

It's a Joy to Serve You!

by Christian Lewis



I was on the phone with Sully when my right rear tire blew out in the rain. The back of the wagon started swimming around the highway and for some reason the windshield clouded up. It was like looking through a glass of milk.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Something broke," I said and hung up.

I unrolled the window, stuck my head out, and swerved around until I found the breakdown lane. A thousand tractor-trailers thundered by before I could get out and inspect the damage. When I did, there it was: crumpled flat and smoking.

This was in Virginia, heading north on the 295 bypass, more than halfway through my thirteen-hour drive from Hilton Head Island to Brooklyn. My parents were down south until the end of April, and they wanted to fly home, so I was driving their silver-bullet Mercedes Benz station wagon back

to the city for them. As I left that morning, reports were coming in of a nor'easter: roads would flood, power lines would fall. Before it ended, the storm would kill thirteen people along the eastern seaboard.

I popped the trunk, found the jack and lug wrench, and knelt down where the mud met the asphalt. Once I got the lugs loose, I threw the emergency brake, jacked up the car, and removed the lugs completely. But the wheel wouldn't come off—tight as a yin-yang. I pushed, pulled, kicked, up, down, sideways, inside out: nothing.

Traffic was rocking the car in fits, the wind was up, the sky falling, so I climbed cold and wet into the passenger side and called my mother.

"I'm in Virginia with a flat, and the storm's on top of me. Have you ever changed a tire on this thing?"

No, but she loved me: “There should be tools in the trunk.”

“Is Dad there?”

“I’ll tell him you called.”

“Any idea why the tire won’t come off?”

“Did you try Triple-A?”

I didn’t have a card. She dug up her membership number and read it to me while I wrote it down.

“I shouldn’t need Triple-A to change a flat. Doesn’t anyone know why the tire won’t come off?”

She asked around and came back on the line: “Your brother asked me to ask you if you’d jacked up the car.”

“Tell my brother he’s an asshole,” I said and hung up.

I got out, pissed in traffic, kicked the tire till my foot fell off, and got back in. My hair made the phone wet.

“Virginia, 295 North, just shy of exit 22A,” I said. “That’s right, ‘A,’ as in ‘apple.’” As in the Big Apple, the place I needed to be.

They said someone would be there within an hour, so I figured ninety minutes. Two hours later, orange flashers appeared in the rearview, refracting through the rain. A snow-white Ford flatbed pulled up: “*Aardvark Towing—It’s a Joy to Serve You!*”

Jackson was burly and black, 6’6”, not fat, but not trim. His moustache was tough to find on his face and he wore jeans with deep ass cleavage. The guy dropped down in the mud with the same tools I’d been using, pushed, pulled, and kicked just like I’d done, and gave up just like me.

“I don’t change tires on the highway,” he said, lowering the jack. “Too dangerous. Get yourself killed by a semi. How about we take you a hundred miles free up the road and fix you there? I need to get out of town, if you know what I mean. But I got no cash, so you’ll have to pay tolls, and I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee. I’m pretty hungry.”

“Whatever, man,” I said. “Get my tire changed and we’ll go as far as you want. Why the hell doesn’t it come off?”

“Suction,” he said, lighting a Red.

“So what now?”

Cupping his cigarette in his hand, he walked around the truck and levered the hydraulics, lowering the bed to an incline. “Drive her up.”

So I got in and started the car and hit the gas, and the tire fell off. I yelled out the window into the rain and swirling lights. Jackson came around.

“Well, fine,” he said. “But I ain’t gettin’ hit by no truck.”

With Jack supervising from a safe distance off the road (in the grass, behind a tree), I jacked up the car, popped on the spare, and cranked down the lugs. Right as rain, which had suddenly lightened. There was a Dairy Queen/gas station combo at the next exit, so I said I’d buy him a cup of coffee for his trouble.

We got going, Jackson leading in the Aardvark, me following in the Silver Bullet, and she immediately started to rattle. At the Dairy Queen I gave the tire some air and took a test run across the lot. If anything, it was worse, a swordfight with monkey wrenches. I stopped next to the diesel pump where

Jackson was gassing up and crawled under the wagon. The edge of the wheel looked bent.

“You got rotor trouble,” he said, after taking a look. “Might get you clear to New York City. Or maybe you’d be phoning me two miles down the road.”

He offered to load the car onto the Aardvark and drive me wherever I was going, all the way to Brooklyn if I liked. He’d been wanting to see the Big Apple anyway.

“Last month, I took a girl and her CRX all the way to Cleveland. Insurance covered it. Don’t forget you get a hundred miles free.”

This time I got hold of my father, voice of pragmatism.

“Dad, it’s Sunday. So I can wander Virginia looking for an authorized Mercedes shop, wait till they open tomorrow, miss a whole day of work, probably get fired, never amount to anything, and die poor and alone and overwhelmed, or Jackson can load the car and drive me to Brooklyn now.”

“What will you do when you get there?” His voice was soft; my mother had told him I was angry.

“The book says there’s a dealer on Flatbush, right by my apartment.”

“They’ll be open?”

I could see his blue eyes measuring the black tide beyond their reinforced storm windows. My mother would be unplugging appliances; they’d already lost one flat screen to a lightning bolt.

“I’ll use their late-night drop box,” I said.

I didn’t know if they had one, but it seemed plausible. Anyway, I couldn’t miss another day of work. As long as I got to New York tonight I could figure something out. My father agreed to the tow. He’d submit the bill to insurance later.

“Sorry about all this,” he said. “Call us when you’re on the road.”

Twenty minutes later we pulled into the bruised lot of Aardvark Towing, largest Triple-A service in northern Virginia. A heavysset woman with tunnel vision got to work on my bill while Jackson paced the office and smoked. Tunnel Vision was smoking, too, as were two teens—one playing computer pinball, the other just sitting there.

“You wanna buy a monster truck?” Pinball asked me, not looking up. There was a lime green monster outside, tires high as my shoulders.

“Maybe the rotor,” I said.

The other kid came alive. “You know what you should do, Jack?” he said, full of fire. “You should pick up a few cartons of cigs from Harry’s and sell ’em up there on 42nd Street. Make a *killin’*.”

Jackson puffed thoughtfully.

“You could see the naked singing cowboy,” the kid added.

“I could,” said Jackson, stubbing his smoke. “But I got standards, you know.”

Tunnel Vision finished tallying:

- Total distance from Ashland, Virginia, to 379 Bergen Street, Brooklyn: 352 miles.

- Minus 100 miles free for platinum AAA membership: 252 miles.

End of excerpt