

Crossroads

by [Armando Simón](#) (December 2023)



The Painter's Family– Henri Matisse, 1911

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It was Saturday and the Nelson family started to get ready to go out. The family, composed of Larry, Violet, the parents, and Eric, Mary and Ann, the children, were going to see a movie, specifically, a children's movies, which had been advertised all week on television, tantalizing them, so that, for once, the children put their clothes on and got ready without having to be repeatedly nagged to do so and, in fact, were ready before the adults were.

Unfortunately, when they stepped out of the house, they realized that it was sprinkling. The sky had been overcast for most of the day, but this was the first notice that they had of rain. The father hesitated at the threshold, frowning.

"Oh, it's all right," Violet said. "It's just sprinkling." Which was true, so that they piled in the car and maneuvered out of the driveway and into their street.

Upon reaching the entrance of the subdivision, however, the sky seemed to open up and a downpour of rain noisily, forcefully, fell on their car.

Larry, an overly cautious individual, muttered. "I don't know. It's really coming down hard now."

"Aww, Dad, it's all right," said Mary. "It's only a little rain."

"Yeah, Dad," Eric chimed in, aware of his father's moods. "We won't melt. Let's keep going!"

"Yeah, Dad! Let's go see the film!"

Larry vacillated. "I don't know. I can barely see the Stop sign." It was the type of rain that was noisy and that it seemed like somebody was throwing giant buckets of water across the windshield so that occasionally his view was obstructed. He glanced at his rearview mirror to see if there were any cars behind them (which was not the case), and instead saw the entreating faces of the children who were urging him on.

Larry looked back ahead of him. Sheets of rain periodically swept by, between which there was relative visibility. He nervously drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

"All right, we'll go," he announced and the children erupted into joyful shouts. It had been touch and go there for a few seconds.

The father turned left, cautiously, went through four intersections, turned right into a major street, and drove slowly for about ten minutes before coming across the rampway to the two lane highway which would take them to the mall where the movie theater was showing the film that the kids wanted to see. They drove slowly down the highway, along with others who drove at the same speed as them, although on the left lane cars occasionally whizzed by unconcerned either about the slick highway or the reduced visibility.

A little farther down, traffic on the right seemed to slow down to a crawl and Larry drove on the left lane, but not for much farther on until they, too, slowed to a standstill.

"Oh, I see. It's an accident way ahead of us," said Violet. "Try to get back on the right side. That's why it was so far back, everybody's trying to exit on this next exit on the right."

Larry looked at his mirror and turned to his right to find a spot to squeeze through, then looked back at his mirror in disbelief. It took him a full two seconds to realize that an eighteen-wheel Mack truck was bearing down at full speed on the same wet road that they were on, that there was no way the truck driver was going to stop on time, that there was going to be an accident and, worst of all, it was going to be a bad one.

"Oh, Jesus! That lunatic's gonna crash into us!!" As his family turned around at the wheeled destruction bearing down on them, now trying ineffectively to brake to a stop, Larry instantly realized that the car was effectively hemmed in.

The eighteen-wheel truck plowed into the car. The car was instantly crushed, killing the whole family, as well as the family in the next car, which was also crushed. Twelve other individuals were also severely injured. The truck driver, whose system was saturated with metamphetamines and who was

late for a delivery (and hence his speed) escaped with only a cut to his right thumb. He was ultimately put in prison for a couple of years, at which time he was released to pursue his old habits.

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Larry looked ahead of him. Sheets of rain periodically swept by, between which there was relative visibility. He nervously drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

"OK, now listen up, you guys! I don't want to hear any cries or whining, or we won't go see that film, OK? Now, it's raining too hard and the movie's across town and I don't want to drive all the way over in this rain, so we'll go tomorrow when it won't be raining so hard. Instead, right now, we'll go see another movie nearby, a comedy. I don't mind seeing two movies in one weekend, OK?"

"OK, Dad," Eric muttered while the other two pouted.

Larry edged forward and carefully turned right. He drove down five blocks, turned right again and drove six blocks down, where another mini mall was at, this one containing two movie screens. He dropped them off at the ticket counter so that they would not get wet, found a parking spot and joined them, getting wet while crossing the parking lot.

Everyone enjoyed the comedy. And the buttered popcorn. And the sodas. And the chocolate covered raisins.

Even with all the snacks that they munched during the movie, by the time that they exited (the rain had ended) they were in the mood to eat at a fast food place and they settled on McDonald's. At McDonald's, the children seemed to have bottomless pits for stomachs and Dad grumbled and threatened to put them up for sale to the highest bidder.

They were inside the car afterwards, about to leave the parking lot, when they noticed a commotion at McDonald's. As Larry drove closer, a man burst out carrying handguns in one hand and a bag in the other and got in a waiting car driven by another man. Instantly, Larry looked at the license tag and impressed it on his memory as well as the color and make of the car as it peeled out of the parking lot.

Ignoring the excited comments inside his own car, he calmly picked up his cellular phone, dialed 911 and gave them the particulars as well as the direction of the speeding car.

Within twenty minutes the thieves had been apprehended and returned to the scene of the crime for identification (the Nelsons had stayed, out of both curiosity and concern).

A television news crew pulled up.

Larry Nelson was an instant hero. He was on the news that night and the police gave him full credit for the success of the culprits' prompt arrest. He was in the newspaper the next day.

Needless to say, the family was busting with pride of him at having the presence of mind to memorize the particulars of the stickup car and to calmly phone in the information, cool as a cucumber. Their phone rang off the hook with friends, coworkers, neighbors and relatives calling over to praise him, joke with him about the event and to get more details. Violet fielded most of the calls, thereby getting into the spotlight, while the children were bombarded by questions that Monday at school by both classmates and teachers.

Larry looked ahead of him. Sheets of rain periodically swept by, between which there was relative visibility. He nervously

drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

"OK. Listen up, kids! We're not going to the movie today- "

"Aww, Dad," Mary whined.

"No fair, Dad!" Eric joined in.

"Ple-e-ease, Dad!"

"Hush! Hush up, now! We'll go tomorrow-"

"No, now!" Mary whined.

"I said hush! Or, we don't go tomorrow, either!"

The kids got silent, but were pouting.

"Cheez! Now ... what I was going to say is, we'll drop by the video store, you guys can pick out a video or two and Mom'll pick us up some chocolate chip cookies at the supermarket to bake and tomorrow we go to see the movie—provided it doesn't rain and you don't whine. Is that a good deal?" He glanced at his rear-view mirror; the kids' faces seemed less gloomy.

"OK," Eric finally muttered. The others remained silent; they'd show him!

Larry checked the intersection prior to crossing it and driving straight for two blocks, at which point there was a mini mall. He dropped her off at the supermarket while they went to the video store.

Sure enough, they could not decide on two videos among three kids, so since each kid video was ninety-nine cents, in order to preserve the peace, Dad rented three. They then picked up the mother.

The fuel gauge was on Empty, so on the way back, Larry pulled into a gas station and, rain or no rain, he filled up the tank. Going inside to pay, he indulged in one of his sporadic

State Lottery purchases, using his children's birthdays as numbers and his age, paying a dollar for it.

At home, the kids spent the entire evening "vegging out" in front of the television, watching the rented videos and getting full on chocolate chip cookies and milk. By bedtime, they were ready to go to sleep.

Next day, while lounging in his Lazy Boy chair, Larry glanced at the winning State Lottery numbers in the Sunday paper, as he had done hundreds of times before and his hands began to shake. He got up and removed the ticket from his wallet, which was lying on the night table.

Yes, it was real!

Then, clenching his jaw, so that he would not blurt it out, which took every ounce of willpower that he had, he put the newspaper in front of his wife with his index finger pointing at the numbers. Violet frowned, sure that Larry was silently telling her of their missed opportunity, and she felt a deep pain of disappointment. Then, with the other hand encircling her, he put the ticket next to the newspaper.

Violet shrieked. She jumped up and down, up and down.

She kept on shrieking.

Then she shrieked some more.

On top of that, there was only one winning entry, which meant that they would not have to share the multimillion-dollar prize.

The very next day, they were at the state capital for the ceremony for the news photographers, wherein they were photographed receiving a bogus blown-up check, whereupon, after the ceremony, they would get the real one. Violet and Larry were mildly surprised at not being ecstatically hysterical during the ceremony, and neither were the kids, but

simply happy. They posed for the customary publicity shots and then flew back home, revising their spending plans every five minutes.

But, before they left the capital, one of the officials took them aside for some advice.

"Let me prepare you ahead of time for what's waiting for you," he said. "After a while, I've noticed a pattern and it helps to be prepared. First of all, every relative you've got is gonna call you up and remind you of those family ties and could you please send them some of the money? The worst ones are the ones who couldn't stand you before, Aunt Leech and Cousin Lamprey. In fact, you're gonna be surprised at just how extensive your family tree has just gotten."

"Next are the total strangers who're gonna call ya in the middle of the night, having gotten your name from the telephone directory, with a sob story to tell you: 'could you give them money, just enough to buy Aunt Bertha a headstone for her grave?' and the like. Hang up on them."

"Then, there's the investors that are going to call you up to get you to invest on a sure-fire business scheme. Most of them are going to be lawyers. Hang up on them, too. If you're going to invest your money, and I suggest that you do, choose a reputable investment agency in town, but, under no circumstances, invest more than half of your money. And always diversify your investments."

"The last category of people to watch out for are those people who are going to hate your good luck. They're going to make up all kinds of stories about you and are going to imagine you're putting on airs or being rude to them, while in reality they're the ones who'll act rude to you, but they'll believe their own stories. I've heard of people who've spilled a milkshake on a little girl's dress and, in one instance, of a man who swerved across the road to try to hit one of our

winners. For no reason. Just goes to show that there's a lot of hateful people out there, full of envy. They would make good Communists."

"Now, the last thing and then I'll shut up and you can get out of here: I know that the first thing that you want to do is celebrate and buy up a whole bunch of stuff."

The Nelson family enthusiastically nodded in agreement.

"Do it! Spoil yourselves. Get yourself new car and new clothes and jewelry and new toys, maybe a new home, schedule a Caribbean or Alaskan cruise or a Mediterranean cruise. It's going to be your Hedonistic Phase. Do it. Get it out of your system. And, remember, always make sure that you pay cash—no deferred payments or loans. Then, afterwards, start thinking seriously about what to do with the rest of the money that's coming to you, OK? Well, that's it! Lord, you've been patient, listening to me! Usually, folks cut me off in mid-speech and run off to spend their money. And congratulations again!" He grinned as he shook hands with everyone.

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Larry looked ahead of him. Sheets of rain periodically swept by, between which there was relative visibility. He nervously drummed his fingers on the steering wheel.

He sighed and, looking carefully all around, made a U-turn. Cries of protest immediately went up.

"We'll go tomorrow! It's too far away and it's raining too hard!" he explained.

Amidst accusations of being "a mean ole Dad" and "the meanest Dad in the whole wide world," they arrived back home. Larry touched a button on the remote control and the garage door opened up and he drove the car in. The garage door noisily

closed up again and everyone disembarked, the children grumbling as they did so. Once inside, they thought that they would teach their parents a lesson by sulking.

Mom got them in a better mood by making lots of popcorn, which they ate, while listening to the rain and reading comic books and watching television. They eventually forgave their “mean ole Dad” and even saw the logic in his reasoning. By the next day, when they saw their film, the whole disappointment had been completely forgotten. In fact, on Monday they told their friends at school just what a nice weekend they had had.

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