

Episode 147: Gregg fell into the crevasse

There's a phrase I find interesting. It's often used to describe a person who seems to have an unusual power in different ways. The phrase I'm thinking of is "force of nature".

When I hear "that man, or that woman, is a force of nature", it makes me think of someone who comes in like a whirlwind, with a clear objective, and nothing is going to stand in their way. And that description makes sense, because that's how nature is sometimes.

Here in Florida, we're about to go into that magical time of year called Hurricane Season. A storm comes up out in the Atlantic, and they often make their way here. And they are literally a force of nature. Thankfully, we usually have lots of warning, so we have time to prepare. But if you're in the path when a hurricane comes through, it's loud, and scary, and terrifying. It doesn't care about you. It's just doing what nature does.

But sometimes nature can be just as scary, and just as deadly, in complete silence. That's what Gregg found out, when he found himself alone and wondering if he would survive.

Scott

This happened in Las Vegas. What were you doing in Las Vegas?

Gregg

I do these public art commissions all over the world - New York, I mean, just as far flung as Azerbaijan and Saskatchewan - and I won a commission to do the floor of the Las Vegas Terminal D airport in Terrazzo. So I flew to Las Vegas. I stayed at the Rio Casino. The reason I stayed there was I discovered that if you bought 15, 000 worth of poker chips, you could stay there for free, and it's quite a nice setup. So I checked in. I bought my 15, 000 worth of poker chips. I put them in my safe in my room. Then, I just thought I could forget about them. But after maybe four days, I got a note under my door that said, "you're not gambling" because, apparently, they have tracers on the chips. Unless I gambled, I was going to have to pay for the room and I didn't want to gamble because I'm not a gambler. What's interesting is when I told them what the room would cost me if I didn't gamble, they said \$95 a night, which is still not bad. I mean, it was a beautiful room. It was, like, a very high story and had a balcony overlooking Las Vegas. It had a sunken jacuzzi. So I was like, "Fine, I'll do that." So I traded in my chips and now I'm staying in my nice room at the Rio.

Then, each day, I come down the elevator and go through the din of the slot machines and then head over to the airport where I work on my public art project. I decided to take the flight map of Las Vegas and do the whole floor of the terminal in Terrazzo. Terrazzo is an epoxy - all different colors - which is soft, but then you put granite chips - also of all different colors - in the epoxy and mix it. Then, you lay out zinc strips on the floor to create different sections that you put the different colored epoxy in. I had come up with 2, 600 different elements that were going to be part of this flight map of Las Vegas that was going to be on the floor of the Terminal D. I also had jetliners coming down between the escalators as if they were landing on the flight map, which is kind of a tongue in cheek joke.

So I spent a lot of time on my hands and knees with a team of people laying out these zinc strips, and it was very complicated. All the time I was working sort of on my knees, there was this 80-foot tall huge glass wall, which looked across the runways and across the desert, and I

could see these mountains in the distance. At the highest mountain, at the middle of it, kind of, fingering its way down a ravine was a glacier. And I said to myself, "You know what I'm going to do?" I was also pretty miserable in my life going from the casino to the airport back and forth every day. I mean, I was not a happy puppy. So I said, "What I'm going to do is I'm going to rent a car, get up early, and I'm going to drive to the glacier and climb it." Now, I knew nothing about glaciers. I knew nothing about mountain climbing, but that was my mission.

Scott

Now, you live in New York City.

Gregg

Right.

Scott

Obviously, New York does have mountains. I mean, you're in lower Manhattan. What was the attraction of climbing a glacier?

Gregg

The attraction was, well, there's a famous story about— I think it was Edward Mallory who perished with his partner on his third attempt to climb Mount Everest. He said, "You climb a mountain because it's there." I could see this. Even though I was in Las Vegas, I was in this very tacky urban situation. The whole city is made out of smoke and mirrors, like, cigarettes—

Scott

Everything is fake, of course.

Gregg

Everything's fake. Every column you knock on is fake. So I'm in this existence going back and forth between the airport and the hotel, and I just thought that would be just a great thing to do. So, I decided to do it.

Scott

And you said Sunday was your day off. That was your day. You were going to head to the mountains.

Gregg

Yes.

Scott

And was this, like, at the end of your work there or in the middle of it? Like, did you have to go back to work on Monday?

Gregg

Yeah. Midway through. I think I was there for 3 months, which is a brutal 3 months. I mean, Las Vegas is just not a nice place to spend time. So in the middle of this, I picked my Sunday, rented my car the night before, got up bright and early, drove out of the casino and through the street grid of Las Vegas, and then I got to this state highway that just was a straight shot, interestingly enough, directly toward the mountain that had the glacier on it.

Scott

How long did you think it was going to take you to get there? Could you estimate, like, the distance?

Gregg

Yeah, I thought it would be— again, I never got a map. I was so incredibly unprepared that it's breathtaking. Of course, it's very hard to judge distances across a flat desert. So I thought I'd be there in half an hour. So I started to drive straight across. It was very hot. I mean, it was still early in the morning - very hot. Cars were, like, looming above the macadam through the heat waves as I drove across, which was a bad sign in my mind, because it just meant it was going to be a really hot day.

After half an hour, I was still halfway there. Then, slowly, I got to some— I wouldn't call them foothills. I would just say that the desert began to rise up a little bit. I came to a scattering of ranch houses. Then, above the ranch houses, there was a pine forest. Once I got into the pine forest, I stopped seeing the glacier, I couldn't see anything above me. They were pretty dense pines. I did roll down my window and it was this wonderful, sweet smell of nature that was missing inside the casino or the airport.

Scott

Oh, yeah. That's like going from one extreme to the other. You're in the middle of nature now.

Gregg

Exactly. I was very pleased with that. So I drove up and I had no idea where I was going. I didn't have a map, as I mentioned. It was a dirt road. At each fork in the dirt road, I picked the fork that went ascended more and - it was pretty steep at this one - my engine was sort of straining against the climb and I just kept picking the right fork up and up. Slowly, the trees got a little smaller. The altitude got higher. I was a little bit slightly dizzy because I could sort of feel the altitude change.

Scott

Okay. If the air density or the oxygen was lower, you're getting up in some altitude then.

Gregg

Yes, I am. It's taken me some time as the trees got shorter and more stunted. Every so often, I'd come to a place where I could look through the trees and see the glacier - just a glimpse of it. So I was very excited about it going to work. I was actually going to get to the right place. Finally, I broke out through some scrub and I couldn't have been better placed. I was, like, right at the foot of the glacier or across some terrain to the foot of the glacier. So I was really excited. I had a little— it wasn't really a knapsack, it wasn't a belly pack. It was sort of halfway in between. I put that on, I got my water bottle, and I started to walk across. I was very pleased that I had the good sense. I mean, it was very bright, so I didn't bring sunglasses, which was a mistake. But I did bring my construction boots from the construction job. I'm glad I wore those because they were nice, hard construction boots. When I finally crossed over onto the glacier, it was pretty steep and I had to herringbone with my feet - sort of smash my feet in a herringbone pattern - to keep from sliding backwards.

Scott

How cold was it?

Gregg

It wasn't that cold, but you could feel the chill of the ice itself.

Scott

Plus the fact that— whenever I've been out in really cold temperatures, as long as I'm moving, I don't feel cold because your blood is circulating. So you started to make your way up the side of this mountain. Were you walking on just frozen ground or on ice?

Gregg

It was icy. It was icy. It was sort of corn snow on top, but it was ice. As I walked up, it was slow-going and I decided— first of all, I turned around a bunch of times, looked back, and I could see Las Vegas sort of in a haze in the distance, and I was completely, like, gung-ho for this experience.

Scott

How old were you when you did this?

Gregg

I was 52.

Scott

And how would you describe your physical fitness, your condition at that time? I mean, were you intimidated by this climb? Or you say, "Hey, I can do this."?

Gregg

Nope. I was completely gung-ho. I've always worked out, so I was in pretty good shape, but I just was so hopelessly unprepared and unaware that I was unprepared. So I was climbing up and I just said, "This would be a whole lot easier if I cut across to the rocks." So as I cut across, I could see there was a gap between the rocky ridge coming down and the glacier, which was formed because the rocks soaked up the sun and then they melted the glacier back a little bit. But what I was unaware of was that during the very cold nights, a strong wind would come across this glacier and make a little thin ice coating that extended over a larger part of the gap, which I was totally unaware of. So the gap was maybe a foot wide, and I thought I could walk right over and step across it. But, in fact, this ice skin was another two or three feet that was completely invisible. I just thought that was the glacier.

So as I approached it, there was a moment when I just suddenly fell and I fell about 30 feet down into this crevasse. As I fell, it's amazing I didn't hit my head on the rocks or the ice. I hit my right shoulder really badly and sort of bounced against the left one. Then, I bloodied my knees, my shins. At the bottom was where the ice face and the rocks came together and sort of came to a point. When I hit, my feet were jammed into that point.

Scott

Yeah, you said it was a 30-foot drop.

Gregg

That's a guess. I mean, it might have been 40, but it was a long drop.

Scott

It's enough that you can really pick up some speed as you're falling so that, when you hit— and you didn't hit, like, a floor. You hit where these two walls gradually came together. So it sounds like a very tight claustrophobic position.

Gregg

It was the first thing I did when I hit. I just panicked and I sort of clawed with my fingers on both sides to try to get out and not just bloodied all of my fingers, which was just a huge mistake. Then I said, "Gregg, get a hold of yourself, man." So I just held still. I let my breathing recover, let my heart rate go down. Then, I thought to myself, "Wow, not a single soul in the world knows you're here." I told nobody on the job. I told nobody in an email. I told nobody on a phone call. I just planned this thing to do. Then I said, "God, Gregg, you are so fucked." When I said that, it sort of echoed up and down the crevasse. You could see, maybe, the crevasse had a slow curve to it. You could see maybe 20 feet in one direction. It was very hard to turn in the other direction because of my shoulder, but it was about the same distance. I just thought, "God damn it, man. You're just totally fucked."

Scott

I'm just trying to think of your mental state at this time, and you just kind of summed it up there. It seems like the only options now, if you couldn't get out, would be the people that you were working for at the airport eventually noticing that you're not there.

Gregg

But they have no idea where I am.

Scott

Right. They don't know where you are. What about the car rental company? I mean, this was probably before They put GPS trackers in cars, right?

Gregg

Oh yeah. I think I told nobody I was going to do this. So there's no reason why they should think the guy rented a car to go climb a glacier.

Scott

Right. Yeah. You're not even close to where you were staying.

Gregg

Yeah. Most of the crew I was working with also— I caught them cheating on the thickness of the terrazzo and it was a crew out of Los Angeles, so they were not happy with me because I reported them to the general contractor, but that went nowhere. I found a letter while doing the research for this conversation which I reported and nobody got back to me. They were not happy with me. It was not a friendly situation, so there's no reason they would know that, A) I rented a car, B) I wanted to go to the glacier. So it could be many months before anybody finds me.

Scott

So your current status... I'm just picturing this, you're injured, you're winded, afraid, of course, and you're in pain. What do you do at that point?

Gregg

Well, I thought to myself, "God, what if the glacier shifts? What if there's an ice slide? What if it gets really cold at night and I just freeze to death?" I am so scared and I'm also angry at myself. Also, during the fall, my water bottle and my little belly pack - which had a sandwich and some food in it - didn't fall with me. They got caught along the way. So. I actually cried a little bit. Then, I actually prayed. I'm a lifelong atheist and I prayed to God to help me out, which I found, kind of, was the only momentary - I don't know - comic relief because I thought, "What are you

doing, man? This is nuts.” But I asked God to help me. Then, I think I also lost consciousness a couple of times because when, all of a sudden, I woke up and it was a little later, I was really cold and my blood sugar had dropped. I was shivering. Then, again, I thought, “God, I thought of my family, my friends. I may never see them again and all because of my own fault.”

Scott

You had mentioned that your blood sugar dropped. What made you aware of that?

Gregg

I was shivering, which also could have been the cold, but I'm a little bit hypoglycemic. So I always know when I'm kind of faint because of my blood sugar level.

Scott

Oh, so you know how to recognize that then?

Gregg

Yeah. I think I fell asleep and woke up really cold and I wasn't concerned about water because I just took some icy chips and put them in my mouth and I got my first taste of, kind of, bitter glacial water, but it definitely slaked my thirst. I did that for a while. Then, all of a sudden, my little belly pack knapsack just dropped from the heavens and it must have been dislodged by a wind or maybe it was hooked funny. All of a sudden, it comes down. I can't quite reach it, but it's there.

Scott

Did you have the slightest thought of, “Thank you, God”?

Gregg

Well, I kind of refused to go there and thought, “Eh, coincidence.” Yeah. Anytime there's kind of a religious miracle, I just say, “It's all in the void and it's just a coincidence.” But I did certainly entertain the thoughts for a minute. I was able to twist and put aside the pain on my shoulder and get a hold of it and eat my sandwich, my piece of fruit, and crackers, which was a huge boost. Then, all of a sudden, I started to feel better. Then, I heard someone else down there around the curve and I said, “Hello! Is anybody there?! I'm hurt. Are you there? Who's there?” No noise.

Then, like, 20 minutes later, I hear it again. I'm saying, “Who's there? Help me. Do you need help?” Again, nothing. It gets quiet again. Then, I say, “Well, I can go around the corner with this new energy I have from my sandwich. I can sort of shinny along and go around the corner and see who's there.”

Scott

Could you unwedge your boots?

Gregg

Yes. It took a while. I had to play with different techniques. I was trying to protect my shoulder the whole time, which didn't work very well. But finally, I just decided I'm going to go for it. I just was able to kind of ignore the pain in my shoulder and turn a little bit. So it was very hard going because my feet kept getting caught. There was one more episode where I heard somebody and then they didn't answer, and I thought, “Well, maybe they're really hurt.”

So I finally slowly got to the curving crevasse. I got around it, and there's a female deer and she's bloodied. She's hurt as bad or worse than me. When she saw me, she completely freaked out and she struggled to jump up. She actually jumped up and tried to flee from me. Because she has four sharp hooves and she's motivated by complete flat-out fear, flight fear, she goes around. She continues around the curving crevasse.

Scott

Away from you...

Gregg

And as I followed her, I couldn't keep up with it because she was moving. She started up the side of the— it's hard to actually describe the way it looked, but she disappeared around the corner. Then, I caught up with her and she was struggling to get up the crevasse and the crevasse seemed to go be inclined a little bit or not as deep. Then, she really got a hold and she took off like a bullet. She went up and then she broke through the ice skin that was there and then she was gone. I was able to slowly work my way up and suddenly I'm out and I'm just overjoyed. I mean, I'm crying. I'm laughing. I'm thankful and I could see her bounding up the glacier. She was high tailing it up the glacier and she's gone.

Now, my emotions are all over the place because I'm going to live. I'm going to see my family. Everything is great. Although I am bloodied pretty much top to bottom hobbling down the ice, I was feeling joy, for sure. Thankfulness. I'm not sure who I was thanking, but I was very thankful. I felt a little giddy because there is a funny side to joy. Then, I also felt disappointed, I think, because I was just mad at myself that I had got myself into this predicament. I'm also hobbling along. I mean, it's like Valley Forge. I'm just definitely hobbling along to get to my car. So I had all these emotions going at once and, as I hobbled down, I was experiencing all those.

Then, as I got to my car, another car pulled up, which was totally surreal because I had just been through this life and death situation, and here's another car. They get out and say, "Are you okay?" I said, "Oh man, yeah, I'm okay, but let me give you some advice..." And I started to explain to them about the edge of the glacier and they said, "No. This isn't a glacier. There are no glaciers above-ground glaciers in Nevada. This is just the last of the snow melt from the winter." So I thought, "Great, not only have I made those other mistakes, but I'm not even climbing up a glacier. I'm climbing up that last bit of the snow." Then, the guy said, "Can we help you?" And we went through a little negotiation. I said, "No, I think I'm okay. I just want to get out of here. I'm okay."

Scott

So you were done with nature for that day, huh?

Gregg

Yes, exactly. Totally done with nature. It was very hard to drive because my right shoulder was killing me. As I slowly went down the mountain, I started to get really sort of self-abusive because I just thought, "You just made so many mistakes. You told nobody where you were. You didn't have the right equipment. You didn't have sunglasses. You didn't have a map. You didn't do anything right. What is wrong with you, man? You got a problem." While I was thinking about it, I thought what made me successful as an artist is that most art commissions have, like, 1,000 applicants or 200 applicants and you're going to fail, but I always head into them as if I'm going to win. I have this kind of belief that I can do it, and that is very helpful. That sort of empowers you and makes you more of a winner. So that's a good side of my fearlessness. I'm

not afraid to fail, but the bad side of it is I also can charge into situations like this one, where I'm gung ho and I have no common sense and nothing that holds me back.

As I drove along, I thought, "If you don't get a hold of this desire to run headlong into unknown situations where you don't know the terrain, you don't know the psychology, you haven't looked at a map, you haven't inquired from anybody who's done it about what it's like, you haven't gone on Google - although Google didn't exist in those days - you haven't inquired of any experts, this could cost you your life, so you need to get a hold of this." Then I thought to myself, "Maybe you should get a tattoo that says something, like, "Never miss an opportunity to stop and think." Then, I said to myself, "You know what? Not only that but maybe you should do the tattoo in reverse and do it on your forehead so that every time you look in the mirror stop and think, that's kind of the last self-critical thought I had before I hit the straight highway back to that mirage of Las Vegas in the distance.

Scott

The idea about having no fear of going into a situation where you really don't know what to expect— if you could change that, is that a character trait that you would eliminate?

Gregg

Well, it's very helpful in presentations - most people get really uptight before they present - or job interviews. There are many situations where it's very handy to be fearless. One of the interesting things is that for years, I mean, I've done 200-plus public art commissions and every one was a whole process, which finally ended up in a final interview where there were usually three finalists. Then, I would make my presentation and I had this trick. I would go into the room and it's usually a bunch of people behind a table. You're sitting in a hot seat and I would find a reason to stand up and I'd bring a bronze sample or whatever it was. I was going to do the project and go around the table and I would touch people's shoulders and have them look at the samples, and this was a great technique because, when you touch somebody, there's physical contact and it really helped my batting average.

Scott

Yeah. That's another level of intimacy

Gregg

Exactly. But also, I'm not afraid to do it. Most people are sitting in the hot seat and they're just nervous. Also, I always try to crack a joke to get a laugh. I get a laugh early on. In public speaking, I have the same thing. If I get a laugh out of an audience, I relax. The crazy thing about this technique of mine was that once Zoom calls came in, it was completely not useful because there's no contact in a Zoom call. You're just on a divided screen like everybody else, and that definitely affected my batting average with getting commissions.

Scott

What was the diagnosis on your shoulder?

Gregg

So I got back. I mean, I just iced it. I had to take a break from the project. I went back to New York. Well, they were happy to work without me, which scared me because I was afraid to do a lousy job. But I had— what's it called? Not microscopic, but I can't think of the name.

Scott

Laparoscopic?

Gregg

Surgery. Laparoscopic surgery on my shoulder and they laced it together and it actually healed pretty quickly. Then, I was back out there again and I think, to their credit - they also knew I was coming back - they did a pretty good job.

Scott

How long were you away from the project?

Gregg

I would say it was at least a couple of weeks -might've been three.

Scott

Do you still want to climb an actual glacier?

Gregg

It's kind of hardwired in me now as a fear. I mean, I might. Maybe it's a good way to get over my fear.

Scott

Well, I mean, if you're only going to have fear of one thing, that's a good thing to be afraid of, I guess.

Gregg

Yeah. Well, if I was going to climb a glacier, I would do it with a guide.

Scott

Oh, yeah, that would make sense.

Gregg

I would have incredible prep beforehand.

Scott

Before we wrap up, I want you to tell my listeners about your podcast, which is called The Compulsive Storyteller. It's one that I subscribe to and I know my audience is going to love it because it's all stories. What's that about?

Gregg

So The Compulsive Storyteller is a series of short, real personal stories, mostly 15-minutes long. A lot of them are, like, 5-10 minutes and they're about my life, different parts of my life. Basically, as you can see, I get myself into a jam and then I get myself out of it. The arc of the stories and the stakes in the stories are how I get myself into things and then how I get myself out. I think that the time length is nice because 5-15 minutes is nice. A lot of podcasts are an hour or hour and a half, and it's a serious investment, but mine are short and sweet. So you can take a break and you can listen to one of them.

Scott

And that's what I do. When you have a new episode that comes up, I usually put that at the top of my queue because I usually listen when I'm riding my bike or in the car or something. I know that, even if I don't have a long trip, I'm still going to be able to do the whole episode. So it's convenient.

Gregg

Yeah, it is. I used to call them Snackable, but that sort of denigrates the product in a way. Some of them are comics. For example, I have one called Ratatouille Too. It's a story of when I had a girlfriend who was a translator for the UN in New York. She spoke, like, six languages. She had a pet rat. We had a French couple who were diplomats come to our loft for dinner, and they wanted to experience an artist's life, and I thought they might even want to buy some art. In the middle of dinner, we couldn't find the rat. The rat's name was Ratsky. In the middle of dinner, Ratsky shot across the floor, jumped up onto the table, and went right up this woman's front of her dress to get a little pita pizza she was eating and she flipped over backwards and her legs were flailing on. It was just a hilariously funny episode. So that's kind of a comic episode.

Scott

Yeah. That one had me laughing out loud. So we'll have a link to that. What's your website? How can people find you?

Gregg

It's called thecompulsivestoryteller.com.

Scott

I've listened to a lot of your episodes and I know some of them are hilarious, but they're not all just funny. What would be an example of one that's more serious?

Gregg

Yeah. Some of them are tragic. My mom, for example, was one of the first female air force pilots in World War 2 and she underwent an enormous amount of abuse. That's a very interesting podcast. It's called "Me too, Mom," but it's also very tragic. Then, some of them are just weird things I've done. For example, one is called "Free fall." Everybody's afraid of falling when they're older and breaking their hip and it's the beginning of a long downward slide. So I collected three of my best fall stories from my life where I bounced right up and almost died and bounced right up. Those are kind of both funny and tragic, but I think weird is the best word to describe them.

Scott

When you live your whole life in New York City, there's going to be stuff that happens all the time that is, "Oh yeah, they're story-worthy, for sure." We'll link to all of that in the episode notes so people can go check that out. Gregg, thanks for coming on. Thanks for sharing your story!

Gregg

My pleasure, and thanks very much for your thoughtful questions. I really enjoyed it.

Scott

When I was in New York City recently, I spent some time with Gregg and he showed me some of his public art installations. Pretty interesting guy. And we'll hear a bit more from him in just a minute.

And now an update on our food server project – if you listened to the previous episode I announced this fun little project where I'm asking everyone to chip in a dollar or two, and I'm going to give that money to some hard-working food service worker as a gift. Why are we doing this? Because they work hard and they deserve it! You can see the current status at WhatWasThatLike.com/server. It's all being done through GoFundMe so that everything is transparent. As I record this, we're over \$200 so far. I really want it to be over \$500 because

that is really going to be amazing to give to someone as a surprise gift. And I'm planning to record that, so you can see exactly what happens. So please, join in if you can at WhatWasThatLike.com/server.

And Raw Audio episode 34 is now live. The Raw Audio shows are bonus, exclusive content with actual 911 calls for anyone who signs up to support the show at WhatWasThatLike.com/support. In this new episode, you'll hear a woman calling 911 because she's on the freeway and her accelerator is stuck –

911 Operator

Do you have your seatbelt on?

Woman 1

I do.

911 Operator

Okay.

Woman 1

I'm coming up on a bunch of cars.

911 Operator

Okay.

Woman 1

Oh, I'm so scared.

Scott

A mother calls 911 because her 3 week old baby has stopped breathing, and the 911 dispatcher tells her how to perform CPR –

911 Operator

Is he breathing?

Woman 2

No.

911 Operator

Okay, alright ma'am. I'm going to tell you how to help him, okay?

Woman 2

Okay.

Scott

(and by the way, that call has a very happy ending) – and the third story in this episode is two teenage sisters calling 911, because they're home alone and hiding inside a cabinet while burglars are breaking in to the house –

911 Operator

What door are they at?

Woman 3

They're at the back.

911 Operator

Okay. So, the two men are at the back door?

Woman 3

Yeah

Scott

You can hear that whole episode, plus binge the previous 33 episodes, AND get all What Was That Like episodes ad-free, by signing up to support the show at [WhatWasThatLike.com/support](https://www.WhatWasThatLike.com/support). And you can get ALL of that right on the app you're using right now.

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Graphics for this episode were created by Bob Bretz.
Full episode transcription was created by James Lai.

And this week's listener story is a voice you're familiar with – it's today's guest, Gregg. This is a story he told on his podcast, The Compulsive Storyteller.

Stay safe – I'll see you in two weeks.

(Listener Story)

Picnic. I find myself hungry in the middle of Newton, Massachusetts. As I left the McDonald's with my bag of burgers and fries, I asked a passerby where I could find a nice place to have my lunch outdoors. He directed me to the banks of the pond in front of nearby Newton City Hall. As I walked away, he said something cryptic, "If you're lucky, you may get to see a really good show." Not knowing what he means, I envision teenagers making out in their cars.

When I parked facing forward in the city hall lot overlooking the pond, I could see a number of picnickers sitting on their blankets at the edge of the water - some of them also had McDonald's bags. As I looked to my left and right, it seemed that the people sitting in their cars on either side of me were in a state of high expectation. The scene is idyllic. It's a perfect soft summer's day outside the Georgian Revival City Hall with its Greek temple-style portico and Corinthian columns. Just the slightest breeze ruffles the water and picnickers are lunching on the newly cut grass by the pond's edge. Then, to complete this summer pastoral, a flock of Canada geese in a V formation paddles across the pond toward the picnickers. I could be looking at a 19th-century John Constable English landscape painting, possibly entitled, "Summer's Peace."

As the geese pick up speed crossing the water, some of the onlookers in the cars around me start to toot their horns and all eyes are on the banks of the pond. I still haven't caught on yet.

The guy in the car next to me jumps out, yelling, and waving his arms to warn the people of something, but he's also smiling. They all ignored him, thinking probably he's some sort of a nutjob. Then, things happened fast. The lead goose reached the edge of the pond and ran up the embankment toward the nearest picnickers with his wings spread wide and his big black bill open, hissing at his targets.

The family jumped up in complete disarray. The wife and one kid tumbled sideways as the big goose stole their lunch, gulping down their burgers and fries. Now I understand why the occupants of the surrounding cars were in such a state of readiness. Meanwhile, the rest of the flock made short work of the other picnickers. I can't help but laugh at this scene of pastoral carnage.

As they retreat, some of the panicked picnickers still have their napkins tucked into their waistbands. A few were crying, some were smiling, and all the onlookers were laughing hysterically. The lead goose was now digging through one of the overturned picnic baskets, looking for more food. I drove out of the parking lot, marveling at how this serene summer scene turned into complete chaos in the wink of an eye, and appreciated a good laugh. It occurred to me that, for the onlookers, this is a regular daily event. I guess that if no one was really hurt, why not just enjoy the show?