

The Backside of Nowhere – by Alec Clayton

Excerpt: The Flood

The water was already ankle deep in the road. As common as flash floods were, I'd never seen it get so deep so quick. Our house was pretty damn high considering the whole town was pretty much at or below sea level. We'd never had any flood damage, but it looked like we were about to. I knew Sue Ellen was worried because her house sat in a bowl up past Little Don's on the far north end of the island where it flooded with just normal rainfall.

The store was right across the street from our house. It was a wooden building made of whitewashed wood slats on a foundation one step up from street level with a broad front porch shaded by a red-and-white striped awning. When I say there was a porch, I don't mean it was up off the ground. It was just wooden slats laid across two-by-six boards on a flat concrete slab. The store was a lot closer to sea level than the house. Out front stood three gas pumps. Neon signs in the windows advertising Jax beer and Coca-Cola. Faded paper ads for Libby's Vienna Sausage, Moon Pies, Aunt Jemima corn meal mix. We knew Buddy would be there already. At least we knew he was supposed to be there. You never knew about Buddy. Sometimes he was where he was supposed to be and sometimes he wasn't. I'm talking about Buddy Boudreau, Mary's boyfriend at the time, now her no-count husband. He was a Cajun from down below New Orleans. We all liked Buddy, but he wasn't the most responsible person in the world. Sometimes he simply wouldn't show up for work and we'd have to scramble to find someone to fill in for him. The funny thing was, Pop didn't seem to mind. He'd never let any of the rest of us get away with that kind of shit, but when it came to Buddy he'd say, 'Well, he's kind of funny that way. Where he comes from they don't keep regular hours.'

I knew Freight Train would probably be there too. Freight Train didn't keep regular hours either, but he wasn't supposed to. He didn't work for us. He just dropped in to help out whenever he didn't have anything else to do, which in the summertime was most of the time. I'm talking about Murabbi 'Freight Train' Taylor. Y'all probably know him as the all-pro linebacker for the Raiders. He went to school with me. He was kind of a local sports hero and a gentle giant who, even in high school, could practically lift all the appliances in the store by himself if he had to.

Water was already lapping the front stoop when we got there. The door was standing wide open and Pop was shouting for everybody to do what they were already doing, which was grabbing everything that could be water damaged off the lower shelves. Freight Train had half a dozen bags of dog food in his arms and was carrying them toward the back of the store where there was a storeroom with lots of high shelves. A couple of neighbors had shown up to help out. That wasn't unusual. The Lawrence store was the town store, even though there was an A&P and a Piggly Wiggly in town. People went to the chain stores for their major shopping but came to our store if all they needed was a quart of milk or a loaf of bread. If a customer wanted to buy something and Buddy or my mom or whoever was running the store happened to be busy, one of the regulars would just step behind the counter and ring them up. It was that kind of place. There were even a couple of easy chairs and a love seat by a pot belly stove where friends would gather and smoke and shoot the breeze. Cigarette butts gathered in an empty coffee can. Somebody had propped the door open with a gallon water jug so they wouldn't have to keep opening it. Buddy

was down on his knees in the aisle lifting boxes and bags and piling them into waiting arms as they formed a kind of bucket brigade. Pop said, 'Let's start another line.'

I took up position on the floor on the next aisle ready to pile stuff into Pop and Sue Ellen's waiting arms. The first things I grabbed, thoughtlessly, were plastic jugs. The old man shouted, 'Not the plastic, you fucking idiot!'

I shouted right back, 'You want my goddamn help or not?' And he said, 'Don't you sass me, boy!'

I shut up. I scooted down the aisle a ways and started loading cereal boxes. I wanted to kill him. If I'd been big enough and strong enough I'd a drowned him, held his freakin' big head under water right there where it was backing up on Liberty Street. But geeze, the old man was big. He intimidated the crap out of me. He had lorded it over me all my life, and I had this mental picture of him as bigger and stronger even than he really was, you know, as if six-foot-six wasn't big enough. I wanted so much to just bust him in the chops. He had no right to talk to me like that, especially not in front of everybody and not when I was trying to help him save his precious groceries. Like he really needed the damn store. Like he couldn't replace a few sacks of groceries. The store had never been a source of income for the family, but I guess it held sentimental value. It had been handed down from his father and grandfather. Pop liked to hang out in the store and shoot the breeze with his cronies. During the days leading up to elections the store became the unofficial precinct headquarters and Pop the unofficial party chairman. In the summertime he set up a target out back and archers practiced, and all year long hunters and fishermen swapped tales of big ones bagged or escaped to be caught another day."

By this point in his monologue David is berating his father pretty good. In front of the TV, Pop slouches further down in his beatup old recliner and crosses his arm in a pout. Everybody looks at him to see how he's taking this. It's no secret in the family that Pop and David have never gotten along. In the twenty some years since David left home the only thing he's ever said to Pop over the telephone has been "Let me talk to Mama."

David continues his tale. "Within a few minutes the water was inside the store. I was sitting in it. It was an inch or two above the bottom shelves. Only a few boxes were soaked. Dry foods that we'd have to throw out. But we'd cleared most of the bottom shelves. Pop said, 'Let the stuff already wet go and start working on the next shelves up.'

"More neighbors came in and offered a hand. It was a regular party. The water reached almost to the second shelves and lapped our legs below knee level. It sat and swirled for a while. Dirty, murky brown water. A water moccasin swam in the front door and went shopping. Pop casually grabbed it behind its head and sloshed to the door and slung it out into the endless lake that was Freedom. Moccasins are deadly, but Pop handled it like it was a child's toy he was tossing out.

Little by little the rain slacked off and then quit altogether. We kept moving stuff. We were wet up to our knees from the flood and our hair and faces were soaked with sweat. Dog tired. After a while Pop said, 'I think we're done here. Y'all go on over to the house and see if they need any help over there.' To the neighbors who had come by to help he said, 'Ya'll been a big help but you get on home and check on your own stuff now.'

Sue Ellen said, 'I need to check on my mother if I can get there.' I could see in her eyes that she was scared.

Pop said, 'Sure, honey. You go right on ahead. David, you best take her. Might best take the skiff. I don't think you can get there afoot.'

Going out in the boat with Sue Ellen after the rain stopped was so weird. It was the peacefulness of it all that lent a dreamlike quality to the world we had thought we knew. The clouds were gone like there had never been any to start with, and the sun was blazing. Our whole town had been washed with dirty water. The banks of the bayou just never stopped. Boats floating in open water were held by lines that dipped underwater like fishing lines; what was not visible was that the ropes that vanished under the water were tied to submerged piers. Eddies and swirls of brown water carried debris in all directions. The water was anything but placid. We took Pop's old homemade wooden skiff, a fourteen-footer with a square bow and flat bottom propelled by an Evenrude trolling motor. Sue Ellen sat up front. I sat on the back seat and operated the motor.

I told her to keep a close watch for stuff that might be just under the surface of the water that could ram us and bust a hole in the boat.

'Okay,' she said. She leaned forward to peer into the water, gripping the gunnels right and left, her shoulder blades angular and arms tense.

We hit little whirlpools and cross currents that carried the little boat sideways. The engine was barely powerful enough to keep us heading in a northerly direction. There were other boats on the bayou and in the town, many of them piled high with stuff salvaged from flooded homes, and off to our left people were wading waist high, and in places even chest high, with boxes and bags held aloft. At the peak of Freedom Loop we headed into what passed for downtown. Here the water was maybe three or four feet deep judging by how high it came on waders. Everyone in town seemed to be outside, either in boats or on foot. I turned the motor off and tipped the shaft up, thinking it might catch bottom in some of the shallower areas. 'Grab a paddle,' I said.

We drifted slowly, using the paddles to steer more than to propel the boat. We turned left onto Coffee Lane, stopping at the stop sign and looking both ways as if we were actually driving on the road. Simultaneously we realized what we were doing, and we both burst into laughter.

The Jamison's house sat near the southern end of Coffee Lane close to where it met up with Liberty Street near Little Don's Diner. It was a ranch style, white shingle house. It sat in a deep dip in the road. The whole house right up to the edge of their roof was under water. Mrs. Jamison was straddling the peak of the roof. She was wearing a denim skirt and she looked like a cowgirl in a saddle. She waved when she saw us coming. Sue Ellen stood up in the boat to wave back, almost tipping us over. We paddled up close and turned the boat sideways. I was an expert paddler. I could maneuver a boat in close quarters even in the strongest of currents, but the current next to the house was as powerful as any I'd ever experienced. I could barely hold us steady. It took all the strength I had. 'Grab that line and toss it to your mother,' I told Sue Ellen.

She picked up a length of nylon rope that was coiled in the bottom of the boat and threw the end. Mrs. Jamison reached to catch it, but missed. Sue Ellen pulled the rope in and tried again, and again. On the third try, Mrs. Jamison caught the rope. 'Okay, now tie it to the pipe,' I shouted.

She looped it around a stove pipe at the peak of the roof and tied up her end, and Sue Ellen pulled it tight where her end wrapped around the bow cleat. Now at least the front end of the boat was secured. Then we had to do the same thing again with another length of rope in the

back of the boat. Sue Ellen had to practically sit in my lap to throw the second rope, and when she did, all hell broke loose. The boat rocked violently, and Sue Ellen fell out, slamming against the side of the house and into the water. She grabbed the boat and hung on.

At the same time, Mrs. Jamison reached for the rope and slipped, and she came tumbling down with a huge splash. She scraped her leg up pretty good and got a big bruise on her hip, but we couldn't see that then. All we could see was that she was in the water and flailing her arms wildly. She screamed, and within a second or two she was swept away by the current, and Sue Ellen shouted at me, 'She can't swim!'

Without thinking, I dove into the water and went after her. She was splashing like a fish on a line. It took no time at all to catch up with her, but then I had to get her back to the boat. I don't know how I managed to grab her and swim against the current with her added weight, but somehow I did it. I think she must have had the good sense to quit flailing about and maybe even help me swim by kicking her feet, even though she didn't know how to swim. I think it must be kind of instinctual. Anyway, we somehow got back to the boat. Sue Ellen was still hanging on to the side. I got in first, and then helped them both climb in, and we took the shorter route home—right down Liberty to Freedom Loop.

While we were motoring back home, somebody stopped by our house and told Pop that there were looters robbing stores in town. We had not seen any evidence of looters, and knowing our neighbors and all, we couldn't really believe it. For the most part, we were proud of the folks in Freedom. All around town citizens were chipping in to help their neighbors, boating people to higher ground and helping to salvage personal belongings. But I guess not everybody was helpful. We heard that the looters hit the Piggly Wiggly first. The store was closed and sandbagged, water lapping three feet deep against the front windows. Looters broke the windows and grabbed armloads of groceries. One young man grabbed a cash register and loaded it into a boat. Looters also ransacked Ramsey's Electronics taking TVs and stereos. Word spread pretty quickly because just about everybody had CB radios and walkie talkies. The regular phone lines were out but that didn't stop the good ol' boys from calling each other. They were saying ten-four good buddy all over the place. This was back when that was all the rage, or maybe a few years after the fad died out. I'm talking about after the Carter years. Of course the first place people called was the sheriff's office, but that was useless. Sheriff Moss was vacationing in Hawaii.

Pop called the sheriff's office and demanded they get someone down to his store to guard against prowlers. 'We'll git somebody down there soon's we can,' a deputy said, 'but right now we're awful short handed. I'm down here all by my lonesome and Sheriff Moss is out of the country.'

'Well looka here, you redneck bumpkin,' Pop blasted back, 'You got a duty to protect the citizens of Freedom whether the sheriff's here or not. And just for your information, I happen to know that Randy Moss is lying on a beach in Hawaii right about now, and in case you didn't know it, that ain't out of the fucking country. It's part of the U.S. of A.'

'Well I'm just as sorry as I can be, Earl Ray, but they weren't no way he coulda knowed it was gonna flood. Now I'm gonna git somebody down there just as soon as I can, and that's the best I can do.'

So Pop and everybody at home went back across the street and waited in the store by the front door ready to fend off looters any way they could. Pop went into the back room and came back with a .22 rifle and a pistol. He handed the pistol to Freight Train.

‘Hey, I can’t use this,’ he said.

‘What? You ain’t never shot a pistol before?’

‘Sure I shot a pistol, but not at people.’

‘Well I ain’t asking you to shoot nobody. Just scare ’em off.’

A little aluminum boat approached, coming right down the middle of Liberty Street. Two men stood up in the boat using large poles to propel the boat through the water. Between them was a large Sony TV box obviously stolen from Ramsey’s. Pop and Shelly and Freight Train watched them approach. ‘That’un up front’s got a gun stuck in his belt,’ Freight Train said.

‘Might be, but I betcha he ain’t got the balls to use it. You can bet your bottom dollar on that.’

‘That’s Malcolm Ashton,’ Freight Train said. Now you have to remember this was long before Freight Train became a big pro football player. He was my age, still in high school at the time. He went to school with me. So did those boys in the boat. So Freight Train says, ‘I know him. Shit, he ain’t a bad guy. He’s just a poor boy that’s gone nuts on account of the flood and all. Seen himself a opportunity to cop some stuff he never could afford.’

‘Well he’s gonna be dead if he comes much closer,’ Pop said.

Mama said, ‘Don’t be too hasty, Earl Ray.’

‘You keep out of this, woman.’

‘I will not,’ she said in no uncertain terms. Mama could be a feisty little broad. She might have been the only person within the confines of Freedom who had the nerve to stand up to Pop.

Freight Train was trembling. Mama said, ‘I know Malcolm Ashton’s mama. She finds out what he’s been up to she’ll tan his hide, and whatever he steals, she’ll just make him march right down and return it the next day, and she’ll make him apologize too.’

‘Don’t you think he knows that?’ Pop said. ‘He ain’t likely to take anything home for his mama to see. He’ll hide his loot and sell it next week or next month. That boy’s clean beyond his mama’s control.’

The boat had come closer. The two boys were within shouting distance. Pop hollered at them, ‘Don’t y’all come any closer. I got a gun and I’ll use it.’

We came up behind them, putting along under the power of the little trolling engine. I killed the engine and let the boat drift up alongside the looters’ boat. Pop shouted, ‘Ram ’em, David. Hit ’em with your paddle!’

I couldn’t believe he’d say that. The boy in the front of the boat put down his pole and turned to his companion and said, ‘Let’s turn around.’

‘Are you kidding, man? We got a gun, and they ain’t nothing but a old man and a woman.’

‘And Freight Train Taylor,’ the other one said.

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. The whole thing was turning comical. I couldn’t believe we were having an armed standoff with Sonny Staples and Malcolm Ashton. They were students at Booker T Washington. I could see that Malcolm was scared. Going up against Freight Train should have scared the bejesus out of both of them, but Sonny didn’t have the sense God gave a

billy goat. He was too boneheaded to be scared. He said, 'You yellow bellied chicken shit,' and he threw his pole down and lumbered up toward the front of the boat, rocking the boat like crazy, and he grabbed the gun out from his buddy's waistband and held it up with both hands trying to hold it steady against the wild rocking of the boat, and he pulled the trigger and the sound of the shot reverberated over the water and we saw the splash where the bullet hit the water a good ten feet off to the right of Pop's boat.

'What the hell!' I shouted at Sonny. 'You're shooting at my daddy.'

Pop lifted his rifle to his shoulder, and just as slow and calm as you please he took aim and shot a hole in their boat near the bow and right under the water line. Malcolm jumped in the water and started wading back in the direction from which they had come, holding his hands up and shouting, 'Don't shoot!' And Sonny fell to his knees in the bottom of the boat and threw his hands up too, and he starting begging for mercy.

Their boat was slowly sinking. Pop shouted, 'Stand up, boy!' And Sonny stood up wobbly in the sinking rowboat, still holding his hands in the air. Pop pointed his gun right at him and said, 'Git naked.'

'What?!' Sonny shouted back incredulously. I could see him take to shaking. Pop said it again, 'Git naked.' And Sonny took off all his clothes, and stood trembling. He put one hand over his little prick and kept the other one raised. His skin was sickly white with festering pimples all over his chest and back, and you could see where he'd blistered and peeled across his shoulders. Pop said, 'Now git out of the boat and follow your buddy there that's wading away.'

Sonny climbed over the side and started after his companion. I tied onto their boat. I hollered at their backs, 'I'm going to tell your mothers,' and then I shoved off and cranked my motor again, and towed the sinking boat with its treasure of a brand new television to the store, where Freight Train lifted it out and carried it to the back of the store where the water had finally begun to recede. He said he'd return it to Ramsey's the next day.

Pop still had some shouting left in him, and he turned it on me. He said, 'What kind of pussy are you? Why didn't you ram them like I told you to?'

Mama came to my rescue. She said, 'Because I taught him to be a decent person, not some kind of caveman like his father.' She was seething with anger at Pop. She said, 'Not everything can be settled with brute force, you know, and this little show of macho bullying was sickening. You're a better man than that, Earl Ray. Those are not bad boys. They just made a mistake, that's all. A little understanding will do them a lot more good than any amount of violence.'

Pop shot back, 'It's just exactly because of wimpy attitudes like that that younguns turn to crime. This world is going straight to hell because people are not willing to stand up for what's right.'



Published by Mud Flat Press

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