-

cial, cultural, and biological signs that are either wholly imaginary or are there to project the very opposite of his mental constructions. The inner fool's paradise of such an individual may be seen as a kind of Tower of Babel, where the gestures of all cultures and the words of all languages commingle to lend luxurious substance to images that would germinate and spring forth anyway, of their own accord and in utter silence.

In a typical scenario, which I reproduce here from real life, a woman thus afflicted meets a man and his wife, and, from the first, the wife appears distant; "she is disturbed by my presence," observes the woman, "because she is desperate to go to bed with me"; then the husband, too, seems unfriendly; "he is jealous of me," the woman decides; then the wife goes out of the room because she can no longer endure the guest's tiresome presence; "she wants to leave the two of us alone," reasons the woman, "so we can start an affair, and then she can be with me as much as she likes"; but the husband is still morose and keeps looking at his watch; "he does not accept his wife's compromise," thrills the woman, "he wants me all to himself; just look, now he's yawning to show he isn't afraid of the consequences!"

All this sounds perfectly nasty, and of course the gambler's paradise is similarly open to derision. But let me tell it from another point of view. In 1928, a famous and pompous literary critic whose name, happily, is now mud, quoted a Pasternak stanza that I would render into English as follows:

What is it? The Cloister of Kiev  
Cupolas sleep? Or the Eddas,  
Revealed by the north and  
wreathed  
With pearls of primordial madness?

"Here one simply does not know which to rejoice in first," the critic ridiculed the poet, "the pearls, the primordial madness, or the revealing of them both. It may be, of course," he went on, "that Pasternak does not rejoice in any of these words alone but only in their accumulation and disorder." And finally:

He is bent on one thing: to combine,  
in the smallest possible space

and by whatever means are at hand, the greatest possible number of heterogenous, unrelated, disparate words. For him, poetry means above all a confusion of tongues, the building of a Tower of Babel.

It is of small importance to the argument here that, in my view, Boris Pasternak is that culmination of genius by whose verse world culture will be reckoned for millennia to come. My point, rather, is that the obsessive semiotic confusion so easily diagnosed in self-condemned erotomaniacs—and which, I believe, is a requisite component of the largely unknown, or misunderstood, worldview of self-confessed gamblers—is so very near to the heart of what we know as the poetic sensibility, which is above all else the stubbornness to see things as one would see them anyway, all the while ransacking the phenomenal world for signs and gestures that deck out these preposterously subjective perceptions in a sort of magpie reality. The result is a phantom truth, though one as maddeningly logical as it is luxuriously tactile.

When we read serious poetry, we call this phantom truth *beauty*. When we look inside the gambler's mind, we are not so sure what to call it, and straightaway we dismiss it as stupidity, illusion, dreaming. Yet is not all poetry, in the eyes of a philistine moron, just as much stupidity, illusion, and dreaming? Oh, those heavenly numbers. Ah, those pretty phrases. Get a life! Or, failing that, get a job.

Here is Dostoevsky at 40, as ever unemployed, and more penniless than ever after the gaming tables of Wiesbaden, in a private letter that contains the first reference to the gestation of *The Gambler* and to the type of Russian expatriate that is to become its protagonist:

I take an original type, a man who is highly cultivated, yet in everything incomplete, one who is done believing yet *dares not to disbelieve*, one who rebels against authority yet fears it too. He reassures himself that there is nothing left for him in Russia. . . . This is a living personage—I see him as though he were standing before me now—