

Twister

by Daniel Harris

The weather forecast for air travel was not good. It was sunny driving to the Tampa airport from Sarasota with no hint of rain. My youngest brother didn't tell me which airline he was flying, but when I entered the terminal, the arrival board showed a flight from Chicago was on time. Fortunately, my brother had a small bag for luggage and we could escape the short-term parking without having to pay a fee.

“When did you get this car?”

“Well, you haven't been to visit in five years. At the end of the lease for the car you remember, I leased this car. It's lease was up last month. Because used car prices are so high, it was financially advantageous to buy this car for fifteen grand. CarMax has it appraised for twenty-five grand. I couldn't pass it up with only fifteen thousand miles. To lease a new car seemed stupid since this car is almost new and the price was right. So here we are.”

“You know this is your death car.”

“What the hell does *that* mean?”

“Well, you're going to be eighty this week and this is probably the last car you'll own. It's your death car.”

“That's pretty fucking morbid.” Yes, it was true, I was going to become an octogenarian in a few days, but I didn't dwell on every event as my last. “Bro, I can't live thinking: well, I guess this is my last omelett, last kiss, last sail, or last time putting out the garbage. I might be a weird artist, but not a mental fuck-up that way.”

“Right. But look: You're the oldest living male on both sides of our immediate family in over two hundred years. The odds are against you.”

My brother was a successful insurance salesman. He knew all the actuarial statistics. He'd been telling me for twenty years I was living on borrowed time. Our dad had his first of three heart attacks

at forty-two, he died of a heart attack at 76. I quit smoking when cigarettes went from twenty-five cents to thirty cents a pack back in sixties. Our dad wasn't a big drinker, but he did smoke. Mom was a different story: a veritable smokestack and a serious throat. Typically, she would have three cigarettes going at once, a long Benson & Hedges, a B&H menthol, and a Pall Mall. Her ash trays were the size of toilet seats. Booze was at the same level: a beer or two with lunch, a pitcher of gin martinis before dinner, a bottle of wine at dinner and a half-bottle of Scotch after dinner, which ended with her shouting at all and sundry or writing long screeds to various critics of her weekly newspaper column. She lived for seven years after she lost her mind dying at the same age as our father. Curiously, when her dementia was serious, I lived in France and she would send me brilliant letters in her elegant Palmer script in perfect *L'Académie Française* French. This was a woman who denied I was her oldest son, but the *friend* of the middle of her three sons. She could not recognize any of us at the end.

"I hate to tell you this, but it looks like Armageddon off to the west."

"Well, as you say, we're in the Death Car. Sounds perfect for Armageddon. Yeah, the weather forecast was for severe thunderstorms. Did your flight encounter turbulence flying into Tampa?"

"Not really, minor bumps, but those pilots avoid turbulence if they can."

Hopefully it holds off until we cross the Sunshine Bridge. I've had some challenging weather experiences on that bridge."

By the time we reached St Petersburg it was sprinkling rain with strong wind gusts. At Tropicana Field we were in the storm. Sheets of rain were blowing across I-275 and traffic was slowed to twenty miles an hour.

"I hope the bridge isn't closed to traffic. It's pretty windy out. Usually if it blows over forty, they close the bridge, especially if it's raining."

"Is that the same bridge we went over to St Pete last time I was here to look at a boat?"

"Yep."

"That's a tall bridge."

"Well, a ship hit the previous bridge and it fell in the bay killing a lot of people who drove off the broken span."

"I think I remember hearing that on the news years ago."

"Yeah, May 1980. I was boarding a plane at JFK for Tokyo when pictures flashed on the television monitors in the restaurants. Scary shit."

"I remember thinking I didn't want to be on that Greyhound bus that plunged one hundred fifty feet into the bay."

We drove in silence for a distance. Each thinking their own thoughts about driving off broken bridges. Meanwhile the rain made driving very difficult.

"Can you see? The passenger side wiper is a streaker."

"I wish they would go faster. It's getting bad. I can barely see the car in front of me. I hope the bridge is open. Making a U-turn and going back to I-75 won't be fun in this weather. That would put us in this storm all the way around Tampa. Not good."

Traffic was crawling at about ten miles an hour. When we reached the toll plaza, I asked the woman who collected our toll if the bridge was going to remain open.

"Oh, yes. The storm should pass by the time you cross the bridge."

"She, sounded cheery,"

"Well, she's not driving, I am."

"The wind is really pushing the car around. Are you sure we should keep going? Maybe we should pull over."

"It's a bitch, especially with assholes driving on the road with their flashers on. The law says flashers only when one is *off* the road, not driving *on* the road."

“Yeah, and there are cars on the side with their flashers on and some with no flashers. How fucked is that.”

“I'm driving fifteen miles an hour and some asshole in that Cadillac Escalade just went by us at fifty mile an hour. Fucking dickwad.”

“Well, you should have bought a bigger car. A big car can get your through this without any problems. My F-150 with a load can handle this stuff at seventy miles an hour.”

I didn't want to comment on pickup trucks and especially people who drove them. In Florida they were not my type unless they were driving a thirty-year-old beat-to-shit farm pickup with livestock or fencing in the back.

“Holy shit! Look over there! Is that a waterspout or a tornado?”

“I can't take my eyes off the road. If it's over water it's a waterspout.”

I gave a quick glance. Sure enough, there was not one but two.

“Don't look now, but there's two over there and coming this way. If they formed over water, no big deal, but if they're tornados which formed over land, we're in big dodo.”

“I think we're hosed. What do we do?”

“Keep driving.”

“You're fucking crazy. You can barely keep this car on the road. It's being blown all over the place.”

“What the fuck do you want me to do, pitch a tent? If we park, we have no control over the car and we could be blown against the railing or even through or over the railing. The updrafts could pitch us off the bridge and into the ship channel. At least driving, I've got options.”

Just then a huge gust blasted us with white-out rain. I couldn't see the front of my car, which was being pushed off the road. I oversteered and our car fishtailed left and then right as I fought for control. Suddenly, the taillights of the car in front of me

disappeared. We were now blown sideways in the right lane and I could feel the rear tires hitting the shoulder rumble strip. Then I saw two headlights aimed right at us.

“Lookout!”

I didn't have time to listen, I spun the wheel so the car aimed back downhill. I saw the head lights of the other car pass behind us just as another gust spun us around so we were heading back up the bridge. Stopping was not an option I could see headlights behind me of cars ascending the bridge. The car that had been in front of me was wedged into the bridge railing. There was a lull in the wind and I goosed us up to twenty-five miles an hour. Battered cars littered the right shoulder. I wasn't about to stop, it was all I could do to keep the car in its lane when another whiteout gust, this one with hail, wacked us from the right side. I hoped no one was coming up on the left lane because we were crab walking into and out of the left lane. The water was deep on the road. Steering iffy.

“Jesus, is that hail?”

“Can't hear a word your saying, bro. I'm just trying to keep us going uphill.”

Another blast and we were blown cattycorner across the lanes. A third whiteout gust hit us and pushed the car. From the incline I could tell we were headed uphill but in which lane? It was white-knuckle steering. My heart was racing. I hoped those fifty plus years of endurance cycling were paying off for my heart now.

And then: Sunshine.

I could see we were almost at the top of the bridge. A waterspout was dancing towards the east. I guess we had driven through the other twister which dissipated after it hit the bridge.

“That was close. Great driving, bro.”

“Thanks, I hope we're done with this crap.”

“I think it helped you had your cataracts fixed. I couldn't see diddly-squat during those blasts.”

“I was driving by sphincter, bro.”

“We're lucky there weren't any assholes going fifty coming up the left lane when we slid over there.”

Nice consolation to hear my brother refer to someone driving an oversized passenger car an asshole. Hopefully things would stay cool during the birthday celebrations. All three brothers had a genetic streak for headstrong loudmouth behavior.

That was the last blast. It was still blowing, but not as hard. Water was streaming down the bridge four inches deep, which made drive tricky. Ahead one could see cars throwing up huge walls of water when they went through puddles. Two cars skidded in a puddle, collided, and went off the road. Suddenly there was a sea of red light as vehicles braked to slow down. But they had no grip on the pavement and they surfed into each other. Two more cars hooked up and slid off the road onto the median. A third slammed into them just as they left the road. There was still deep water running down the road. Braking was impossible. My years of driving on ice now came into play. A large moving truck was behind me blowing his horn like crazy. I assumed he couldn't stop. The only escape route was to go left, swerve to miss the car partially in the left lane and then cut right past a line of rear-end collisions. Luckily the tires had just enough grip that I could avoid the car partially blocking the left lane, I jerked the wheel and my rear end slid away from the protruding car as I went past.

“Very cool, bro. You did your best A. J. Foyt imitation. I thought we were goners.”

“Don't look now, but the truck behind us jack-knifed and swiped a whole line of cars.”

I gunned it enough to slip passed another pileup and eased over to Route 19. I knew there was always a big deep pool in the right lane and I went left onto the shoulder. A car passed me on the right

and splashed to a stop hood deep in the middle of that flood. Except for the puddles on the road, it was just another sunny Florida day.

“Well, bro this may be your death car, but you're plenty alive.”

“Too much white knuckle driving for my taste. Glad we made it.”

“For an old geezer you did great. Did you load your shorts?”

“My shorts are clean. I'm waiting for my heart rate to normalize. Too much excitement for this old guy.”

“Now the question is: With this storm, will our brother's plane arrive on time at Sarasota?”

“We've got twenty sunny miles and forty-five minutes to find out.”

