



You Want a Story? (Part Two)

(continued from last week)

Last week's story may not have been a literal 'cliff-hanger', but it was certainly a 'steep-hill-hanger'! So what happened next during that night-time journey through the mountains?

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As I began heading down the first part of the long hill, the truck began to pick up speed. In fact, it began to pick up speed very quickly, as the vehicle was quite overloaded. I quickly let go of the accelerator, and that was a mistake. I should have let it up at a more steady pace; the sudden change caused the engine to hiccup, and then a moment later, it stalled completely. I reached for the key and tried to restart it, but it wouldn't catch. The fuel filter was acting up, and not enough gas was getting through for ignition. Time to pull over. I pressed on the brake, but without the engine working, the power brakes were not working properly.

I then made another serious mistake; instead of simply jamming the brake pedal down as hard as I could, I pumped it repeatedly. This had the effect of releasing the brake fluid from the system, and as no more was coming in due to the engine failure, the braking power was severely reduced.

So there I was - my foot jammed on the brake pedal as hard as possible, but the speed of the vehicle continued to increase. I knew this hill; I had travelled it many times. It was at least a few miles long, and wound its way down and down this mountainside. The hill itself was perhaps manageable, but what awaited at the bottom was a different story. The road crossed a small creek over a tiny one-lane bridge and then immediately bent back upwards in a sharp curve on the other side.

Could I make it down as far as the bridge? Possibly; if I was able to keep this runaway from flying off the road. Could I then make it across the bridge? Very difficult, and only if there was nobody coming the other way. Could I then make it around that next curve? Not a chance. That would be the end of this journey, and of me.

I considered trying to jump clear, but a Winnebago motor home of this type has no driver's door. To get out, I would have to leave my seat, move into the main cabin, and climb over a pile of musical instruments to get to the door. I would never make it; no, the only way out of this was to try and ride this thing down as far as I could.

Second by second the speed increased. I would be lying to you if I told you it was XXX mph, because I had no chance to watch the instruments. The road rushed up at me in the cone of light from the headlights, and I twisted the wheel this way and that, careening around each curve as it came up. There was no panic, no praying, no crying. Just sharp focus on the road, and the steady jamming pressure on the brake pedal, whether or not it was having any effect.

I'm obviously here to be able to tell you this story, so there was indeed an 'escape' for me. A road-side sign flashed by, blurred by the darkness and the speed. "Runaway lane ahead" The people who build these moun-

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tain highways know that these events happen occasionally, and have created special zones at certain places, just for such eventualities. Somewhere up ahead there must be a track leading off at the side of the road. But where? It was pitch black, and my lights - even on high beam - didn't show much of the country at the side of the road.

But then suddenly came another sign, an arrow pointing off the road. Just where it lead, I couldn't see, but this was obviously my only hope. I wrenched the wheel to the right, and ran the truck off the concrete, plunging into the darkness beside the road.

The next few seconds were an absolute chaos of bouncing and kaleidoscopic motion, as the truck smashed its way up the rough and rutted pathway. I managed to keep it on track, and finally came to a standstill. The truck was still upright, but everything inside - the piles of instruments and the music from the shelves - was strewn in a jumbled mass on the floor.

A few minutes later another driver stopped at the edge of the highway to see if he could offer assistance. He had been behind me up at the top of the hill, and when I disappeared in the distance, with my brake lights still shining, he had feared the worst, and fully expected to come across my smashed vehicle at the bottom. He offered to drive off and call a tow truck, and a couple of hours later, after a tow to the nearest town, and a replaced fuel filter, I was back on my way. I made it to the appointed place in the morning, although when the crew saw the mess I was bringing them, I had some explaining to do.

Was this an experience I would want to repeat? Of course not. But I must say that, having been in this situation, it is good to know that I'm the kind of person who can keep his head when things really start coming apart. But when I recall that moment - the split second decision whether or not to turn the wheel and plunge off a mountain highway into pitch darkness - my hands still shake a little!

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