



Season 4
Episode 2 Transcript
Trapped in a Flooding Elevator

Torah Kachur:

It's around 10 p.m. on a stormy Tuesday night, and Gabriel Otrin and Klever Freire are working late at the office up on the fourth floor.

Klever Freire:

A cleaning lady knocked on our door and let us know that there was a little bit of flooding in the basement level and that people were moving their cars out of the garage.

Torah Kachur:

Klever doesn't want his car to get damaged, so both men get in the elevator and start their descent to the parking garage. After a few floors, the elevator stops with a jerk.

Klever Freire:

And we heard a loud splash as the elevator hit the water. It was just like a fire hose was at the bottom of the elevator and the water was just pouring in. Then I think to force the door open is really the only way out, and unfortunately, it's just not possible. We're afraid we might drown.

Torah Kachur:

I'm Torah Kachur and this is Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

On August 7th, 2018, Klever drove to work and parked in the underground parking garage. He'd founded his own robotics tech startup a few years earlier and rented space in a low-rise building in Toronto, Canada. Gabriel was his first hire. Gabriel was used to working evenings with Klever, but he often ended the day with some work of his own down in the parking garage.

Gabriel Otrin:

I would actually go down there and work on my car for several hours and then go home.

Torah Kachur:

So when the custodian warned them about the flood, Gabriel thought he could lend a hand.

Gabriel Otrin:

I was thinking maybe there's a deep puddle somewhere, and I just wanted Klever to at least not drive into it and potentially hydro lock the engine.

Torah Kachur:

But he thought that was pretty unlikely.

Gabriel Otrin:

I could foresee there being maybe a little bit of flooding, let's say near the garage door, but zero chance of it reaching the doors leading to the elevators. That's impossible.

Torah Kachur:

And at night, the elevator was the only way to access the garage.

Klever Freire:

We knew that the door to the parking from the stairs would be locked, so we were not able to get to the basement from the stairwell.

Torah Kachur:

What Gabriel and Klever didn't know was that Toronto was in the middle of a massive and unexpected downpour. The media would later call it a ninja storm. Some estimates say parts of Toronto got almost eight inches of rain in just a few hours. Storm drains were overwhelmed. Sewer pipes burst and the city streets flooded, but Klever and Gabriel were so engrossed in work they didn't notice what was happening outside.

Gabriel Otrin:

When I work, I virtually always have my headphones on, I'm listening to music, and so I probably wouldn't have noticed if it was a heavy storm and I didn't think all that much of it and just kept focused on whatever I was working on.

Torah Kachur:

Even if they had noticed the storm, they wouldn't have known that the creek beside their building had swollen into a river and drained right into the parking garage, so when they got into the elevator and took it down to the basement, they were surprised when they hit water.

Gabriel Otrin:

It made a pretty loud like whoosh noise, a pretty large splash, and you felt it.

Klever Freire:

Water started pouring in immediately.

Torah Kachur:

At first, Gabriel was annoyed.

Gabriel Otrin:

And I'm like, "Oh, this sucks. I'm probably going to be stuck here for a while. I don't want to get my shoes wet."

Klever Freire:

Gabriel jumped on the handrails like he was a cat keeping himself dry from the water, but I was just letting the water soak me as I was in disbelief, trying to assess the situation.

Torah Kachur:

Then he looked around the elevator.

Klever Freire:

And I noticed the outline of Gabriel's cell phone in his pocket. I asked him to take it out and be very careful not to drop it.

Torah Kachur:

Klever had forgotten his cell phone at home that morning so they only had one phone with them. Gabriel tried to get a signal. Nothing. Then Klever snapped into action.

Klever Freire:

I started pressing the elevator buttons for other floors, just trying to get the elevator to move.

Torah Kachur:

But the elevator didn't move. They tried to open the door.

Klever Freire:

The elevator door is designed so that if you try to jam your fingers in the crevice between the door and the wall of the elevator, you can't get your fingers around to push anything. It's impossible.

Torah Kachur:

The water kept rising. It was now almost at their knees.

Klever Freire:

So then I pressed the elevator alarm buttons again and the emergency call buttons. By now, the water is close to the intercom speakerphone and we're starting to get pretty worried that we're not going to be able to hear anybody, even if anybody does answer.

Torah Kachur:

Finally...

Klever Freire:

We hear ringing coming from the speaker, then what sounds like an on hold notification, which you can imagine made you a little bit more scared to be put on hold in the middle of the elevator starting to flood.

Torah Kachur:

At this point, the speaker was nearly submerged in water. Then the two men heard a voice.

Klever Freire:

And I began yelling, "Hello, we're stuck on the elevator and water's rushing in. I'm afraid we're going to drown."

Gabriel Otrin:

But as soon as we heard that voice, the water hit the speaker and it cut out.

Torah Kachur:

The water was almost waist high.

Klever Freire:

I noticed the water is brown. I look around and I see leaves coming into the elevator, floating in the water.

Torah Kachur:

Klever couldn't believe what was happening. He thought about where he should have been that night.

Klever Freire:

I remembered that I canceled a movie date with my daughter that was supposed to be for 7:00 PM that night because we were busy with work.

Torah Kachur:

And then...

Klever Freire:

I started to hear Gabriel praying.

Gabriel Otrin:

And I certainly felt at peace then, for either life or death.

Torah Kachur:

Gabriel prayed that he and Klever would get out of the elevator alive.

Klever Freire:

I noticed that he made an effort to pronounce my name correctly as if God would not know which person he was talking about, and in that instance, my worry broke. And this was the first moment that I said to myself, "I'm not dying in this disgusting elevator, in this brown, mucky water."

Torah Kachur:

Then they remembered the hatch on the ceiling of every elevator.

Gabriel Otrin:

Just like you see in movies, and I press on and I'm like, "It's not moving."

Torah Kachur:

The hatch was locked and it could be only opened from the outside.

Gabriel Otrin:

I punched it as hard as I could in various different ways and it started to bend.

Torah Kachur:

It bent a bit, but not enough for Klever to even stick the phone through a gap to get a better signal. So Gabriel tried another tactic. He used his head, literally.

Gabriel Otrin:

What I found was actually quite effective was pressing up on it using my head, so I was standing on the handrails, pressing up on my head, and I was able to bend it quite far.

Klever Freire:

He managed to open it just a crack.

Torah Kachur:

The water was more than halfway up the elevator. Gabriel and Klever were balanced on the handrails, clinging to the walls. Gabriel had a small book in his back pocket. He used it to hold open the hatch, then Klever positioned the phone near the small opening in the ceiling.

Klever Freire:

I found signal by holding the phone just ahead of the panel where we had cracked it open.

Torah Kachur:

Klever dialed 911.

Gabriel Otrin:

And the calls just didn't go through. There just wasn't a sufficient cell signal.

Torah Kachur:

A moment later, their phone rang.

Klever Freire:

911 then called us back and we tried to answer, and the call drops.

Torah Kachur:

Klever tried to call his partner.

Klever Freire:

Because we need someone on the outside that will not give up and that knows

where we are, so I called. One ring, two rings, three rings, voicemail.

Torah Kachur:

But Gabriel and Klever didn't give up. They tried 911 again.

Klever Freire:

And we got a clear voice on the other side.

Torah Kachur:

This is Tell Me What Happened, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase the importance of a human connection when you need help, whether you're trapped in quicksand, lost in the woods, or treading water in an elevator. Gabriel and Klever were trapped in a rapidly flooding elevator at their office building. The water was more than halfway to the ceiling when they finally got through to 911, but the storm meant emergency service workers were overwhelmed with calls that night.

Ryan Barnett:

Officers, I know, had to get out of their cars to get into the water to check on cars that had been submerged to make sure there was nobody in it.

Torah Kachur:

That's Officer Ryan Barnett. He's been a police officer for over 30 years. The night of the rainstorm, Ryan was working with Officer Josh McSweeney.

Ryan Barnett:

First time I've ever worked with him. That day, my partner was not in. Josh, I guess his partner wasn't in, so we ended up working together.

Torah Kachur:

They heard lots of calls over the radio, calls about flash floods, cars and street cars stuck in water and people trying to swim their way to safety. After a fairly routine call in their patrol area, they parked to write up their notes, then a call came in that grabbed their attention.

Ryan Barnett:

You could tell the dispatcher was a little bit more anxious than normal.

Torah Kachur:

The dispatcher described the situation. Two people were trapped in an elevator that was quickly filling up with water.

Ryan Barnett:

She was calling out for any cars to attend in 12 Division because there was nobody clear.

Torah Kachur:

Nobody clear. That meant every officer in 12 Division was already on a call.

Ryan Barnett:

So basically, she had nobody to go.

Torah Kachur:

And technically, a stuck elevator or a flood is a call that firefighters would answer, but they were also swamped that night.

Ryan Barnett:

You could feel the dispatcher and the anxiety level. It was getting pretty desperate.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan and Josh weren't with 12 Division. They were part of a neighboring police station and didn't patrol or answer calls in that area, but that night, they were only

about five minutes away from the call.

Ryan Barnett:

It was just pure happenstance that we happened to hear the call and be close and were able to jump on it.

Torah Kachur:

But they had no idea what they were walking into.

Ryan Barnett:

We just thought, "Okay, we will just show up and we'll wade through the water and we'll open up the elevator and we'll get them out. No problem."

Torah Kachur:

Ryan and Josh hit their siren and sped to the office building.

Ryan Barnett:

I specifically remember, we were driving down the street and as soon as I turned, you could see the water had gone all the way up to the back of this building, and I thought, "Oh my goodness, this is definitely not something that we would ever expect."

Torah Kachur:

The officers got out of their squad car and went in through the front entrance. They ran into members of the cleaning crew who told them how to get to the parking garage.

Ryan Barnett:

He actually said, "The other elevator's working. You could take the other elevator," not thinking, right? So we looked at each other. We were like, "No, we're going to take the stairs."

Torah Kachur:

Josh and Ryan entered the stairwell and went down a few steps. The water was almost at the top of the door to the parking garage.

Ryan Barnett:

We need to do this now. There's no time to come up with a plan. There's no time to wait. You've got to go.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan removed his bulletproof vest and his gun belt, then he stepped into the water.

Ryan Barnett:

As I'm going down, I didn't realize how deep the water was. But I'm a tall guy. I'm almost six foot four, and I was on my tippy-toes just to keep my mouth above the water.

Torah Kachur:

Josh stayed behind to keep in contact with the dispatcher in case they needed to call for more help. Ryan waded through the muddy water and made his way to the parking door. He tried to open it.

Ryan Barnett:

And I can't get over how heavy the door is to open, I guess because of the water pressure.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan eventually pried it open and quickly eyed the elevator in the parking garage, then he hesitated for a second.

Ryan Barnett:

It's quite dark in there, and I will be honest, I was worried that when I went in, that the door would shut behind me.

Torah Kachur:

And lock him in the flooded garage.

Ryan Barnett:

And I thought, "Well, I need to make sure I have an escape plan, but I don't have time to worry about this now. I have to just get these people out of the elevator."

Torah Kachur:

At this point, Ryan's feet were no longer touching the floor. He had to swim.

Ryan Barnett:

I get to the elevators and I could hear them screaming inside and yelling for help. I'm telling them, "It's the police. We're here. We're going to get you out. We're here to save you."

Gabriel Otrin:

By the time we heard the officer and I saw the door, yeah, we were treading water. We had about a foot of air left.

Klever Freire:

There was an enormous sense of relief, but at the same time, I didn't know how they were going to get the door open.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan couldn't pry it open with his hands either.

Ryan Barnett:

And that's where I became very concerned, I won't lie. You're thinking, "Oh my goodness, what am I going to do?" So I yelled to Josh, I said, "Josh, I need a crowbar."

Torah Kachur:

Josh found a crowbar and Ryan swam to the stairs to get it.

Ryan Barnett:

And he gives me this crowbar. It's got to be four feet long and a hundred pounds, and it's just massive.

Torah Kachur:

Ryan swam back to the elevator. He tried to fit the crowbar in between the elevator doors, but it was too big.

Ryan Barnett:

As I'm doing this, I could hear these two gentlemen in the elevator and they're saying, "Please hurry. We're going to drown. We're going to drown. Please hurry."

Torah Kachur:

Ryan yelled to Josh that he needed another crowbar, a smaller one, and fast. Josh found a smaller crowbar and swam over to his partner.

Ryan Barnett:

Eventually, we get the lip of the crowbar into the door and I could wedge myself in the doorway and just push it open as hard as I can, and it opens. I could feel it open by about an inch.

Gabriel Otrin:

And then all of a sudden, the door started to open.

Ryan Barnett:

As soon as I felt it start to open and give way, I was like, "We're doing this. It's happening, we're getting them out," and the water level was extremely high at that point. It was almost at the top of the elevator, and these two gentlemen just come out of the elevator as quick as you can imagine.

Torah Kachur:

40 minutes after Gabriel and Klever stepped into that elevator, the doors opened. All four men swam to the stairs where help was waiting for them.

Ryan Barnett:

It was surreal. At the time, we get to the stairs, we get them up. The fire department meets them at the stairs and they're looking after them. Josh and I got up to the top of the stairs and the captain was there and he goes, "You guys are amazing." We were just joking about the whole thing because we really don't know how to react to the whole thing. You do what anybody would do, and then when it's all said and done, you just take a step back and you're like, "Did that just happen?"

Torah Kachur:

Other than some cuts on their hands from punching the ceiling hatch, Gabrielle and Klever were both okay.

Klever Freire:

We're super thankful to them and to their families as well because they were putting themselves into distress for doing this.

Gabriel Otrin:

It was not required of the officers to do anything like that. Josh McSweeney and Ryan Barnett, these are names I won't forget.

Klever Freire:

This was a life-changing experience. If you speak to anybody that knows me, they'll know the drastic change in my behavior and what I found important after that. Spending time with family, with loved ones, self-care all of a sudden became the top tier things that needed to be done, things that in being an entrepreneur and building a business just went by the wayside.

Torah Kachur:

Klever told his cousin, a sergeant in the police force about what happened that night.

Klever Freire:

In speaking to my cousin about what the police were obliged to do in that scenario, it's like in many cases, many of the officers would not have taken the risk, but these two officers did.

Torah Kachur:

Klever's cousin was so impressed, he recommended them for the Star of Courage, an award that recognizes acts of conspicuous courage in circumstances of great peril. They won.

Ryan Barnett:

I just know that, I don't know if it's fate but a lot of things fell into place for that to happen. I'm not saying things were written in stone by any means, but there were a lot of stars alighting that night and I would a hundred percent do it again.

Torah Kachur:

A flash flood can turn an everyday situation like taking an elevator into a life or death experience, but the reality is you can't control when and where a flood will occur. The only thing you can do is be prepared. Julie Munger is an internationally acclaimed swift water rescue instructor and a whitewater professional. She's also the CEO and founder of Sierra Rescue. They provide hands-on training on how to safely navigate fast moving water to the military, fire departments, river guides and fishery workers and other interested groups. Julie has experienced the dangers of flash floods, but unlike our story today, her scariest moments happened in the wilderness.

Julie Munger:

The first one was when I was a Grand Canyon River guide, brand new, and the Colorado River flows through the Grand Canyon and has a lot of different drainages that feed into it. And sure enough, we hear the roar of a jet engine coming down the canyon, which is the first sound that you hear, and then the rocks tumbling. So we were able to get up on boulders, but one of the challenges with a flash flood is you don't ever know how much water's actually coming. So we were lucky that day. Five years later, some of those boulders that we were on actually washed out in a different flash flood, so avoid getting into those sort of situations.

Torah Kachur:

How much water came? How much did the river rise in that couple of minutes?

Julie Munger:

So in that particular flash flood, it came up about five vertical feet in about 30 seconds.

Torah Kachur:

Holy cow. That sounds scary.

Julie Munger:

It's incredibly scary, and it's like a lot of the other flood and water related incidents. It's really about avoiding trouble in the first place, understanding how water flows. And the hard thing about flash floods in general is you don't often know that they're coming because the source of the water is far away, and that's true no matter where you are, whether you're in a city or whether you're in a river canyon. It's the accumulation of water flowing from higher areas to the lower areas.

Torah Kachur:

How can we prepare homes for flash flooding if we do live in one of those At-risk areas.

Julie Munger:

The most important thing to understand is that water is always going to follow the course of least resistance and it's going to fill up and seep into any voids, so putting sandbags around a house could be a good way to keep it from flooding. If you know that you are in a flood area, then absolutely, I'd say it's worth having a plan, the best that you can to divert the water away from your house, and that's going to be trying to make anything lower than your house. I live up in a little valley in northern California and we use railroad ties and rocks to divert streams away from our house so that it goes around the house and into the meadow, so the same type of philosophy and methods can work in a city as well. The most important thing really is to pay attention to the weather and to know where your house, your particular house is located

in that flow of water so that you can leave before it floods.

Torah Kachur:

The folks in our story today were in an elevator which got stuck underground because of a flood. What should you do in that situation?

Julie Munger:

Well, as I'm sure they would tell you, don't get in the elevator. You don't want to go down when it's raining hard or when there's a chance of any type of flooding. A basement obviously or an underground parking garage is where water is going to go first. It's going to fill up that space before it starts filling up the building. Water in the basement can affect the electronics of the elevator, so going up, not down, which I understand is a hard decision to make. You want to get to your car, you want to get home, but resist the urge to go down to low spaces when it's raining.

Torah Kachur:

Are there common mistakes that people make when driving into water on the road?

Julie Munger:

It amazes me still that people will drive their car into a flooded waterway. Six inches of water can lift a car and float the car. When you drive your car into a flooded waterway, you have less traction and you don't have any way of gauging how deep the water is, and then usually, it's really hard to judge how fast the current is moving. So the biggest mistake people continue to make is driving into a flooded waterway. Don't do it.

Torah Kachur:

Are there lessons that you take from outdoor adventure guiding and water safety that can be applied to an urban flood?

Julie Munger:

It's always the humility and being aware and paying attention to the water, and just understanding the power of water. The force of the water is something that you have to work with and you can't work against, and there's nothing that we can do to stop water when it's flowing in a powerful way. We can't stop it from filling our house. We can't stop it from floating our cars away. All of us, whether it's on a river or in a city, we need to stay out of the water when it's flooding.

Torah Kachur:

That's it for this episode of OnStar's Tell Me What Happened, true stories of people helping people. If you want to share your own story about a stranger who showed up for you at just the right moment, look for our link at onstar.com, or if you're listening on Spotify, check out the Q and A feature. Let's share some love for people who help others, in big ways and small. While you're at it, share some love for this podcast. It really helps if you review and rate us or share this with someone who would enjoy it. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.