

MakeShift 21: Commentary and Winners

On the face of it, this challenge seemed straightforward enough: Survive a minor crash into a shallow river. Yet within its simple construction reside a number of subtle and profound truths. One: If you're not careful, even a really sucky day at work can get considerably worse. Two: What may first appear as a shortcut could end up biting you in the backside big-time. And three: It would seem, from all your responses, that there are fewer more potent forces acting in the universe than that imparted by... a bag of homemade cookies.

Seriously, people, if we'd told you that plastic baggie was filled with paper clips, or stamps, or even cold, hard U.S. cash, you would've discarded those items without a second thought. But almost all of you made a point of detailing what should be done with those cookies. Many said, "Eat them first..." "They'll give you energy..." "They'll calm you down..." Really. You've just crashed your car into a river, you've been punched in the face by your airbag, your ankles and legs might be broken, and the car is rapidly filling with water. So, yeah, let's eat some cookies why don't we?

Yet even those of you who realized this might not be the best moment to start snacking vigorously suggested, "Be sure to save the cookies for later..." "Make sure the cookies stay dry..." "Don't forget to take the cookies..." Clearly, there is a powerful force at work here, such that – even in a mere imaginary situation – some remote part of our primordial brain is still whispering, "...Cookies ... we have cookies..." – a fact all you serious scientific makers might want to file away for the next time you decide to ask your boss for a raise, or tell your significant other you've just blown this month's car payment in Vegas: "Hey, look what I got. Want a cookie?"

As for the challenge itself – in a rare break with our usual tradition – we hinted that your cell phone might actually be of use here; a tidbit nearly all of you correctly leapt upon. Yes, Virginia, we have a working cell phone – and cookies! Ahhh, a conundrum: put the cell phone in with the cookies? Just put the cell phone and, say, the flashlight in the baggie? But how, then, to preserve those precious morsels? The entries reflected a wide range of opinions on this, once again confirming the inescapable gravitational pull of said baked circular disks. Suffice it to say, most of you grasped that the two key moves in this situation were to protect the cell phone and get yourself out of that car, so let's start with protecting the phone.

Yes, it should go into the plastic bag – and then what? Many of you just said "secure it on your body" or "tuck it in your shirt or pants." And, that indeed might work. But consider that once you manage to get out of the car you're going to be thrashing your way through flowing water to get to shore ... and that cell phone is

your critical – and perhaps only – lifeline to realistic help anytime soon. Is the phone really safe enough in a plastic baggie stuffed in your shirt, pocket, or bra strap? To our thinking, in the minute or so you've got before the car fills with water, you need to do any and everything you can to see that the phone stays dry. So indeed put it in the baggie, but peel off whatever coat you're wearing (which will facilitate your swim), wrap the phone in that, and then stuff it all – and perhaps the flashlight – into the briefcase. The case may not keep out all the water forever but between the case, the coat, and the baggie, you've done everything you can to ensure that cell phone will work when you need it.

But might not the briefcase hamper your ability to swim? Yeah, it could. But, whether they're fractured or sprained, your feet and legs are probably not going to be much help there either so you'll really need your arms for whatever power and control you can muster. Hence, we thought you should either use your belt, if you're wearing one (or use your knife to cut your seatbelt), to secure the briefcase. This could be done by, say, looping a strap through its handle and slipping that over your shoulder and torso. That way it can float and be dragged on your back, or at least behind you. It may not be comfortable, but it should still leave your arms free for the swim, and ensure the case and its precious cargo stay with you until you get to shore. (Not unlike the looped rope and float lifeguards use to effect the rescue of a swimmer in trouble.) We would not recommend – as several of you suggested – tying the briefcase, the umbrella or anything else to your wrists or arms, as this would undoubtedly make it extremely difficult to swim effectively.

The second issue was how and when exactly to get yourself out of the car. A few suggested breaking the window if it wouldn't open on its own. We found this curious for two reasons: a) We specified in the challenge that the door latch worked, thus (we thought) eliminating the need to break the window, and b) Have you tried to break a car window lately with anything less than a hefty swing from a baseball bat or a golf club? Not so easy. Those puppies are specifically designed not to break except under the most extreme circumstances. So better not to waste time and energy on the window but, having used the little time you had to protect the cell phone, make sure your seatbelt's off and there's nothing impeding your swift exit from the car. Also take off any clothing or shoes that might encumber your swimming and ... wait. Yes, we said it – wait until the water has risen enough in the car (at least equal to the height of the river) before you attempt to open the door and swim out. Although most of you already knew this, for those who didn't, if you attempt to open the door before the water pressure inside and out have equalized, the water outside will rush in with enough force to make it difficult if not impossible for you to exit, and this will also quickly displace whatever air you have left, thus increasing the odds that you may get trapped and drown. Not the outcome we're looking for.

Okay, so we've secured the cell phone and, waiting for the right moment, managed to get out of the car. Now, how best to get to shore? One of you suggested bringing the umbrella and opening it under water, using it, in effect, as a sail in the water and guiding through the current to steer you to shore. We kinda doubt it would really work like that and might do more to hamper your control than enhance it, but we gave the idea points for creative thinking. Others suggested using the briefcase as a flotation device, which also might work, since it should keep air trapped inside, at least for a time. But wrapping your arms around it like a life preserver would leave you completely at the mercy of the current, and with your legs out of commission, we really felt you'd want to keep your arms as free as possible. So by all means, let the current take you as much as it can while using your arms to work your way towards the shore until you can pull yourself from the water.

Then, making yourself as comfortable as you can, dig out your working cell phone (most of which now will give the emergency services your location even if you're unsure of exactly where you are) and dial 911. While you wait for them to come retrieve you, you can pop open the umbrella, if you managed to stuff it in the briefcase, wave around your flashlight when you hear vehicles or people approaching, but above all else, be sure to eat that colossal quantum of cookies if they managed to make the trip intact, because God knows, you've earned them!

And now, as we head off to the nearest bakery to make a detailed study of the perpetual power locked in cupcakes, we once again thank you all for playing and look forward to seeing what wondrous wizardry you will wow us with next time.

Yours in chocolate chips,

Lee Zlotoff

Makeshift Winners:

Most Plausible: Jean Sison, Jim Richardson

Most Creative: Ed Banke

Honorable Mention: Thomas Slusser