And Leave It for the Water

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The sun couldn't punch through the leaden sky that clung over Spocari, and the rain kept coming down. For five days and nearly five nights it had rained—hard rain, but not the stinging, driving kind. It was warm rain, at least warm for the time of year. Second warmest March on record, the Herald said, and the damp air wasn't cold in spite of the hovering clouds.

The farmers around Spocari didn't mind the rain; it brought the frost out of the ground a little earlier, they said, and meant that they could get by with a little less wet weather, if they had to, when it came time for planting. But for the Bottoms folks in their house trailers and wooden apartment buildings and one-story bungalows along the river the rain was no blessing. Nor was it welcomed by the Spocari Emergency Volunteers, for it had already brought them three sleepless nights and wet days. Ever since the river had left its banks three days earlier, the Volunteers, in crews of two and three, had been helping residents who were pushed from their riverside homes by the rising waters. For a day before that the workers had sand-bagged the banks, trying to keep the waters in check, but their efforts were useless, and the rain kept falling.

Jacob Early had seen the Bottoms floods before, too often, and he had worked in them. He remembered the one of 1947 that swiped a dozen Negro shacks off the bank near the north side of the Bottoms, and the one that drowned young Harold Mulroney when it caught his boat and washed it over the Gas and Electric Dam back in '53. This one didn't look so bad; the houses had never been rebuilt too close to the banks, and the workers had a pretty good start on getting
folks moved out. But to that damned excited kid he was working with, the flood was already a major catastrophe; maybe it was just as well though—it's better to watch those floods with a wary eye, especially when you're as inexperienced as Darrell Markey, or they'll catch you with your guard down and then wash right over you.

"Jeez, Jake, lookit it come up!" Darrell sloshed toward Jacob, carrying a bulging suitcase in each hand. "Why, I bet it's up more'n half a foot since eight!"

"Yeah. Come on with that stuff." The older man was impatient. "Get much more water on this street and the trucks won't be able to make it through. I hope you got tags on them so ya know whose they are." He motioned toward the suitcases.

"They're Mrs. Shannon's. I guess she's got insurance policies and stuff in them and she doesn't want them to get wet."

"Toss 'em in." Darrell shoved the two bags into the back of a pickup truck sitting in water up to its hubs. Its box was packed with cardboard cartons and dog-eared suitcases waiting to be taken out of the flood area. It was a matter of practicality that the workers took only what one man could handle. Furniture—dressers, tables, chairs—took too much time to move. Besides, there was nowhere to store it until the waters went down.

Jake signaled the driver of the pickup. "Take 'er out, Bill. Prob'ly better not try comin' back 'less it stops risin' soon." The pickup slogged off down the watery street and turned, sputtering up the Fourteenth Street toward higher ground.

"That's all for this block, Jake. Where to next?" Darrell looked at the muddy water creeping up his hip boots, then up at the drizzling sky, apprehensively. "It's still coming down, Jake."

"Course it's still comin' down. Ya think I can't feel it or what?" Jake pulled the yellow rain hat down tighter over his gray temples. "Let's see. Sam and Jerry'll be workin' over on Fifteenth, an' Fourteenth's got enough of a rise that we ain't gotta worry about it for a while, so we might's well git to it down there." He pointed west down Eleventh Avenue. "We'll start with Sanchez's place and work
that way.” The old man splashed off toward the first house on the block. “I guess Lupi next door got his old lady ta move her junk out yesterday, so that’ll leave four or five places an’ we’ll end up with old Mrs. Feister’s, less’n the water don’t git’s high as her place.”

“Say...” Darrell paused. “Mrs. Fester. Isn’t she the one you were telling me about who gave you such a time back in...?” He hurried to catch up with Jake.

“Yeah, she’s the one,” Jake replied over his shoulder. “Last time the water got up toward her place we tried to get her ta clear out but she said she was stayin’ and locked the doors. Finally had ta git her kid down here ta talk her out.” He stopped, looking south toward the boiling river three blocks away. “But he ain’t in town no more. Sure hope ta hell she don’t give us no guff if we gotta mover her this time.” Jake surveyed the frame house with peeling lumber paint at the end of the block. It was on a slight rise, and though the muddy water already covered the street half way to Jacob’s knees and licked at the brown lawn fronting the house, it didn’t yet threaten the building. Jacob hoped it wouldn’t, but his boots pressed tighter on his legs as the water rose.

Darrell climbed the cracked wooden steps and knocked on Joe Sanchez’s door. An old Mexican answered, carrying a box wrapped tightly with dirty cord. “Hi, Mr. Sanchez. Have much for us to move out?” Darrell took the box from the man.

“Noh, nawd very moch. Dat ees all.” The Mexican pulled a ragged overcoat onto his stooped frame and hobbled down the steps.

“Hey, Joe, where’s the wife? She ain’t in there, is she?” Jacob motioned toward the door.

“Mary? She lef’ thee morning weeth her seester.” He splashed across the street, soaking his overcoat, and followed Darrell and the box through back yards toward the truck that waited on the next street.

Jacob passed Lupi Lara’s vacated house next to Sanchez’s and turned toward the next home on the block. As he pulled the gate through the water in the front yard he glanced down the block in time to see Mrs. Feister, a few houses away, step out onto her open porch and rush back inside. He thought he heard the door slam shut behind her.
“Water ain’t up there, least not yet.” He watched the river that played at the base of the rise that held the old woman’s house. “God, I hope this damn rain quits ‘fore it gets there.” He sloshed through the gate, and the rain kept falling.

“Hey, Jake, who lives in this house?” Darrell came back from the pickup, puffing. “Isn’t it Zimmerman’s?”

“Naw, they live down a couple. This’n’s Arby Pulaski—works out ta the mills. Ain’t home now though, looks like; must be on night shift ‘n’ ain’t back yet. Mornin’ Mizz Pulaski.” Jake touched the brim of the shiny hat pulled over his ears. “Sorry if we kept ya waitin’ but this stuff in the street makes it hard ta hurry much.” He climbed onto the porch steps. “Got everything tagged so’s we can keep it all straight?”

“Yah, Jake, come in. I got it all here in my living room.” Mrs. Pulaski opened the door for the old man and Darrell. “This is all, right here.” She pointed toward the corner of the room.

“Wheew.” Jake sighed. “Now Mizz Pulaski, ya know we can’t take all this stuff.” He surveyed the collection of lamps, chairs, pictures and boxes.

“Ah, Jake, you know what that river can do when it gets in here. You jus’ got to move this out.”

“We just can’t do it, Mizz Pulaski.” Jake shook his head, tossing off drops of water like a wet dog. “If we do it for you, then everybody’s gonna be on our back ’cause we didn’t do it fer them.” He motioned to Darrell, who was still standing in the open doorway. “Come on, let’s git some o’ this stuff outa here. Mizz Pulaski, you tell us what boxes got papers an’ stuff an’ we’ll take ‘em, but no lamps ‘n’ chairs.”

The woman hesitated, then searched through her belongings in the corner. Finally, without a word, she pointed to two boxes and a satchel. “OK, take ‘em outa here, boy,” Jake ordered, grabbing the larger box and heading for the door. “Now you better git yerself out too, Mizz Pulaski. That water ain’t gittin’ no lower out there.”

“I’ll thank you to mind your own business, Jacob Early,” the woman replied, sitting on one of the chairs she had dragged into the corner. “I’ll leave when I’m ready.”

As Darrell followed him from the house, Jake looked back to see Mrs. Pulaski putting on her coat. “Least we got that problem outa the way, boy.” They splashed up onto
the higher yard across the street, but the old man couldn’t feel relieved; he kept remembering the problem still ahead of him, the one down the block, if the water kept rising.

They crossed the back lots. “Say, Jake, where’s the National Guard? I thought they were supposed to be sand-baggin’ in this kind of weather.”

Jake scowled. “Yeah. Them guys’re up north on Riverdale baggin’ for the rich folks. Heard they got it pretty well held in up there.” He spat on the soaked grass as he slushed across it toward the waiting pickup. “Guess all it takes ta keep dry is money and pull.”

“S’pose ya heard the latest news, Jake.” The driver of the truck poked his head through an opened window and drew it back in as the warm rain struck his bare head.

“Make sure them tags’re on tight now,” Jake cautioned as he and Darrell shoved their burdens into the pickup’s bed. “What’s that about some news, Bill?” The old man walked toward the cab. “Hope it’s good.”

“‘Fraid not. I just got word from up north that there’s ice pilin’ up again behind the dam. Guess they’re gonna ease the top gates open some ta get ridda the pressure.”

Darrell had come up behind Jake, and his mouth dropped open. “Jeez, that’ll mean more water down this way though!”

“Damn right.” Jake shook his head. “Whadda they figure, Bill? Raise it down here by a foot or so?”

“More likely about two,” the driver replied. “That is, if the rain slows down.”

“Better get hustlin’.” Jake shoved Darrell back across the wet yards. “I guess everybody’s offa this block ‘cept Zimmermans now, an’. . . .”

“And Mrs. Feister,” Darrell interrupted. “Do you think it’ll get to her place when they open the gates?”

“Couldn’t hardly miss.” Jake looked toward the old woman’s house. “‘T’s nearly up ta her porch now.” He went through the gate and was met at the door by a tall man wearing a dirty leather jacket. “Howdy, Mr. Zimmerman.”

“Howdy, Jake. Ain’t got nothin’ here that I can’t carry. The missus and the kids all left early an’ we packed most the stuff in the attic.” He locked the door and carried a
suitcase into the street. "Been waitin' for ya though ta tell ya about Mrs. Feister."

"Huh? What's she got in for us now?" Jake turned to listen.

"Well," the tall man went on, "my missus tried to get her to leave with her an' the kids, but the old lady just sits there an' says she ain't leavin' for no river. Hope she don't give ya much trouble."

"Guess we'll soon find out. Thanks, Mr. Zimmerman." Jake and Darrell watched as the man disappeared behind the houses across the street, then turned, together, and started toward the woman's brown house.

Jake climbed the few steps, hesitated, then rapped on the door. "Mrs. Feister, we're here to help you with your things." He waited, listening, but there was no reply from inside. He knocked again—no answer. "You'd better be thinkin' about leavin' soon, Mrs. Feister. The dam's been opened and the water's already up to your porch." There were slow footsteps on the other side of the door.

"You're bluffin' me, Jake Early. I ain't scared o' no river. Why last time it wrecked half my carpets, and danged if I'll let it this time." She stopped, waiting for the two men on her porch to leave. "Now you just go on, Jake. I'll worry 'bout myself."

Jake grabbed the door knob and shoved, but the door wouldn't move. "Dammit." He turned to Darrell. "Go see if the back door's locked." The younger man splashed along the side of the house, disappeared, and a moment later returned, shaking his wet head.

"Nope, that one's locked up tight too." He looked at the gray water climbing the porch steps. "Man, they must've really opened those gates. You can see it come up!"

Jake ignored the boy's excited rambling. "Open up now, Mrs. Feister. We'll help you get your carpets off the floor so's they'll stay dry, but we gotta get in first." The old woman was again silent. Jake looked down at the water that was seeping across the porch floor and toward the crack beneath the door. "If you won't unlock we're gonna have to force your door, so open up. We ain't leaving you to stay here with this river right at your doorstep."
For a moment there was only the sound of the water making jerky little advances toward the bottom of the door. Then the woman spoke. "Jake, I'll go along with ya if ya'll just promise me one thing."

"What's that, Mrs. Feister?" Jake could tell from the woman's voice that he and Darrell wouldn't be able to satisfy her completely no matter what they tried to do.

"I got a box in here that goes too. Otherwise I ain't leavin'."

"We'll see what we can do. Now let us in."

"Ya gotta promise me first, Jake. Ya gotta help me to take it."

Jake looked out at the river, and again at the water that already covered the porch. "Well?" Darrell looked at him questioningly.

"All right, Mrs. Feister." The old man hesitated as he spoke. "I promise ya."

The door clicked, then swung open to reveal a frail little woman in a faded house dress standing inside. "It's right in there, Jake." She pointed to a doorway, and Jake motioned for Darrell to go after the box. The young man went into the room.

"Criminy, Jake, look at this." Jake pushed past Mrs. Feister and stuck his head through the doorway.

"Right in the corner there, that's it. Ya said you'd take it, Jake."

"But we can't take that, Mrs. Feister. It's a trunk!" He turned to face the scowling old woman. "It'd take three men to move it." Jake looked back in at the trunk. Sitting in a corner of the old woman's tiny living room, it was almost as large as her sofa.

"Jake, ya promised!" Mrs. Feister hurried into the room. Shoving Darrell away from the old trunk, she sat, suddenly, on a chair at one end of the huge box. "It's got my wedding gown in it, an' Tom's last letters 'fore he died in France." She looked up at the two men. "I just ain't gonna leave it here. I can't."

"Now maybe the water won't even get that high ta touch it, Mrs. Feister. It'll be all right. Don't ya think so, Darrell?"

"Sure, Mrs. Feister. Why, it's almost stopped raining
already.” But the old woman could see the water that already covered her kitchen floor.

“I ain’t goin’.”

Jake took the woman’s shoulders gently, and tried to lift her to her feet, but her thin hands clung to the chair. “C’mon, Darrell. Put her coat over her an’ let’s git her outa here.” Darrell laid Mrs. Feister’s coat on her lap. Then, he on one arm and Jake on the other, they lifted her until she let go of the chair. It wobbled and fell against the trunk.

“OK, I’ll get her now.” Jake picked the small woman up in his arms and started toward the back door. “Lock the front an’ let’s go.” He went onto the back porch and kicked open the screen door. “Hey, Darrell,” he shouted back in. “Grab a box or somethin’ when ya come. Least we can do that. Hold still, Mrs. Feister. ‘T’s for your own good.”

Mrs. Feister stopped her weak struggling and began sobbing. “Jake, that’s all I got in the world is in that trunk. Ya promised to take it, an’ now ya drag me out and just leave it for the water to wreck.” Jake carried her down the back steps and said nothing. “Jake, can’t ya do somethin’?”

“Mrs. Feister,” he answered as he carried the woman away from the river that was invading her home, “there ain’t a damn thing I can do. There’s more folks’n just you an’ me who gotta go an’ let that river do’s it pleases, an’ there ain’t nothin’ any one of ’em can do but just let the water go where it wants to, and wait, and pray.”