

# Thirty

Used to be that journalists, like Rosy and Gary, would end a story with the notation, “-30-“. *La belle* tells me that since computers came in that practice went out. I’m writing “-30-“ on this issue of **Challenger** at a nexus of anniversaries which mostly involve thirty, as in years, but also right after I almost saw “-30-“ written to the whole shebang. I mean it.

I should have figured something like this was coming. Over Christmas I saw a cartoon on WGN, the Chicago cable station, that I loved in childhood and hadn’t seen since. In January a college girlfriend e-mailed me out of the ozone, Circles being completed, and all that.

On the morning of Friday, January 24, I dressed especially warmly, adding a set of long johns to my usual *couture*. fiddled around the public defender’s office in LaPlace, Louisiana, filling the last of my thirty (note) hour work week. Not much to do at my desk; I even sneaked in a little **Challenger** scutwork, pasting page numbers onto a few pages. At mid-afternoon I had a choice, go home or go down to Thibodaux and surprise Rose-Marie. She hates her little reporting job and feels envious of my leisure time, so I decided to surprise her and maybe cheer her a little. Off I went to Thibodaux.

We’d recently replaced the fan belt in my \$377.50 Ford Festiva, at a price over ¼ of the car’s value, so I watched the temperature gauge carefully as I set out over the Vacherie bridge. I turned the wrong way at first and had to double back along the River Road to find the proper state highway. Second fateful decision. I passed a post office and gave a moment’s thought to stopping to mail back an erroneous order from the Science Fiction Book Club. I didn’t. Third fateful decision. While I drove along the two-lane road I eyed the empty fields and wide-open spaces about me, thinking how alien it must still seem to Rosy and how grim living in such an environment would be for her. ... and for me, too. I *need* my bookstores and movie theatres.

I was within two or three miles of Thibodaux, on a clear stretch of road several hundred yards long. It was a beautiful day. A woman some distance ahead had stopped to turn left into a subdivision, a former canefield, treeless, sterile I slowed, of course, and must have been stopped. There are one or two or three seconds there that just don’t exist anymore.

The universe separated into three distinct parts: before, during, and after. During:

I felt an incredible jolt from the back, and heard that sound again, that hideous metallic *crunch* and *bang*. I felt something hit my face or my face hit something ...

And then it was *after* ...

I was feeling around for the latch to my seatbelt. It wasn’t where it was supposed to be. And the door – was it locked? Difficult to get it open ...

Faces double framed in my window and theirs, staring at me. I lurched out onto the pavement. *Are you all right?* the faces said from their car. *I don’t know*, I replied. *How do I look?* I wasn’t being sarcastic. I touched my forehead. Even as I brought down my hand and stared at the Transylvanian tea coating it, I was aware at what a cliché that was.

I staggered a few steps. I remember giving a guy my cell phone and asking him to call Rosy. He did. Someone told me an ambulance and a state trooper were on their way. I wanted to assure him that none of that was necessary, but instead I took my cell phone back and called my brother's house in New York. I *think* I talked to my sister-in-law. I saw a huge black pickup truck lying on its side in the roadside ditch. I also saw my \$400 Ford Festiva. Know why they call small cars bugs? Because of the way they look when people step on them.

I flashed on an auto accident I'd witnessed in Birmingham when I was a kid. The lady kept asking for her glasses. I asked for mine: they'd been flung off in the impact. As the EMTs were tying me to a board and loading me like so much laundry into the ambulance, they brought me my cell phone and keys and notary seal and briefcase – but they didn't see my specs. I still don't have them back. Also left behind, a nice Christmas sweater, that package I needed to return to the SFBC, and my NYFD pullover cap, bought at Ground Zero. Memo for later: go fish around in the wreckage and recover whatever is there to be recovered.

At the time, though, I was helpless about such things. I busily tried to convince the EMT, and myself, that I was all right. I wriggled my feet happily, convincing myself of no spinal damage. I recited my Social Security number to establish that I still had my memory. If I had the right number, I did fine. I also begged the guy not to catheterize me. I was doing this when I heard the voice that meant the most to me in the world. Rose/Marie says she shot the EMT a look and he explained, "It's a Guy thing."

They hauled my flab to a table and soon a doctor was poring over my blasted corpus. I hurt. My face hurt. My right thigh hurt more, and my sternum – probably from the seatbelt. My long underwear may have cushioned me from worse damage. My right eye was swollen shut. Off I rolled to X-Ray and Cat-Scan, both of which produced negative results. Felt woozy when I had to stand – but I never had to hurl. (What do you mean, "too much information"? You can *never* have "too much information.") We were there for five hours, but I didn't notice the passage of time. Concussion, y'see.

The last time I'd been in serious medical trouble was when I'd popped an eardrum, and they'd kept me overnight, pumped full of the most *wonderful* stuff – Antivert, which not only curbed my dizziness but enwrapped me lovingly in the gentle arms of Morpheus. I was a little disappointed, then, when the M.D. told me that there seemed to be no major damage, and Rosy should take me home, get me checked out for a possible fractured orbit (sounds science fictional, doesn't it?), and contemplate my bedroom ceiling. I am presently doing so.

On deck, besides the medical nonsense, is a trip to a civil lawyer of my acquaintance, the dissection and evisceration of the doofus who hit me the object. I want a new used car. I want a rental until it's available. I want my glasses back or a new pair. I want my face to stop looking like something out of Lon Chaney's makeup box. That's where we stand, or stagger, as Super Sunday carries forward.

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