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Swimming Lesson

Bill Elgersma

Living on the plains, regardless of a postal or zip code, brings us closer to God. We don't get a choice, and if we don't believe that, we are lying to ourselves or sadly disillusioned. One of the great things about working for both CN Railroad and a towing service in the winters of Alberta was knowing that the weather could actually kill me. No drive-bys, no hold ups, no drug O.D.s, nope; just stupidity or lack of respect and I'm a popsicle. Three frostbitten fingers and one frozen ear emphasized that point. But that is Alberta.

Now, relocated in the Midwest in the States, I assumed the land would be more civil. Older country, established settlements, more people, and all that. Wrong. The land doesn't care. As a matter of fact, I suspect Iowa hates people. When the temperature drops to 20 below and the howling wind sinks the mercury another 10-20 degrees, intelligent people should be asking themselves why they live here. I often wonder what the Native Americans or First Nations people, when they were still Indians, had for conversations in their teepees—before we took the land. At 30 below, did Mrs. Indian tell her man to go out and kill another buffalo? With the sole mode of transportation being horses, there was no going South for the winter. Horses might start well in the cold, but the heater leaves much to be desired.

However, complaining about the cold is easy, and so we shiver, whine, look out the window, turn up the thermostat, and bake another hot dish. Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, chili—we can eat and drink away the cold inside our carefully insulated homes and wait it out. As well, we fatten up nicely to insulate our bodies because we've learned subservience to the cold, and for those that haven't, the above statement still holds true—this place can kill you.

Summers, on the other hand, bring a different kind of respect. I appreciate and respect cold—

when the thermometer plummets, I put on more clothes. But then summer appears, and the temperature soars to the mid 90s—when you are naked, you can't take anything else off. Even the flies sweat. Birds with beaks open attempt to cool down; dogs pant; cows stand in the muck that was once a crick; misters fog across herds that languish beneath them, and pivots run continuously to keep the crops irrigated. The heat wears on everything.

One indicator of just how lethal the heat can be is the number of animals dragged to the road, awaiting the gut wagon. Rendering trucks on routes not unlike the milk trucks of old daily materialize out of the humid haze on the horizon to drag dead animals into the box. The putrefactive stench infects the air and sucks out the oxygen while a faint brown cloud emanates from the back. Should the truck not appear within a few days, the animal—hog or cow—begins to grow, legs reach toward the sky and belly rounds. Few legalists are courageous enough to remain behind that truck in traffic unless the double line on the road really means the hill is within 50 feet and they can actually see the oncoming traffic.

But summer and winter are what residents revel in here. Returning to the past to talk about the summer of '82, when Sagers lost 30,000 chickens to suffocation because the transformer blew and the fans shut down is comparative news.

How hot is it? *How many cattle'd you lose?*

How cold is it? *Did the car start?*

Benchmarks. That's what we have, and in a post-modern world we have learned the value of comparisons and equate our level of inconvenience, in part, with what occurred in the past. Then we get to brag, gloat, or resign ourselves to the comparison. *Thirty below—ha—in the winter of '77 the calves that stayed outside froze their hocks, tails, and ears. Ugly as sin. Kept them for beef; no one was going to have a milk cow looking like that.* We sip our hot chocolate and pull the afghan a little closer. And

summer conversations are no different.

But those are the predictables. If you live on the Plains, you know that at some point the cold is coming, frigid cold, and you know it is going to get hot, beastly hot, and you are going to deal with both of these. Tornadoes are a roll of the dice, but the town whistle reminds us like a protective parent. We don't respect it until the clouds begin to swirl and the sky washes from green to black, but that is simply being observant. What even the *Farmer's Almanac*, that odd literary resource often residing in outhouses of the past, can't predict is rain. Rain is the great unknown.

Last summer the Midwest faced a drought—a severe drought. Certainly Texas and the Southwest have been at drought stage for extended periods of time, and while we may be concerned for them, we also believe that if you live in an arid climate, you should expect little rain. The plains are not like that. In this part of the country we get rain, as the crop production testifies. The rain falls, the earth absorbs it, the plants get nourished, and we get corn and soybeans—acres upon sections upon miles upon counties upon states of corn and soybeans. When it rains. When it doesn't rain, either the crops don't germinate, or they germinate because of winter moisture and then promptly shrivel and burn.

For all the advancements that allow farmers to increase crop production, one thing no lab has achieved is rain on demand. None of the less scientific methods—shingles removed from roofs, washed cars, camping without tarps, killing spiders, outdoor weddings—none of these brought rain last year, and the farmers surveyed the skies so often that the rest of us scanned them as well. But our scans had to do with gardens and green lawns. Without the ponds, reservoirs, and lakes of other parts of the country, we rely on wells, pumping down the water table to irrigate—a frightening concept for someone who grew up surrounded by the Great Lakes, the real ones in the East, not the Iowa ones. But as quickly as a drought becomes severe, we don't even know we're in one until we haven't seen rain for 6-12 months—like not knowing you're in a relationship until you're given the silent treatment for talking to someone else.

Too much rain catches us even more unaware. There are few reliable signs to indicate a monsoon season for the plains. Sure, Wilbur may have no-

ticed the skunks mating early in the spring, and Don may have noticed too many buds on his apple tree, but empirical data? No.

In the spring of '94 we had one of those years. For those who haven't seen the plains, this flooding is insignificant unless a river is involved. Significant streams are rare, so if we get a heavy rainfall, measured in inches, little rivulets and cricks arrange to meet at a central location, and we have floods. Certainly the weather channel issues flash-flood warnings, but only those with low-lying basements, poorly excavated houses, and proximity to rivers worry. In a matter of hours these rivers can swell to engulf the flats around them, consuming crops and trees and grass. The ditches that channel this water pour over roads, submerging driveways and depositing cornstalks sometimes miles from their roots. Flooding is serious business.

That spring our house took on water like a cap-sized boat. Though assured by the previous owner that this home had never seen water in the basement, we were part of the aquifer by the time May arrived. Seven inches of clear, cold water might be a delight anywhere else but not in a house with no drainage tile and no sump pump. Unwilling to wait for the water table to subside, I rented a jackhammer to sink a hole below the concrete, determined to break the water table. The initial drop was easily evident, but the table was much more difficult to lower—the pump ran for six months. But that was simply a precursor to summer.

That was also the summer I started grad school. A university residing 60 miles from our house, I anticipated a quick commute at a reasonable price. All I needed was an efficient car to get me back and forth. And that is where the floods of '94 stamped themselves indelibly in my mind.

I needed a cheap car with heat. I didn't really care about air: open the windows and deal with it, but a car without heat can kill a person on the Plains. I needed a cheap car that was efficient, with a radiator—a diesel. Now diesels in the mid '90s were not easily attained. Mercedes, Volkswagen, and a few North American disasters were the extent of my options, so I watched the paper. Sure enough, scanning the paper one evening, I read, *1984 Volkswagen Rabbit Diesel. \$1000.00*. Here we go. I called and asked a few particulars. The car lived 90 miles away, and I wanted to make the drive worth it. Everything checked out until I asked

about the mileage, as in how many miles were there on the car?

“320,000” he said.

“Miles or Kilometers?” I asked.

“K-what?” he sounded annoyed.

“1,000.00?” with incredulity in my voice.

“1,000.00” was the response with finality.

I bought it.

For those unaware, the exclusive owners club of '80s vintage Rabbit diesels stands alone in the world. The TDI's of the recent VW generation have nothing on those cars. People make payments on them. In the '80s, an employed person could pay with cash for that European jogging shoe. And the name is less than inspiring—Rabbit. Mustangs run wild and free, Roadrunners blaze, Darts did dart—at least in the late '60s, but Rabbits . . .?

Rabbit—the name conjures up soothing images of something sort of warm and furry cowering in a cage or looking for fresh grass or carrots through the mesh. If not in a cage, it is nibbling whatever is growing until disturbed, whereupon it disappears. *That* rabbit image, the disappearing one, makes sense for a car, but not for the owner of a Rabbit diesel. Only its owner knows what's entailed in coaxing it up to speed. Call that thing a tortoise, slug, sloth—anything but a Rabbit. The only time I was pulled over by a State Trooper, I told him I should get an award for breaking the speed limit—I didn't believe the car could reach 66 miles per hour. Later I realized the trooper had picked me off coming down a hill. What the Rabbit couldn't do for speed, it did in coasting.

The proprietor of a vehicle that a dog could not only chase but also catch knows that starting a diesel Rabbit requires certain rituals. Starting requires pulling the compression knob on the dash, especially if the glow plugs have forgotten what glow means. While diesel glow plugs are designed to radiate temperatures hot enough to ignite the fuel, these glow plugs were the fake candle-in-the-window-at-Christmas glow. Little heat, just a soft warmth and ambiance like the light in the Terry Redlin prints that some on the Plains prize. The diesel simply scoffed at it. When the weather was warm, life was good. When thermometer headed north, the Rabbit went looking for a winter burrow.

But those experiences came later. When I picked up the car, it didn't look bad. Yeah it smoked, but all diesels smoked—besides it had this sort of rumbly

Caterpillar sound, and if a person really pretended, he might believe he was driving a truck. The reality was—beyond the fact that tractor trailers and Rabbit diesels share the same fuel—nothing else compared. That Rabbit was a dog. It was going nowhere quickly, but it would get there eventually. If I didn't leave 20 minutes early for appointments, I was late. Still, it was reliable. Incredibly reliable. In temperate months no matter what the circumstances, Puff the Magic Rabbit would fire up and rumble down the road with a tail of smoke. And so began the summer of the floods.

Now between this institution and my home lies a stream, the Big Sioux, mostly a poor excuse for a river. The Grand Canyon, the World Cup, and Big Ben can live up to their names; the World Series and the Super Bowl are shakey, but the Big Sioux for the most part is a swampy sort of backwater creek that trickles farmland runoff to the Missouri River downstream. Just a wanna-be crick. Not in '94.

As the crow flies, only two roads in the area access South Dakota because, in these parts, the Big Sioux is the border. Both roads politely channel the water under the road, with insignificant bridges of no more than 20 feet. In years of normal rainfall, the river all but stops running, and pools form where catfish and suckers wile away the summer, and old men, long done with work, attempt to entice them onto a hook. Looking at the roads that connect to this traverse over the Big Sioux, an astute driver recognizes that in the past, this river had revolted and the occupants of the area had respected its rage. Both roads running parallel to the river are up on bluffs where the river cannot lick away their foundations.

Turning off these bluff roads to cross the river, a driver travels approximately a mile of floodplain prior to crossing the bridge from the east and perhaps a quarter mile beyond the bridge to the west. Over eons of time the Big Sioux has gone from a sprawling, friendly inch of water spanning several miles in width to a bi-polar slash that continues to erode the soil, engirdling the water and forcing it to shrink and move quickly. This river, even when not at flood stage, has begun to develop intent when enough rain fills it. In '94, the intent was to evict anyone foolish enough to live within several miles of its banks. Abandoned farms too close to the water were evidence of trial and error that ended in

resignation. Sojourners—forget it.

One of the frightening things about being educators is that often we think we know everything. Perhaps this confidence comes from our occupation. Far too often in our classes, some student lies in wait, scheming up ways to make us look stupid or at the very least, stumped. Girding our loins daily, we enter the fray with little more than whatever is girding us and our wit. On a good day we leave unscathed, on an average day we leave somewhat tattered, and on a poor day we flee with hands behind us. But if we do this long enough, the poor days diminish, convincing us we know just about everything. And if we are not an authority, we have an opinion, and we assert it like fact so that others believe our confidence. Grad school acceptance compounded my false sense of security. And so the summer began. High school classes over for a few weeks, I was traveling back and forth to my Masters classes while the rain continued to fall. Puff the Magic Rabbit was performing beautifully; I was enjoying myself in class, and, in retrospect, I was somewhat in awe of me.

My realization of this inflated sense of self arrived much the way realization of drought does: later rather than sooner, and by the time awareness arrived, I was in too deep. Literally. The river had continued to rise over the early weeks of school, first trickling out over the banks, then nibbling at fields, and finally crawling up the ditch to my access road. In the early fjording, the short span seemed much like a movie. Puff would come howling down from the bluff and skim the surface of the water with two rooster tails erupting in my mirrors. Even in a Rabbit diesel, there is an inexplicable euphoria that comes with leaving evidence of your presence behind you. It may not be the surge of power that comes with laying rubber on pavement, but displacing water meant I was doing something.

One benefit of diesel means no wet spark plug wires, so I could push water without caution. This vehicle would not die from flooding. But in time, as the water continued to rise, the rooster tails were becoming wakes. The white line was not visible; neither were the shoulder locations. But theoretically, even if water poured over the road and curled back on itself in the receiving ditch, the car should stay on the road if the driver lined the car up carefully with the opposing bluff—where the dry road rose out of the water—and drove at that point. I

grew up on a farm, and this was like plowing fields. Furrows are to be straight, so a point on the nose of the tractor is lined up with some imaginary point in the distance, and the operator drives toward it. I plowed water for several days.

One day, coming back from class I realized the landscape had changed. Arriving at the top of the bluff on the west side, I surveyed the sight below me. Words don't do justice to the volume that poured over the road, and the depth was remarkably deceptive. The drop-off to the receiving ditch curled the water like a Hawaiian halfpipe; I could have been surfing. Tree limbs, trunks, and cornstalks seemed to be doing just that. I started to hesitate when I could gage neither the depth of water raging across the road nor its speed. For those who have stood right where the water goes over the edge of Niagara Falls, my feeling was much the same. I felt drawn in a little, like a moth to a flame, and so I put the car in first and eased out the clutch.

Initially the water was not deep, probably four inches, and the Rabbit pattered along as if on a simple jaunt in the forest. That didn't last long. About 50 feet in, I realized how deep the water was becoming, and my hands clenched the wheel. I couldn't see the road, and watching the water in front of me disoriented me so much that I looked to the horizon and plowed on. When I was halfway through with no option to turn around, the radiator fan began picking up water and spraying it out of both sides of the hood. This would have been hilarious in any other setting—or anyone else's car for that matter—but by now the water was half way up my door, and the floor was looking like a bathtub. Sweat trickled down the sides of my face while I ground my teeth. Fortunately, as a diesel it was all right with blub-blubbing under water, so we blubbed along, little rainbowed bubbles of diesel exhaust emerging behind us like a pioneer blazing a trail, or less optimistically, one of those deep sea fish on a National Geographic special.

At one point as the water splashed off the door and into my face, I released my seatbelt. This unconscious gesture was the first indicator of this situation's severity. Apparently those who captain ships honourably go down with their vessel; however, this was one captain who was bailing, should Puff decide to take a dip. But even as I pushed down on the release button of the seatbelt, I thought, *How will I explain losing the car to my wife?* What will I

say? *It just slipped off of the road. Guess what honey? I sort of lost the car today. I got good news and I got bad news . . .?*

I could hear the questions as I played through the answers mentally. *Yes the road was closed. Yes, there were barriers up. Yes I saw the water. Yes, I thought I could drive through it. No, I wasn't thinking.* I had a feeling that unless I died, a drowned Rabbit was not in my best interests. And so we treaded water together thinking . . . *steady as we go.*

Forever. There is no other way to describe it. The drive took forever, and between the grip of my fingers fastened around the steering wheel and the tension in my back waiting for the car to be washed off of the road, I barely thought to breathe. A cycle of questions looped in my head: *Was I moving toward the ditch? Where was the ditch? Is that ripple up ahead a washout in the road? Do I dare avoid the potential hazard? What is my wife going to say if I come home without the car?* I hadn't planned an exit strategy if the car decided to ride the curl, other than open the door and get out, a strategy that, I realized after the fact, would have been impossible with the water piling up against it. Dumb, dumb, dumb.

As Puff continued to flounder, putter, and choke his way along, the opposing shore grew in size. Slowly, slowly the road beneath me started to rise, and we emerged from the stream. Water shed from that car like a submarine but more like a wet

dog. It was sputtering and coughing, and when I finally arrived at high ground, steam was rolling off the exhaust, and it shook violently as if to dry itself out in protest.

I got out shaking, watching rivulets stream from unusual locations around the car. And when I opened the hood to check the engine, I found the source of the tremors. The diesel injection pump sits at the front, and with all of the water being sprayed around the engine compartment, the warm alloy met the cold water, shrinking it, fording the injection seal to pop partially out. My Rabbit was no longer getting a consistent diet of diesel. I had a semi-drowned, sick Rabbit. We limped home soaked.

Stupidity has a price, and mine was a thousand dollars and two hours traveling one way for the rest of the summer. Class continued, and in time the water receded, but the education was better than any literature and writing class I took that summer. I can't help but think of the story where Elisha's servant is paralyzed with fear by the armies surrounding them, and Elisha prays that his eyes might be opened. In the next scene, the servant witnesses a mountain full of angels with horses and chariots. I may not have been at war, but if Elisha had prayed that God open my eyes, I believe I would have seen angels treading water around that car, or at the very least, an enormous floaty ferrying it to the other side. Rabbits don't swim.