

Ride on the Pineapple Express

“Please, Mrs. Beckett! You need to leave with us!” Officer Bradley yelled, his voice fighting through the pattering of rain. Our thin yellow raincoats flapped noisily in the wind, crinkling as if it were paper. What was only a drizzle has turned into a downpour, and the worst was yet to come.

Under the cover of 72 year old Claudia Beckett’s porch, I watched as Bradley tried to negotiate her own evacuation. He pointed to the rain, exasperated. “You see how bad it is right now? It’s going to get worse, we need to go!”

“I’m not leaving, officer!” she shouted back. “This isn’t Florida, it’s California! I’ve lived here my whole entire life, no flood is gonna come here!”

Bradley pleaded, “I’m telling you, it’s different this time! We’ll take you somewhere safe, and you can come back after the storm passes! I’ll tell you what; we have a nice, warm, shelter at Truman High School, we’re going to take you there-”

Mrs. Beckett cut him off. “My home is safe enough! I’m not going, and that’s final!” Mrs. Beckett shouted, slamming the door.

Bradley pounded on the door. “Mrs. Beckett! Mrs. Beckett!” Realizing there would be no further discussion, he sighed and glared at me. “Some help you were.”

I shrugged. “She’s not the first one who refused our help.”

“Doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try.” He glanced back at our patrol car, barely visible in the rain. On the sides of the SUV, it read, “Garden Beach Police”. Loitering behind it was a blue colored transportation bus, filled with other evacuees.

Mrs. Beckett wasn’t the only one who needed to evacuate; all across Hamlin County, various neighborhoods under high flood risk were urged to leave. Just in our assigned blocks alone, over 80 houses were under risk of getting hit with a deluge of water. Those without high-profile vehicles couldn’t evacuate on their own, so we borrowed a few buses from our transportation authority to accommodate.

Bradley put on his hood again, and motioned to me. “Come on, you ride-along! We have to get moving!” Cautiously we descended Mrs. Beckett’s porch, which more or less resembled a waterfall now. Rain flowed off the steps, down the walkway, and into the street. The pavement lined with a thin layer of water, coming up to the soles of our boots. It wouldn’t be long now before these roads became impassable.

Walking towards the bus, he banged on the door to get the driver's attention. The folding doors opened. The driver, a portly man, swiveled to face us. "So what happened?" the driver asked, yelling his question. "They don't want to go?"

"No," Bradley shouted, shaking his head. "But that's the last house we needed to check! We gotta go now!"

"Alright!" The driver nodded in acknowledgement, and shut the bus' doors. Bradley and I scrambled back to the patrol car, our steps splashing water as we went. As we sat back inside, he pulled up a digital map and marked Mrs. Bradley's house with a red color. Four other houses were also marked, all others who didn't want to leave.

"Geez, it's raining cats and dogs out there!" Bradley declared, taking off his rain jacket. "Let's meet up with the rest of the convoy, and take them to the shelter."

"Give me a second," I said, taking control of the geospatial map. Finding our location, I sifted through various layers of data: barriers, floodwater, weather radar, topography. "We barricaded some streets, so I need some time to map out our path back."

Bradley shrugged. "Okay map whiz, I trust you. Which Emergency Operations Center did you say you're from again?"

I showed him my lanyard, holding a green card with a yellow star. "The Sheriff's, I'm your department's on-site liaison."

"What about EMS and Fire?"

"Their liaisons are already at the Truman shelter. We'll meet with them when we get there." I finished marking the map, and presented the pathway to him. "Take this path to the rally point. It should take us to Holder and Houston in just a few minutes."

"Got it." Bradley started the car's engine, and used his siren lights to signal the bus driver. The driver flashed his own lights in acknowledgement. Nodding, Bradley turned the car away from the curb and headed down the road. The bus followed behind, making sure to maintain a distance.

High winds and heavy downpour pelted against our car, rattling its frame as we left the street. The windshield wipers frantically swished side to side, trying to sweep away the rain. Bradley turned back onto the main road, careful not to hit the Jersey barriers lined on each side. Last night, coordinating with Public Works and CERT volunteers, we managed to install flood barriers to try and mitigate potential flood water. But with how much rain we're getting right now, our expedient fortifications might not hold for long.

Trying to drown out the cacophonies of stormy weather, Bradley turned on the radio. "Put it on 89.3", I suggested.

"Why not 89.5?" Bradley asked.

"Stronger signal for this area," I replied.

"If you say so." He adjusted the knob, and soon we began to hear what seemed to be midway through a news segment.

"...And Tom, the NOAA is calling it a Pineapple Express. The weather is definitely not a pina colada though, so why don't you explain what that means for our listeners."

"Sure thing, Carrie. A Pineapple Express is essentially a kind of atmospheric river. That's a stream of water vapor moving along a strong air current. You can think of it as a river in the sky. It's called a Pineapple Express because it's an atmospheric river that runs from the Hawaiian island to the Northeast of the Pacific. Does that clear things up?"

"Yes it does, thanks for the explanation Tom. So, what do you think of the situation so far? I know we all felt the rain on the way to the studio today."

"Well Carrie, I for one am not enjoying this ride on the Pineapple Express!"

"Hear hear, Tom! Back to you Roger."

"Thanks Carrie. Last night: San Diego, Los Angeles, and Hamlin County have all been declared under a State of Emergency by Governor Larson as of..."

Bradley lowered the volume of the radio, and pointed to his car's patrol radio. "We're near the rally point so I need to keep my ears open. They're giving movement orders for the convoy group right now."

Throughout the ride, the PD's channel has been filled with chatter. With how fast everyone was talking, it was difficult for me to understand a word they were saying. But Bradley seemed to have no problem deciphering the gibberish.

"Any problems?" I inquired.

"Don't know," he replied. "Listening right now."

Not wanting to go the rest of the way in what was basically pink and white noise, I decided to make small talk. "Well, I guess this whole situation is pretty bad huh?"

Bradley snorted. "You tell me. But, hey; at least we aren't upstate. My cousin's a firefighter up there, and he says it's ten times worse."

"I've heard they had it worse, but is it really that bad?"

"Yeah. NorCal got hit before us, and a lot of their main roads have been flooded. Since yesterday he's been fishing people out of the water from a raft."

"That sounds terrible, I hope our area doesn't have to come down to that."

"Me too. But we live in SoCal though, so maybe it's different."

"Maybe." I replied, unsure of that myself.

Approaching the rally point, we started to slow down as we approached the intersection. City patrol cars and traffic cones lined the intersection ahead, creating a makeshift checkpoint. The left side of the intersection was blocked off with orange and white barriers, a yellow diamond sign being propped up in that direction. "FLOOD," it warned.

Officers with reflective vests and traffic wands started detangling civilian and government vehicles, and directing each along a specific path. Recognizing our vehicles, a traffic cop started to motion for us to take a right turn. Confirming this with our assigned bus, we headed down the guided path.

Other convoy members were spotted much further ahead down the road, snaking across the entire street. Just like us, they were in pairs of buses and patrol cars. Palm trees swayed against the wind, some succumbing to the strong gales. Every few streets, a makeshift sign was placed, with a hand drawn arrow telling us where to go.

The water level had also now grown in size, our tires spraying water as if we were on a flume ride. If any of that got under our car's hood, it would probably flood and crack our engines. We passed State Route 91, with hundreds of cars still zooming through the overpass. Water poured over the bridge's edge, landing on top of our vehicles.

"Wonder where they're all going," Bradley mused.

"Probably work," I commented.

"Working? In this kind of weather? You gotta be joking."

"I'm not. I mean, look at how many places are still open," I said, gesturing to the stores we passed, most still proudly brandishing glowing, "Open", signs. "You know, there's a local commuter college near me; they are still making the students go to school today."

He shook his head. “Bunch of psychopaths, not taking this storm seriously. You know; if I were governor, I would- WOAH!” Bradley’s attention quickly shifted away from the topic at hand, pointing towards a street on the right. “Check that out, that’s gnarly!”

Blocked off with a mix of sandbags and patrol cars, a street almost entirely submerged came into view. With that road leading downhill, it was likely that all this rainwater came to pool here first. Building roofs barely held their own, nearly also taken by the water. Power lines, uprooted from the ground, floated like driftwood on the water’s surface. Officers guarding the sunken path hectically directed our vehicles to move along, prompting turns away from the floodwaters.

“Oh boy,” I said, my eyes processing the damage. “How long is that going to hold?”

“Let’s not stick around to find out.” Taking a right turn, we left the sunken street behind us, its view receding back into the storm’s miasma.

Approaching Truman High School, we found it to be entirely repurposed as an emergency shelter. What was once the school’s sign was now covered with a banner that read, “American Red Cross: Disaster Relief.” Red Cross emblems and vehicles were stationed all around the parking lot, creating a path towards the gymnasium.

“Well, at least they still have power here,” Bradley commented. And it was definitely an optimistic look; the neighborhood we just left hadn’t had power since last night.

Red Cross disaster workers, in their bright red uniforms, started waving for the buses to enter the school’s drop off section. Turning the opposite direction, we parked our vehicle with all the other response vehicles and headed towards our assigned bus.

As soon as the convoy buses parked, a swarm of news crews flocked towards the evacuees. Even from where we were, we could hear them shouting their questions.

“Sir! You, sir! What’s your name?”

“Maam, where did you come from?”

“Sweetie, how do you feel leaving your home?”

“Miss, Is this your entire family?”

Other officers, guarding the drop off point, held them back. “Stand away from the bus!” I heard one shout. Red cross members, presumably part of public affairs, rushed in and started to redirect the news teams. Slowly, the news people started to peel off and were ushered towards another site.

Bradley gave them a look of contempt. “Media vultures, the lot of them.”

Drawing closer to our bus, we watched our evacuees disembark the bus. Mothers, fathers, grandparents, children; some as a whole, and others incomplete. A handful were crying, clearly having left people or things behind. Lugging their suitcases and backpacks, they exited the bus' doors.

We were approached by a group of Human Society members. Instead of the bright red Red Cross vests, they wore black shirts. Their presumed leader, a woman in her early 40s, greeted us with a smile that's been made rougher by the day. "Hi, my name is Amanda. I'm a case manager here, and we're part of the disaster team. We'll help take these newcomers off your hands, and orient them to our facility."

Bradley looked at me, unsure, and I nodded. "They're NGOs, they're helping us." I turned to Amanda. "That would be great, thank you. If you need a list of people we have, the driver, George, has it."

"That's perfect!" she said. "We'll take it from here." Her team immediately got to work, greeting all the passengers. Leading our evacuation group, they took them towards their check in station. Which left us more or less just standing there.

"Well, now what?" Bradley asked.

"I gotta find the other liaisons" I said, checking my watch. It was only 7:58 am. This was going to be a long day. "There should be an external partners section here. If you want, you can come with me and grab some donuts or something along the way."

Bradley mulled over the idea, and agreed. "You know what? Okay. I deserve a break. We got everyone here safe, and I haven't eaten breakfast yet."

As we headed towards the gymnasium, however, Bradley's radio started to pick up. Stopping, he picked up the radio. "Sorry," he said, apologetically. "I gotta pick this one up." Listening to his radio, any smile he once had turned into a grimace. He exhaled an exasperated sigh and replied, "Alpha 32, I'll be here. ETA 6 minutes." Cursing under his breath, he turned and started to run back towards the parking lot. Other first responders also followed suit, EMTs and firefighters running back too.

"Where are you going?" I asked as I ran with him, bewildered.

"I have to go back to the car!"

"Why, did something happen?"

"An I-5 connector just got hit with a mudslide! I need to help close off the road, and help those stuck in it!"

“You want me to go with you?”

“No, stay here. You said you needed to meet with the other liaisons right? I'll be fine. Sergeant Peters is there already, and he says he's connected with the sheriff's operations center.”

“Alright then,” I said, extending my hand out to him. “Stay safe out there!”

He returned the gesture, hurriedly shaking my hand. “You too! And, hey; I'll take a rain check on those donuts.”

I smiled. “You got it!” Nodding, Bradley turned and ran all the way back, splashing water all along the way. “Rain check,” I chuckled, walking back toward the gymnasium. That's a pretty good one.