

Driving Lake Bissonnet

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We were startled by the sound of the rain that June night in Texas: huge drops drumming on the windshield and pounding on the roof as we exited the Cinema 30 parking garage. While we had been watching *Saving Private Ryan*, downtown Houston was transformed into a skyscraper parody of Venice—every street cradling a shallow river, every city block an island. Meteorologists would later report that 28 inches of rain fell in twelve hours that night, some areas receiving up to 80% of their annual rainfall in a single storm. But I was convinced that we could make it. I ferried my green Nissan Altima onto the entrance ramp for Highway 59 and headed south to take Rory home.

The highway was deserted. Most cars daring enough to wander out had now resigned themselves to spending the night on the shoulder, pulling in on high ground, where the freeway arched over a cross-street. We slogged forward for a few minutes, windshield wipers flailing at top speed, before I had second thoughts. I asked Rory, who lived right next to a bayou, if he would rather come back with me to the Heights (the highest point in the city), where we would have a better chance of staying dry. Rory agreed. The only hitch was that we would have to turn around, which required going down an exit ramp and doubling back underneath the highway.

I switched lanes and pulled off at the next exit—Bissonnet Street. Coasting down the ramp, I felt water begin to rise against the tires. Ahead, at the intersection, a lake of unknown depth covered the cross-street. Startled, I braked to a stop a few feet before the standing water and contemplated our next move. On my right was a Diamond Shamrock gas station. Several cars,

intimidated by swelling lake, had already pulled in under the high portico roof of the station. But for me, this was far too cautious.

“I think we can make it, Rory.” Rory—a native Caribbean—one part reggae, and one part rage-rock, gave me his vote of confidence, nodding at me with a knowing look. “I’m cool with whatever you wanna do.”

The problem with assessing the depth at the intersection was that all clues, such as sidewalks and footings for the traffic poles, were completely submerged. Water ran straight across from exit to entrance ramp—a flat plane broken only by the cylindrical concrete pillars supporting the overpass. I knew we would need speed, so I put the car in reverse and backed up fifty yards to the top of the ramp. We paused for a moment. I summoned all the cowboy machismo I could muster after having lived two years in Texas, and tightened my grip on the wheel. *There was no way I was going to be stranded for the night at that Diamond Shamrock.* With that thought in mind, I stomped on the gas pedal, and we raced down the ramp. In seconds we reached the standing water and careened inward. But water rose quickly. The tires lost both traction and speed in the lake. I reached the intersection and cut left. Water was up over both bumpers, but we had made it underneath the tunnel. Then water started to rise over the headlights, creating fluttering yellow patterns just below the surface. Then breeee, bruu, buuuuuu. Silence.

We glided noiselessly, water under all four wheels. Several yards passed by before we reached the far side of the tunnel. It was a formality, but I turned the wheel left again to point us back toward the highway. We coasted at an angle in the turning lane, and came to a standstill just beyond the overpass. Rain snapped loudly on the hood. Outside our door, the water had risen to within a few inches of the window, though inside we were still dry. Unthinkingly, I turned the key: *greeeuh...* water siphoned through the muffler into the engine block. More silence.

We started praying out loud, all at once. Then a new sound seized our attention: a dooley—the kind of pick-up truck with double wheels in the back—chugging down the middle of the road, pushing out wide waves in front and behind. One wave broadsided our car with a thud, water suddenly over the roof, dipping us back and forth. We felt like crazed kids jumping up and down on a flimsy boat.

We touched down. But hardly had prayer resumed before I felt a tingle on my heel. Water was now streaming into the cabin through the air conditioner vents. “OK, we’ve gotta get out of here, Rory.” We quickly agreed that the best plan was to crawl out the back window, even though this would leave the cabin exposed to the rain. I stuffed everything worth salvaging into my backpack and strapped it on. We would make for the Diamond Shamrock.

We squeezed through the window, climbed up the grassy embankment that lead to the overpass, then scrambled across all ten lanes of highway and down the far side. The rain pummeled us, compelling our speed as we ran towards the station. By now, almost the entire plaza was covered with parked cars. It was an unlikely gathering: everyone who happened to be passing Bissonnet on a Friday night at 12:30 am—a chef in his black and white checked pants leaving work, a few club-hopping Latino teens in white t-shirts smoking cigarettes, an elegant woman (of the Tex-istocracy) in high heels and a sequin dress standing nervously next to her black Mercedes; Rory and I, impossibly wet, our clothes stuck to us like paper mache.

Most of those who had found refuge at the *Shamrock* huddled closely in a line along the low curb outside the convenience store. As we waited, uncertain about our precarious situation, a group of young adults paraded past, frolicking in the rain, the guys with their shirts off and twirling them over their heads, whooping and yelling, then trailing off behind the thick curtains of downpour. It wasn’t long before we had a more urgent distraction: water, rising quickly near

our feet. Within minutes we were ankle deep and the convenience store attendants started swabbing madly at the tile floors where water was slipping in underneath the double glass doors.

Rory and I hastily discussed our options: returning back into the thunderstorm to find alternative shelter or toughing it out at the *Shamrock*. We agreed to leave, but wondered aloud where we could go. Neither of us had friends or co-workers within reasonable walking distance. The only possibility was the church where I worked as a youth leader—I had the keys in my pocket—but this would still require a brutal two mile hike through uncertain waters. We had no time to lose. I slung on my pack, and we ran out from the store awning, suddenly bombarded by endless, massive drops. Recrossing the exit ramp, we scrambled back up the grassy incline to the crest of the highway. Crossing the empty lanes of the freeway, we stopped at the far shoulder to survey the best route to our destination. Just as we waited, however, something happened that I could not possibly have expected.

I heard a rumbling noise, and from the highway guard rail looked down at my car, off-center in the turning lane, near another sedan that had failed the pass. Suddenly, a large white truck barreled through and broadsided my car, spinning it around. I yelled instinctively: “Hey, that’s my car!” The driver didn’t flinch, but completed his turn and continued north down the feeder road. Then, just a moment later, a second, smaller truck appeared, slowing down as it approached the corner. The driver lowered his window and called out in a thick Texas drawl, “Hey! Is that yer car ov’r thar?” pointing to my crumpled sedan. “Yeah...”, I replied warily. “Whell, that boy up thar jes’ hit it, and drove off. C’mon, let’s go catch ‘em.”

Though we had just begun our journey, a break from the pounding rain and a ride to anywhere sounded overwhelmingly appealing. Before we knew it we were clambering down the embankment and into his pick-up truck. Our

driver introduced himself between a torrent of curses directed at the first truck, and we were off.

By now the first truck was a full half-mile ahead, though we could still discern his tail lights. Our driver churned through the waters in eager pursuit. “Here,” he said, handing me a dirty white rag. “Waiper fuse is out. You’ll have to switch ‘em.” Seconds later, true to his word, the wipers shorted and water cascaded across the windshield, blurring our view. The driver tapped on the appropriate fuse in front of me and I grabbed it—white-hot, barely cooled by the rag. I quickly replaced this fuse with another one from the dash, and the wipers sprang back to action. For the duration of the pursuit, this became my duty: wipers off, hot fuse out, new fuse in, repeat.

We were gaining on him. Soon we drove within a half-block of our assailant, when suddenly he turned into the parking lot for The Houston Chronicle: he was, it turned out, a newspaper delivery driver. “I’ll take yew within a hundred yards, and then y’all have to go in from thar,” our driver instructed. I mumbled a thank-you completely unsure of what ‘go in from thar’ would entail.

The Houston Chronicle building was in full operation at 1:30 am, with six large bay doors, emitting a bright interior light, opened wide on one side to receive trucks. The white truck ahead decelerated, then started backing into one of the open bays. Our own driver let us off stealthily, alongside a nearby tree. Thanking him again, we sneaked across the vacant lot toward the dock. I asked Rory if he would rather wait outside until I returned—seeing as this was my own business. But without hesitation, Rory replied, “No way, I’m goin’ in with ya.” We decided to approach the ramp from the near side and hopped into an open bay at a distance from the truck. Inside the warehouse, distribution continued as if the flood had never happened: newspapers ran noisily on belts, big piles were loaded onto hardwood palates, managers strutted about with clipboards.

I saw him—a short Asian man, loading a fresh round of papers onto the truck. “Uhh, Sir?” He looked up at me. “Yeah, you hit my car—the green sedan back on that feeder road.” He turned pale, and spoke with a strong accent: “What car?” “The one back at Bissonnet.” “I did not hit car.” I persisted, “But I saw you hit it and then followed you here.” He replied, “O.K. You come to my house and we talk about it.” *Come to your house?* You committed a hit-and-run on my car, but now you expect me to trust you enough to come inside your house unawares? This was an absurd proposal. “No, no, I can’t even *get* to your house, I don’t have a ...”, but I was cut short: he was already on his cell phone. I glared impatiently at him. Then, just as abruptly, he looked up and thrust the cell phone into my hand. “Hello, this is Ryan, Hung’s brother.” Ryan spoke fluent English. I adopted a professional tone and explained the situation. Ryan listened patiently, but then also responded by inviting me to their house to “talk about it.” My irritation rose: *What was there to talk about?* I firmly refused. Then Ryan explained the real story: if Hung were reported to insurance, he would lose his job as a delivery driver. I softened a bit, but still penciled down the insurance details.

Now we were even further from the church—about three miles away. Our first driver had left, and we declined Hung’s offer for a ride, still wary of his driving. There was nothing left but to wade the lattice of street-rivers back towards the church. We descended the loading dock, and sauntered down the sloped parking lot: calf-deep, knee-deep, waist-deep.

The rain was still falling, though for the moment it subsided in intensity so that Rory and I could talk. Wading down the middle of the street side by side, we re-lived the wild events that had just occurred, then chatted about mutual friends in the *Heights* and curiosities of the flood—wood beams and children’s toys floating in the water, unseen tree limbs or perhaps a small fish that brushed

unexpectedly against our ankles. Walking was strenuous work, every step an effort to push against high water.

By degrees, I began to comprehend the gravity of the situation. I had just driven my car into the lake—a hilarious, testosterone-confused act of bravery on one hand, but also a serious financial loss. The Altima was the first ‘real’ car I’d ever owned, undoubtedly my most valuable earthly possession, probably worth seventy-five percent of everything I owned. Second to that was my guitar, made of rare koa wood, and unfortunately left without a case in the trunk of the Altima, now presumably waterlogged. I couldn’t afford to replace either one. I did, however, have insurance on the car, though I was dubious that my insurance company would pardon my ill-conceived attempt at sedan boating. My anxiety grew as I enumerated these implications. Rory and I became silent.

After brooding for a few minutes, my thoughts unexpectedly arrived at a catharsis. I *had* lost almost the sum total of my possessions, but somehow, in their absence, I understood with renewed clarity the inherent gift of my own life. The sedan and guitar were lost overnight, yet my life—no less frail or tenuous—had been protected. Why? I was overwhelmed with gratefulness and humility. Every step against the waist-deep waters of Wesleyan street was further indication of this grace. Inwardly, I became aware of the near presence of God, assured that he knew me, and amazed that he had chosen me as a carrier of life.

I began to sing. Not since I was a child had I sung so unashamedly and with such clarity. But here at three in the morning, softly and reverently, I sang over the surface of cool waters. Simple phrases, sung prayers, songs for the near God. Rory fell back a few paces to give me space. I heard him, swishing through the water behind me, an echo in the cathedral, singing his own lines. Mulch from underwater flowerbeds drifted up and floated across the river, trolling slowly on the surface like saltines on soup. A father and his son canoed by ahead of us on Tennyson street. Rory and I continued singing.

A few days later, the insurance adjusters let me know that I would receive full value for the car, as the whole incident fell under an 'act of God' clause. I never did have to claim against Hung's insurance. The Houston flood of 2001 became the largest aggregate insurance claim of its kind in American history: an estimated 5 billion dollars. By some feat of engineering, or perhaps a second 'act of God,' the trunk of my car held water-tight: I returned to find my guitar dry, unscathed and even in tune. And as hard as the night had been, we later learned that the Diamond Shamrock would have been even worse—the very spot where we stood had six feet of standing water by morning.

I was glad to receive my guitar back, and thankful to be able to buy another car. But both were set in perspective: I knew that neither could compare with what I had found wading through the waist-high waters that June night. For once, if even for a few moments, I let go of my clamoring need for security, possessions and comfort. In so doing, I discovered a bit of what it means to trust. The one night I ended up with nothing was the very night I learned how to sing.