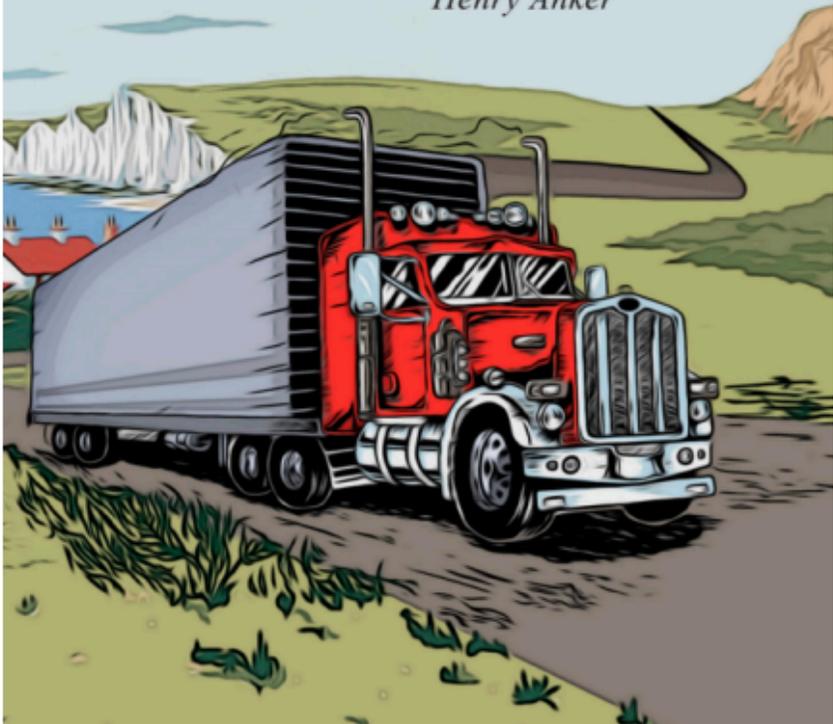


The Stuck Truck

Henry Anker



Chapter 1



The light that hung over the **massive**¹ roll down door cast a yellowish glow over the warehouse loading dock. Another light, this one faint, and on the inside, gave the **warehouse** the appearance of a tunnel. It was dark pretty much everywhere else.

Inside the unpainted, aging concrete building, a gray-haired man wearing an orange safety vest backed his forklift further inside. He called out through the large doorway, “I’ll see you soon, Sal.”

He brought the powerful wheeled machine to a stop and took a few steps in the direction of the dock, and at the same time, adjusted his baseball cap, which was also orange. The warehouseman wasn’t sure if the trucker heard him over the beeping noise of his forklift. But Sal, standing by his truck with the trailer door open, silently waved back, then reached up high and pushed against the

¹ **massive** means very large

cardboard boxes, brick-stacked on **pallets**² inside his truck. He tugged hard on the **twine**³ that encircled the boxes to make sure it was **taut**⁴. Although he was satisfied that the load was secure, Sal sighed heavily as he **knelt**⁵ down and pulled the folding panel door down to the truck's tailgate. He secured the door's curved latch under the sturdy locking pin and locked it with a large padlock. The warehouseman noticed Sal stumble a bit getting back to a standing position. "Sal.... You okay?" he called out.

Frank, who now stood just a few feet away from Sal, waited for a response. Sal was slow getting back to a standing position. Frank, concerned, though not wanting to offend Sal, walked around outside and **feigned a skyward gaze**⁶, as though admiring the twinkling stars, whose brightness in the blackness was fading. The morning sun was creeping over the mountain range in the distance, reflecting its rays on the painted metal blue, red, and green cargo containers lined up outside the warehouse. "Yeah. I'm okay, thanks." Sal took a deep breath. "Just a little tired, I guess."

² **pallets** are portable wooden platforms on which goods can be moved, stacked, and stored, especially with the aid of a forklift

³ **twine** is a kind of heavy string made of two or more strands of hemp, cotton, or nylon twisted together

⁴ **taut** is the past-tense form of the word 'tight'

⁵ **knelt** is the past-tense form of the word kneel, meaning to get down to one's knees

⁶ **feigned a skyward gaze** means that Frank acted like he was looking at the stars, so as not to embarrass his friend

When he stood outside in the cold morning air, Frank could see his own breath and Sal's as they spoke. "You're movin' like an old man, Sal," Frank chuckled. "What are ya, twenty-seven or twenty-eight?"

"Twenty-seven. Thanks," Sal answered with a sigh and a little **grimace**⁷. "I was drivin' another load last night 'fore I got here."

"Oh, yeah. That figures. Want some coffee? I got a fresh pot back in my office."

"Sure, thanks. I gotta make it quick, though. Vince is gonna be here soon, and we gotta get this load down to L.A. in less than two days."

Frank headed for his office and came back with a Styrofoam cup with steam hovering over the top. "Good thing you got a partner to help you drive all that way. I'd hate to do that on my own. Black, right?" Frank handed the steaming cup carefully to Sal.

"Uh, yeah."

"Hey, where is your partner anyway?"

"Oh," Sal interrupted the sip he was taking. "He just texted me. He ought to be along any minute--"

"Mornin', Sal!" came a quick, loud voice from behind. Sal turned, and a tall, lanky young looking man bounced up the steps to the loading dock and appeared

⁷ **grimace** is a facial expression a person might make when in a little pain, or when frustrated

right in front of him. He was wearing a green **plaid**⁸ flannel shirt and blue jeans. Sal stuck his left fist out slowly to meet the younger man's own fist with a bump, trying not to spill his coffee.

“Mornin’, Vince.” Sal smiled. “Thanks for comin’,”

“Hey, I--I should be thankin’ you for c-callin’ me! You know I need the work. Rent’s due n-next week. My landlady’s just about ready to kick me out of my apartment!” Vince said half-jokingly.

“Hey, Vince. This here’s Frank.” Sal turned in Frank’s direction.

“Nice to meet you, Frank,” Vince said, again a little loudly, as he stuck out his hand to shake Frank’s.

“Same here. I’d offer you some coffee, but it don’t seem like you need it,” Frank chuckled. “Sal said he’s known you for a long time.”

“That’s right,” Vince replied. “Since high school...” Vince paused for a moment. “...b-but we don’t see each other much nowadays since he’s so busy drivin’ all over the country.”

“Well, it’s great that you guys can catch up some. Have a good trip.” Frank smiled and nodded his head, and then turned and walked back to his forklift to move a ten-foot stack of wooden pallets.

⁸ **plaid** is a checkerboard pattern used mostly on shirts

“Thanks for the help...and the coffee,” Sal called back toward Frank.

Sal then slowly walked down the concrete steps then ran along the side of the loading dock, heading in the direction of his truck’s cab. Vince followed him and ran around to the passenger side. Sal climbed up high into the driver’s seat and set his coffee in the cup holder between the seats. He started the engine and let it **idle**⁹ for about a minute while he checked his mirrors and **gauges**¹⁰. Then he put the truck in first gear and pulled the long, extra tall eighteen wheeled truck slowly away from the warehouse loading dock.



⁹ **idle** means ‘not working’ or inactive. In this instance, idle means that the truck’s engine was running, but the truck wasn’t moving

¹⁰ **gauges** are devices for measuring the contents of something, like the fuel tank level, or speed in mph/kph, oil level, or engine temperature

“Sal, didn’t you text me you were drivin’ last night?” Vince asked over the rumbling truck engine. “Ain’t ya tired?”

“Yep.... Just finished another delivery of **cargo**¹¹ from Boise, just about two hours ago. Tons of potatoes!” Sal exclaimed.

“Boise, huh?” Vince pondered for a moment. “Where’s that again?”

“State of Idaho,” Sal answered. “A few hundred miles away to the east of Washington, that’s all. I’m gettin’ a lot of runs lately ‘cause more companies know I got this fifty-three foot long, eleven foot tall trailer. I can **haul**¹² a bigger load than most other drivers. Standard cargo containers most trucks haul are only nine an’ a half feet tall.”

“Uh-huh. What do we got in here for this **run**¹³?” Vince wanted to know.

“This time we got all products made from Washington apples. There’s hundreds of cases of apple juice, cider, applesauce, and apple pies back there ...all made from apples grown from right around here. Frank and me could smell the apples when we were loadin’.”

¹¹ **cargo** is/are the things the truck is carrying, like food products, paper, furniture electronics, etc...

¹² **haul** means to carry or pull a heavy load

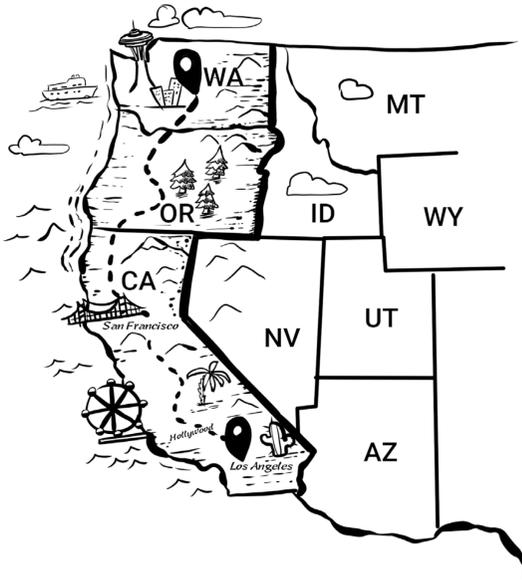
¹³ **run** is a trucker’s term for trip from one place to another

“Yeah, that Frank seems like a nice guy. Known him long?”

“Not as long as I’ve known you, eh, Vince?”

“That’s for sure! Where did you say we was goin’?”

“We’re goin’ from these **orchards**¹⁴ all the way, ‘bout 1200 miles, down to a big grocery store in Los Angeles, which is in southern California. They bought the whole truckload.”



“That’s cool. Must be a big store, like a Costco.”

“Yeah, somethin’ like that,” Sal confirmed with a grin.

¹⁴ **orchards** are hundreds or thousands of trees, generally planted in rows, on farms to produce apples, oranges & other fruits

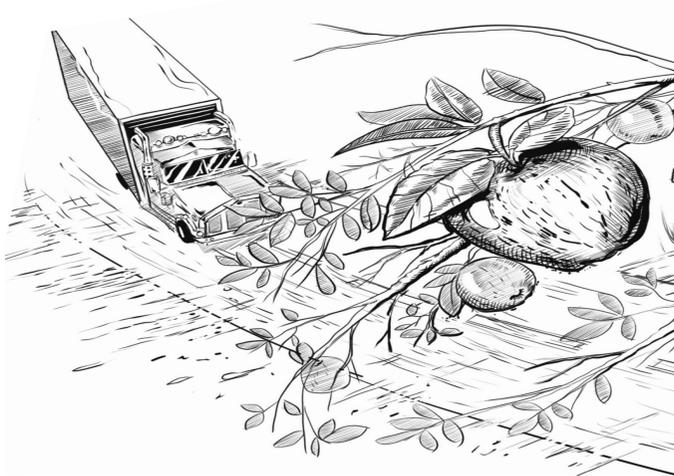
“Hey, Sal,” Vince began enthusiastically. “Ever seen a kid stick their arm out the window of their parents’ car make a pulling signal, like they want you to blow the truck horn for ‘em?”

“Uh, sure,” answered Sal. “Almost every time I’m drivin’ a long run like this one. All kids like that. I used to do that myself when I was a kid.”

“Yeah, me too,” Vince said.

Sal told Vince that it would take two days of driving, nearly nonstop, if he had to make the run alone. “I know I need to rest, but I don’t like to turn down work,” Sal said.

“Uh-huh,” Vince listened to Sal over the hum of the engine and the occasional squeak of the suspension springs compressing beneath the **laden**¹⁵ trailer.



¹⁵ **laden** means heavily loaded or weighed down

Sal continued, “You know, truckers say, when you start turnin’ down work, **dispatchers**¹⁶ stop callin’. I’m glad you were able to help me out. I got another cross-country run to make Wednesday, next week, so I got to get this one done quick. I want to make this trip in around twenty-four hours each way, ideally. You’re really helping me out.”

“Like I said, Sal. I’m glad to do it.” Vince took out his phone and opened the calculator app. He whispered to himself, “1200 divided by 24” as he tapped out his equation. “That’s 50 miles an hour. We can do that, easy.”

“It’s gonna be close. Better do that math again. Remember, ‘law says drivers can only drive eleven hours each per day,’” Sal cautioned as he took a sip of his coffee.

Vince whispered again as he recalculated, “1200 divided by 22, that’s about 55 miles per hour. I still think we can do it.”

“If we’re lucky,” Sal chuckled. “Remember, we gotta stop for fuel, eat some, and go to the bathroom ...unless you’re plannin’ on holdin’ it in for the whole trip!”

¹⁶ **dispatcher** means a person whose job it is to organize the movement of vehicles like trucks and taxis

“Hah!” Vince laughed. “Hey, I imagine you’re pretty tired from drivin’ last night. Let me know when you want me to **take the wheel**¹⁷.”

Sal smiled. “Keep watchin’ what I’m doin’. I know you’ve driven before. I’m gonna drive these first few miles ‘cause the roads are a little rough here, and some of them ain’t **marked**¹⁸ too good through the farmlands. I know ‘em pretty well since I drive ‘em so much.”

Though it was a bit bumpy, Sal managed to get the truck out onto the main highway, heading south, in less than an hour. Vince’s eyes were **fixed**¹⁹ on the way Sal managed the long gear shift with his right hand, and worked the clutch pedal **deftly**²⁰ with his left foot. “I ain’t seen you in a while, Vince. What’ve you been up to?” Sal asked.

“Well,” Vince said, kind of shyly, looking up for a moment, then returning his eyes down toward the floor of the truck, even though Sal wasn’t shifting gears much anymore. “Lately, I’ve been bouncin’ around from one part-time job to another, never really gettin’ to work in one place for more than a few weeks.” Vince’s eyes were

¹⁷ **take the wheel** means to ask another person to take a turn driving

¹⁸ **unmarked roads** are what we call roads, sometimes dirt or gravel covered, that have no street signs, usually far from a city

¹⁹ **fixed** can mean eyes focusing on someone or something, without distraction

²⁰ **deftly** means with a lot of care and skill

looking down at his own **ragged**²¹ boots now. “Remember back when we was in high school?”

“Yeah, those were some pretty good times,” Sal said.

“Well, I think, for you, they were,” Vince continued. “I wasn’t exactly the best student. I barely passed most of my classes, and you know I had my share of **run-ins**²² with teachers and the principal.”

“Oh, hey, that’s no big deal. We were just dumb kids back then. We didn’t know anything.”

²¹ **ragged** means torn, old, worn down; in bad condition

²² **run-ins** is another way of saying troubles or disagreements with another person

Chapter 2



Vince went on, “I was always gettin’ busted by the **deans**²³ for runnin’ in the hallways trying to avoid being late to class.” He was looking out the passenger side window now. “Sometimes, even now, I get to work late,” Vince said.

Sal muffled a cough, “Oh, yeah. I remember you tryin’ to slide into the desk behind me in Mr. Davidson’s first period class, without him seein’ you.”

“I got a lot of detention hours for that, and more,” Vince moaned. “Sometimes, in the last couple years, if I’d show up late for a job, the boss would fire me.”

²³ **deans** are high school staff members who mostly deal with student discipline problems

“Yeah, that’s tough.” Sal **sympathized**²⁴. “Do you remember that time you got caught shakin’ a vending machine, trying to get a bag of chips to come down?”

“Uh-huh. I remember,” Vince mumbled. “You know I had paid for those Cheetos™, right? The vice principal made me stay after the football game that week and clean up under the **bleachers**²⁵!” Vince said, a little frustrated.

“Oh, that must’a been why you didn’t come to that party after we won....” Sal’s voice faded as he realized that wasn’t something Vince wanted to recall.

“Yeah. I heard it was a good one,” Vince sighed. “Someone told me Sally Ferguson was there. Remember her? Sally Ferguson.... I **had a thing for her**²⁶!”

“Not sure,” Sal thought for a moment.

“It’s okay. It’s been a few years. She was really nice, though,” Vince continued. “But that vice principal was a mean old man. Do you think he’s still working at the school?” Vince asked, not really expecting an answer. “You know, he never even thought to ask me if I paid for those chips.”

²⁴ **sympathized** means to show someone else that you understand the bad way they feel

²⁵ **bleachers** are the rising rows of wood or metal benches in an old stadium where paper cups, hot dog wrappers and other trash can fall through to the ground below

²⁶ **‘had a thing for her’** is an expression that means Vince liked Sally a lot

“I hear you, Vince. It’s like a ref in a game who only sees the second player defending himself after a hard foul. Those refs never call a foul on the first guy, ‘cause they didn’t see it.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s like that. Hey, since we’re talkin’ about high school, do you remember the time our friends Eddie and Steve got into that fight, and I went to try and break it up?”

“No, I don’t think I do. Did you forget that I graduated a couple years before you did?” Sal asked.

“Well,” Vince explained, “I’ll tell you what happened. From far away, I seen the two of ‘em start fightin’ out on the football field. They were throwing punches left an’ right! They were real mad about somethin’.”

“My guess, ...it was about a girl,” Sal suggested.

“I don’t remember that part,” Vince continued. “I just remember they were good friends. So I just got between the two of ‘em and tried to break it up. I got hit a few times myself. Nearly got my nose broke. But when they got called to the Dean’s Office to get suspended for fightin’, I got suspended, too!” Vince took a breath from his frustration retelling the story. “Can you believe it?”

“That’s messed up, Vince. Sounds like you were just tryin’ to do the right thing. Hey, how are your mom and dad doing?”

Vince squirmed a little in his seat and pulled the seatbelt away from his chest until the strap locked up. He leaned back in his seat and let the seatbelt collapse back to his body, then looked out the window again. “Hey, Sal. How ‘bout I take the wheel for a while and you get some rest?”

“Huh...yeah. That’s a good idea.” Sal then remembered that Vince’s parents had split up when he was still in elementary school, and felt bad now about asking about them. He also remembered times when the principal called home to have Vince picked up for a behavior problem, and his friend was never sure who would show up.

Sal glanced over at his right side mirror and began downshifting through the gears. “I’m gonna pull over and stop on the shoulder up ahead so we can switch places.” Sal pulled the truck to a stop. “Sorry if I was gettin’ personal.” He put the gear shift in neutral, leaving the engine to idle, and set the emergency brake.

The two men got down from the truck and walked around the front to change places. Vince was about to say something to Sal as they passed one another, but there was too much noise from the vehicles on the highway passing by.

“Oh, thanks for askin’,” Vince said to Sal as he settled into his new position as driver and buckled the seatbelt. “You know, in my last year of high school, I lived with my mom in a small apartment. She’s doin’

okay, I guess. She's got a cat now. I hardly ever see my dad."

Vince was now seated in his new position as the driver. "Well, you know, I really thought both of them were cool," Sal said as stepped between the seats and sat down on the sleeper **cot**²⁷ behind. He turned sideways and rolled onto his back on the cot, being careful not to bump his head. "Your mom made a great lasagna, and I remember those times your dad took us to **Seahawks**²⁸ games. Sorry things didn't work out for them."

"Thanks," Vince said, looking up into the rearview mirror at Sal's reflection. "You know what my mom said to me one time?" Vince asked.

"No, what'd she say?" Sal asked as he buckled himself into the sleeper cot, with one seatbelt to secure his legs, and another one across his chest.

"She said I was lucky to have a friend like you," Vince said, "'specially because you were older than me. She said you were like my big brother."

Sal smiled, but didn't say anything. Vince had the truck back up onto the highway, gradually accelerating up to 65 miles per hour. "Hey, Sal..." Vince called over his shoulder, "...any special instructions?"

²⁷ **cot** is a small mattress, often rolled up after use; cots are frequently used in the military for soldiers to sleep on

²⁸ The **Seattle Seahawks** are an NFL™ professional football team. Seattle is the largest city in Washington state.

“You’ve driven trucks with me, and on some other jobs you’ve had, right?” Sal said. “Just keep it under the speed limit, watch for Highway Patrol cars, and stay on this **interstate**²⁹. If you happen to see a car **stranded**³⁰ on the side of the road, pull over and see if the driver needs help. If the car is empty, use **Waze**³¹ to alert the Highway Patrol so they can check on it. Oh, and remember, this truck’s full. Leave plenty of space to slow down between us and cars ahead. Wake me up in 4 hours.”

“Got it. How many miles do you think we’ve gone so far?” Vince wanted to know.

“Oh, I’d say about a hundred fifty,” Sal yawned. “Maybe one seventy-five...”

“You know, Sal. You were one of the few people I felt like I could talk to when we was younger, and you’d really listen.” Vince said. He waited to hear what Sal might say after hearing his confession, but all he heard was the hum of the engine in front, and gentle snoring behind.

²⁹ **interstate** means a highway that crosses state borders, like I-5 which goes from WA through OR to CA, or I-10, which goes from CA east, through 8 states, all the way to FL

³⁰ **stranded** means something left behind, usually without wanting to

³¹ **Waze™** is an app used on SmartPhones that tells a driver the best way to go, and also can be used to report accidents and cars on the side of the road

Chapter 3



By now Vince had driven nearly an hour on his own. He had checked the fuel gauge and the truck still had over three-quarters of its tank filled. It was about 10 AM and the traffic on the interstate was pretty **light**³². He was feeling a bit bored driving with nobody to talk to and not being able to play music on the radio. He didn't want to wake Sal up, so he tried humming different songs he had memorized in his head, but it wasn't much use. It was going to be like this for a

³² **light** traffic is a description of a highway where cars and trucks are moving along well, at the speed limit

while. He knew they only planned to stop for fuel and to eat, so there was going to be a lot of driving without a break.

Vince's eyes scanned across the broad windshield and side windows looking for anything interesting he might see along the highway. Mostly, there were trees. Miles and miles of trees. Every once in awhile though, Vince would notice a clearing with a meadow or a farm, but not much else.

The road passed through one stretch of forest that opened out into a clearing. Vince noticed a flock of Canadian Geese flying in V-formation, gracefully flapping their broad black wings over a river that ran parallel to the right side of the highway. The birds flew so fast they were keeping pace with the truck. Vince checked his speedometer and clocked the birds' speed at over fifty miles per hour. As the geese lifted higher into the air and **veered**³³ off to the north, Vince strained to see them for one last moment. He returned his gaze to the highway before him and was surprised to see a mother deer leading her fawns across the two lane highway, about the length of two football fields ahead. Vince applied the brakes and began downshifting through the gears to slow the truck. "I hope they get across quickly," Vince said to himself.

The truck was taking longer than he thought it would to slow down, but then Vince remembered what

³³ **veered** means changing direction suddenly, turning

Sal had told him about how trucks take longer to slow down when they're full. The deer were still on the pavement as the truck closed in on them. Vince flipped on the truck's headlights and hazard lights. He still had to drop through three more gears before he could fully stop the truck. The brakes were squealing louder as Vince pumped harder on the pedal to slow the truck. Cars following behind were honking.

The long gear shift was now down into second gear. The deer turned their heads in the direction of the approaching truck and finally scurried off into the field on the other side of the road. Vince released the brake and began going back up through the gears to return the truck to highway speed. From behind, Vince could hear Sal stirring and beginning to wake up.

"What's happening, Vince?" Sal moaned from the cot.

"Oh, nothing, Sal. Just some deer on the road. They ran off," Vince's voice trembled a bit. "No worries...traffic's been pretty good so far, eh?" When he thought Sal had gone back to sleep, Vince raised his arm and wiped the beads of sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his flannel shirt.

Vince continued driving for four more hours. He wasn't tired, but he knew Sal was, and wanted to give him the extra sleep. He passed a road sign that reported the mileage to upcoming cities.



Vince didn't want to overdo it with his own driving, so he turned on the truck's radio and put in a Bruce Springsteen CD. He gradually raised the volume on the song, *Born to Run*, just loud enough to hear, but not too loud. "What time is it?" Sal groaned.

"Almost two o'clock. Sleep okay?"

"Yeah, thanks. I needed that. Guess you gave me an extra hour, huh? Whereabouts are we?"

"Just passed through Medford, Oregon and crossed into California. Traffic's been light so far. No real problems," Vince proudly reported. "Hungry?"

"A little..."

"Want to stop for somethin'?" Vince offered as Sal unbuckled himself and slid up into the passenger seat.

“Nah. How ‘bout we just have some of the snacks I have in the ice chest and wait ‘til dinnertime? We still got fuel for about 800 more miles.”

“Sounds okay to me,” Vince agreed.

“**Whatdayawant**³⁴? I got chips, cookies, **beef jerky**³⁵, a couple of apples, water, and some sodas.”

“How about an apple, a bottle of water, an’ a bag of chips,” Vince said as Sal opened the ice chest. “You sure keep a lot of food with you.”

“Sure do. We truckers keep snacks with us to save time and help stay alert.”

“That makes sense,” Vince said, and smiled as Sal handed him an apple. “What else do you do if you’re feelin’ sleepy, Sal?”

“I play the radio kinda loud,” Sal offered, then took a bite of an apple himself. “Or I roll down the window or crank up the A/C. I don’t want to take any chances.” Sal took another bite. “And that’s only if I got a couple of miles to go. Otherwise, I stop at the nearest truck stop or Walmart parking lot to rest.”

“Funny, Sal...”

“Yeah, hey, we long haul drivers gotta be careful about drivin’ tired. That’s sometimes how accidents

³⁴ **whatdayawant** is a quick, slag way of asking, ‘What do you want?’

³⁵ **beef jerky** is a kind of dried, salted meat, like bacon, that takes a long time to chew

happen. Speakin' of that, I guess it's my turn to give you a break."

"Okay, sure...thanks," Vince said. "I think there's a rest stop comin' up in about five miles or so." Vince took another big bite from his apple. "We can stop there and switch."

The two men passed the next few minutes talking about Seattle's football team, the Seahawks, and friends they both knew from high school, now in the Army, who were **stationed**³⁶ in **Iraq**³⁷. "Traffic's been pretty good so far, eh Sal?"

"Must be," Sal said as they pulled into the rest stop. He remembered that Vince said that same thing just a few minutes ago, but instead of reminding Vince of it, he said, "Yeah, I believe we've covered over five hundred miles since morning. Thanks again for helpin' out."

"Anytime!" Vince said enthusiastically.

After Vince had turned the ignition off, Sal hopped down onto the pavement and called back up into the cab, "I'm gonna use the **John**³⁸," he said. "Need to go yourself?"

"Nah, I'm good," Vince said confidently.

³⁶ **stationed** means where in the world, another country, for example, a soldier is assigned to serve

³⁷ **Iraq** is a country in the Middle East whose neighbors include Iran, Syria, Jordan, and others

³⁸ **John** is a slang word for restroom toilet

The Stuck Truck

“Okay. Then why don’t you stretch a bit, grab a drink, and then buckle yourself up in the cot for a couple hours of sleep?” Sal suggested. “I’m gonna need you to take another turn behind the wheel before we get to L.A.”

Chapter 4

Sal was back behind the wheel now, fresh from the rest and happy that the traffic was moving so well. Vince was buckled into the cot behind, but not asleep yet. “Hey, Sal. Who pays for the gas you use to make these trips?”

“I do. I’m an independent trucker,” Sal said without taking his eyes off the road.

“What does that mean?” Vince asked.

“It means I don’t work for a trucking company that provides the fuel. I pay for it out of the money I get paid for drivin’ these loads. When companies like the apple company that hired me pay me for this run, I set some of the money aside to pay for fuel.

“That kinda sucks, doesn’t it?” Vince asked.

“It does when diesel costs four bucks a gallon!” Sal exclaimed. “Right now it ain’t too bad. ‘Costs about two-fifty.”

“How many miles per gallon does this truck get?” Vince wanted to know.

“Most trucks get seven to eight miles when they’re empty, but only about five when they’re full, like we are now.”

Vince yawned, “That doesn’t sound like much. I mean, most cars get around thirty, right?”

“Actually, we do pretty good, considering we’re pulling the weight of more than ten minivans full of passengers,” Sal said proudly. “Wouldn’t you agree?” He waited for a response from Vince, but this time, Vince was the one snoring.

Sal drove through northern California, past San Francisco, **Silicon Valley**³⁹, and down into the farm belt of central California. Night was falling. Sal turned on his headlights and hoped the drivers around him would do the same. Fog was often a hazard in the Central Valley farmlands, and there had been some terrible **fatal**⁴⁰ vehicle pile ups, because of poor **visibility**⁴¹ in this stretch of highway over the years.

Sal didn’t feel like listening to music right then, and he didn’t want to wake Vince, so he drove the truck focusing on the road, now in a small **convoy**⁴² of other trucks in front and behind, listening to the faint chatter of

³⁹ **Silicon Valley** is an area where a great number of computer and Internet-based companies like Apple, FaceBook, Google, and others are located

⁴⁰ **fatal** means deadly, as when people have died for one reason or another

⁴¹ **visibility** means the distance one is able to see; it can be limited by fog (clouds of moisture low to the ground), smoke from fires, or darkness, for example

⁴² **convoy** means a group of vehicles or ships traveling together, sometimes for protection

other truckers on the ancient **CB radio**⁴³ he inherited from the old timer who sold him the truck.

As he nursed the cold coffee with a sip now and then, Sal's mind wandered back to the times he and Vince would ride the bus out to baseball games to sit in the cheap seats out in left field. Vince always said he liked those seats best because they could talk to the players as they jogged by during warm ups, and maybe catch a home run ball hit there during the game or in batting practice. Sal knew Vince couldn't afford better seats, so he was cool sitting out there. Sal also remembered them hanging out in the bowling alley after school playing video games and looking for change left behind in the coin slots. Sometimes Vince would ask Sal for advice about asking a girl to the movies. He also remembered them going to all the **Bruce Lee martial arts**⁴⁴ movies together when they didn't have dates.

In their talk before the trip, Sal and Vince had decided that they would stop to refuel, stretch, and eat a good meal near the end of the flat portion of the trip before continuing up into the mountains. This highway

⁴³ **CB radio** is an older technology truckers used to use to communicate with others on the highway before cell phones were invented. Some older truckers still use them to talk to other drivers on the same highway. They have a range of just a couple of miles or less, depending on the factors like mountains, trees, and weather.

⁴⁴ **Bruce Lee's martial arts** movies includes karate, judo, taekwondo, jujitsu, and other fighting, and self defense disciplines. These movies, though made with small budgets, were amazing. Look for Bruce Lee on YouTube™.

was known to truckers as the Grapevine, and as being quite steep. Fully loaded trucks would often struggle with the burden of pulling their loads uphill at under 30 miles an hour when passenger cars whizzed by at sixty-five or more. The Grapevine had lots of curves, requiring extra care and attention. It was only a couple of hours from L.A., so when they got to the top of the mountain, they knew they'd almost be there.

Sal continued driving the seemingly endless miles through the **farmbelt**⁴⁵. Sal planned for Vince to drive the next stretch into the mountains after the break, when he could rest again. Right now though, Sal was looking forward to opening a real menu, sipping a freshly-brewed cup of coffee, and maybe some dessert. He had heard about a place to eat near Bakersfield from another trucker he knew. He had passed it a few times before, but never stopped. Sal figured it would be after 9:00 pm before they would get there, but just thinking about it kept Sal motivated to keep driving.

⁴⁵ **farmbelt** means an area where there are a lot of farms, often next to roads or railways that are used to haul their produce

Chapter 5

A smile grew on Sal's face when he saw the giant well-lit billboard on the side of the highway, advertising FLO's, in big red letters. The sign said the diner/truckstop was just three miles ahead.

A few minutes later, Sal pulled the truck off the highway and into the truck stop, which included fuel pumps, a store, showers, and a diner. The friend who had **referred**⁴⁶ him said that if he bought over \$300 worth of gas, he could earn reward points for a free shower or items in the **convenience store**⁴⁷ there. Word was that the food at the diner was really good, too, wholesome and healthy, much better than fast food.

Sal pulled his truck in behind the half dozen others that were waiting to refuel, two in each lane. A sole attendant monitored the pump area, but it was the drivers themselves who were operating the pumps and filling their tanks. Sal checked all his gauges and mentally calculated how much gas he was going to buy. While he was waiting his turn, Sal busied himself by responding to a few text messages on his phone, checking the weather report, and playing a few words with the app Words with Friends™.

⁴⁶ **referred** means someone told another person something good about it

⁴⁷ **convenience store** is a small store that has drinks, snacks, cigarettes, magazines, lottery tickets and such for sale, like a 7-11™

When the trucks in front had rolled away, Sal pulled his forward. He hopped down from the cab and reached for his gloves stored away in a compartment near the driver's side fuel tank. Sal set the master pump to begin fueling, unscrewed the tank cap and inserted the nozzle. He clicked the pump lever to the lock position. The numbers on the pump's display rapidly counted out the gallons flowing and the dollars he would pay. Sal next walked around to the passenger side, grasped the secondary pump nozzle and started filling the passenger side tank as well. He knew fueling was going to take a few minutes, so as his trucker friends had taught him, he used the time to clean the windshield with the long-handled **squeegee**⁴⁸ leaning out of the soapy bucket on the pump island. When the main tanks were full, their pump nozzles automatically clicked off. Sal rehung the nozzles on their pumps, got back in the cab, and slowly pulled the truck forward about ten feet, using his side mirror to line up his reserve tank to the pump's location. He filled the reserve tank until the nozzle clicked off again. He replaced the nozzle and pressed the button on the pump to request the receipt. In all, the three tanks took 118 gallons for a total of \$302.08. Sal grabbed the long printed receipt as it came out of the pump. He quickly hopped back in the cab and pulled forward so the trucker behind could pull in.

⁴⁸ a **squeegee** is a T-shaped tool with a strip of rubber on the end, used to clean windshields and other windows

Once away from the fuel pumps, Sal glanced around looking for a place to park. There were lots of trucks in the lot, but he was able to find a space all the way on the end. Finally, Sal logged his time behind the wheel on his tablet. He knew, by law, that neither he nor Vince could drive more than eleven hours each, out of fourteen, going back to the morning when they began the trip. Vince's time had started after his.

Sal rapped on the sidewall of the sleeper compartment. "Vince, wake up. Time to get somethin' to eat."



"Great!" said Vince. "I hope they got a bathroom in there, too, 'cause I gotta go real bad!"

Sal chuckled, “Of course they--,”

Vince slid out the passenger side and was running for the diner’s entrance before Sal could finish his sentence. Vince didn’t even bother to close the door. Sal smiled and pulled the door closed and checked to make sure the cab and the trailer doors in back were all securely locked. As he made his way to the entrance of the diner, Sal twisted his shoulders side to side, rolled his stiff neck around, and took a few deep breaths of the fresh cold night air. He **hocked some phlegm**⁴⁹ in the back of his throat and spat it out into the bushes near the area where the cars were parked. One of the front doors to the diner stood open, but Sal closed it behind him as he walked into the warm diner. He found two **vacant**⁵⁰ **chrome**⁵¹-rimmed, red leather-covered stools at the counter.

⁴⁹ **hocked some phlegm** is when a person, usually a man, gathers the mucus and saliva in the back of the throat with a growling sound and works it into collection of thick liquid intended to be spat out (‘spat’ is the past tense form of spit)

⁵⁰ **vacant** means ‘empty’, or not being used, like a hotel room or an airplane bathroom

⁵¹ **chrome** is a term for a silvery, shiny metal common on door handles, mirrors, and bumpers of old cars



“How ya doin’ there, partner!” came a high pitched woman’s voice from behind. A red-haired woman, whose hair was quite tall, **impaled**⁵² a recent food order bill on a chrome spike next to the register. She worked the gum in her mouth as she walked around the end of the counter, pulled an order pad out of her apron pocket, and leaned in real close to Sal. “What can I getcha, partner?”

“Couple’a coffees, to start off. Thanks.” Sal said.

“Be right back,” said the woman in the red apron. “Oh,” she paused before turning, “my name’s Flo. This here’s my place. I don’t think I seen you in here before. Welcome!”

“You’re right,” Sal said as Flo hustled over to refill some coffee cups at another table. A moment later, Flo made her way back behind the counter.

⁵² **impaled** means ‘stabbed’, in this case, stabbing a small piece of paper on a small sharp spike, to keep it from blowing away from wind that might come through the open entrance door

“Sorry, honey...you were sayin’?”

“Oh,” Sal said, “I was sayin’ this is our first time here. Nice place.”



“Best food in town!” Flo said proudly.

“That’s what I heard. Can we get a couple of menus? My friend will be back in a minute.”

“Oh,” Flo said with a **wry**⁵³ smile, “was that the guy who just about knocked me on my **keister**⁵⁴ on the way to the restroom?”

“Yep, that was Vince. Sorry about that. My name’s Sal.”

“Nice to meet you, Sal.” Flo greeted Sal enthusiastically. Again she leaned over the counter toward Sal’s ear. “If you don’t find what you’re hungry

⁵³ **wry** is a word that means using or expressing dry, especially mocking, humor, as in, ‘Oh, really!’

⁵⁴ **keister** is a term for buttocks, butt, or rump

for, you just let me know what you want, and we'll fix it right up for ya, 'kay?"

"Okay," Sal replied. "Thanks."

Flo spun around and leaned in toward the **kitchen galley**⁵⁵. She tilted her tall hair to the right and called to the cooks, "You got my orders ready, George?"

"In a sec, Flo," came a voice drowned out by the sizzling sound coming off the grill.

Just then Vince returned from the restroom, sat down, patted the counter a few times and sighed.

"Feel better?" Sal asked Vince, with a wry smile of his own, though without looking up from the menu.

"Yeah. Thanks," Vince said as he exhaled, with relief in his voice.

Sal cleared his throat and took a sip of water from one of the glasses Flo had put out for them. Sal, in a low voice said, "The owner told me, if you don't find want ya' want on the menu, they'd make it up special."

"Cool," Vince said in a low voice, as though it was a secret the other customers weren't supposed to hear. "Where's the owner?"

A moment later, Flo passed behind the two men on her way to a booth. She had a steaming plate of spaghetti

⁵⁵ **kitchen galley** is where the chefs work preparing meals with ovens, stoves, griddles, mixers, refrigerators, etc...

in one hand and a stack of appetizing platters skillfully cascading down her other arm.

“There she goes,” Sal shrugged his right shoulder in Flo’s direction and smiled.

“Wow...” Vince let out a long breath.

“Right?” Sal answered. “My friend who told me about this place said she owns the whole enterprise, the diner, the store, the showers, and the fuel station.”

“Nice...” was all Vince could say.

The two men returned their attention to their menus. The diner was busy with other truckers and some families, too. “What can I get’cha?” Came Flo’s voice from behind the men as she **swiveled**⁵⁶ around the counter to face them.

“I was just thinkin’ ‘bout gettin’ a burger an’ some fries,” Vince said, more to Sal, than to Flo. What are you going to get?”

“Well, I heard from my friend that the food here’s good,” Sal said back to Vince.

“That’s true,” Flo interrupted, “Glad to hear people are recommending my place,” Flo continued, “We wanna make folks like our food so much they’ll wanna come back.”

“What do you suggest for two hungry truckers?” Sal asked Flo.

⁵⁶ **swiveled** is a word that means ‘turned’ or ‘twirled’ around

“Well, we got lots of good choices, like spaghetti, meat loaf, stew, or pot roast,” Flo smiled and she reeled off some of her favorites, “but I’m gonna guess that you’ll like our chicken fried steak and potatoes.”

“That sounds great,” Sal said with a smile.

“Fantastic,” Flo replied. “That comes with a salad, corn on the cob, and either baked, or mashed potatoes.”

“I’ll have it with a baked potato, with butter,” Sal said to Flo. He turned to his friend. “How ‘bout you, Vince? Remember, **it’s on me**⁵⁷.”

“I ain’t never had chicken fried steak before. What is it?” Vince asked.

Flo was about to describe it, but noticed that Sal was going to. “It’s kinda like a thin hamburger patty that’s fried up like fried chicken, and it’s smothered with a creamy gravy.” Sal went on, “I first had it when I was drivin’ through Arlington, Texas, at a restaurant called the ‘Black-Eyed Pea’.”

“Yeah, I’ve been there, too,” Flo offered. “That’s a pretty good restaurant. That’s their **signature dish**⁵⁸. But I got a secret for ya. Our’s is even better!”

“Okay, I’ll have that, too,” Vince gave his order to Flo, “but can I have it with french fries?”

⁵⁷ “**it’s on me**” is an expression that means, that the person offering will pay for the other person’s, or whole group’s bill

⁵⁸ **signature dish** means a particular meal a restaurant is known for because lots of customers order it and like it

“Any way you want, young man,” Flo said in her motherly voice.

“I think you’ll like it,” Sal reassured Vince.

“I’ll get your salads right out,” Flo said with a smile. And true to her word, she had their salads out in less than a minute.

“Thanks,” the men said in **unison**⁵⁹ to Flo as the heavy white ceramic bowls were set down in front of them.

“Enjoy,” Flo said sweetly. “We got saltine crackers right there in the basket if you want some.” Then she stepped away to ring up some customers who were waiting by the register.

“Sal,” Vince turned to his friend between bites of his green salad covered in ranch dressing, “I was gonna ask you...if it’s okay, I mean...I think you’re saying that you *own* your truck...? You said, *independent trucker*, right?”

Sal swallowed the bite he was working on and turned toward his friend, who waited now for his response. “I bought it from a trucker in Canada who said he was retiring. The guy had been drivin’ trucks on and off for like forty years. Nice guy. He told me a few stories about his experiences as a trucker since he started...”

⁵⁹ **unison** means together, at the same time, as with one voice

“Oh, I know old guys like that. They can talk.” Vince leaned a bit closer to Sal and whispered, “My grandpa’s like that. ‘Talks about how things were so much better in the old days....’”

“Nah, Vince. This guy wasn’t like that at all,” Sal said. “Real nice. Knew a lot. I asked him a bunch’a stuff, you know, since he’d been drivin’ for so long. Said he’d seen a lotta changes since he started. He said the roads used to be so much rougher and required more attention from the driver to avoid flats and crashes. He also told me how truckers hated it when police started using **radar**⁶⁰ devices. He said, sadly, that the pay for most truckers had gone down over the years.”

“Uh-huh, yeah...wait. Really? Why?”

Sal sighed. “The guy said it was because most truck drivers now just pick up and drop off cargo containers instead of loading and unloading their own trailers. Most drivers are driving longer runs for less pay. It ain’t any better for guys doin’ short runs in the city, either. The guy, I think his name was Rick or Ricky, said he thinks we’re all gonna get replaced by self-driving trucks someday.”

“Yeah, you’re right...I guess. I guess that stuff’s true. Probably good stuff to think about,” Vince offered as he looked down at his now empty salad bowl, kind of embarrassed he’d said what he said about old guys.

⁶⁰ **radar** devices are used by police to determine the speed of cars, trucks, and motorcycles on roadways. Some police use radar devices from patrolling helicopters and airplanes

“My uncle was the one who found his ad for the truck in the newspaper.” Sal had noticed his friend’s embarrassment, and figured it best to continue his story. “My uncle drove with me over the border to check the truck out when I bought it. You remember my uncle’s a mechanic, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” Vince’s voice brightened a bit. “His name is Gabriel, right?”

“Yep,” Sal said proudly, happy that Vince remembered him. “My uncle knows lots about heavy vehicles like trucks, buses, bulldozers and stuff. He works on farm equipment, too. I go to his shop whenever my truck needs anything, like brakes, hoses, or other repairs. Oh, and on weekends, he grills up some delicious *carne asada*⁶¹!”

“Mmmm! Really? Just thinkin’ about that is makin’ me hungrier. Do you think you can invite me along some time?”

“Sure,” Sal answered.

Flo, who had been running all over the diner taking other orders, serving food, and refilling coffee cups, reappeared, sliding two steaming plates of chicken fried steak and potatoes in front of Sal and Vince. She picked up their empty salad bowls and said, “I’ll be right back with your corn.”

“Thanks, ma’am,” Sal said.

⁶¹ *carne asada* is Spanish for ‘grilled meat’, beef, usually thin sliced and marinated in sauces before cooked on a stove or outdoor grill. It is tender and delicious!

Vince looked down at his plate, unsure what to think. “It sure smells good, Sal.” He watched Sal take his steak knife and fork to the breaded meat on his plate. Sal dipped the piece he cut off into the thick gravy puddled on top and took a bite. Vince did the same. “Man, Sal,” Vince exclaimed, “you were right! This is delicious!” He started carving up more of the meat and **scarfed it down**⁶².

“Hey, Vince, take your time,” Sal counseled.

“Okay, sure, Sal,” Vince said quietly as slowed down his bites. “I thought we was in a hurry...and this is so good!”

“We got time,” Sal said. “Enjoy it.

“Okay, right. Hey, can I ask you some more stuff about your truck?” Vince asked.

“Sure, like what?”

“Does your truck *need* a lot of repairs?” Vince asked as he reached for his corn on the cob.

Sal took another sip of his coffee and placed the cup back on its **saucer**⁶³. “It runs really good, considering how old it is,” Sal smiled as he spoke. “It was more than ten years old, with over **two hundred thousand miles**⁶⁴ on it, when I bought it. Still has

⁶² **scarfed it down** is an expression that means a person ate really fast, almost w/o chewing because he was in a hurry

⁶³ a **saucer** is a small plate placed under a coffee or tea cup to catch any liquid that may spill over

⁶⁴ **two hundred thousand** is written as **200,000** in numbers, equal to about 8 trips around the Earth, driving along the Equator, if that were possible. Most people drive their cars only about 10,000 miles per year.

manual transmission⁶⁵, as you noticed. But with as many miles as I've been drivin', stuff's gotta get fixed or replaced from time to time."

"Yeah, that makes sense," Vince agreed. "And since you're an *independent*, you gotta pay for repairs, too, right?"

"Yep," Sal went on, happy that Vince seemed interested. "Gabe says if you don't repair something when it's needed, it's gonna cost a lot more to fix later on."

"I've heard that before," Vince said. "But back to payin' for your truck... How'd ya do it? I mean, you're just a couple years older than me, an' I ain't got money saved even for next week!"

"Well..." Sal was thinking that they probably ought'a get back on the road soon, but nodded toward Vince. "Since we still got a few minutes, I'll tell ya." Sal took a bite of his corn and another sip of coffee, looked around, then looked for a moment at Vince, sitting to his right. His gaze came back down toward the counter. "When I was a kid, my dad taught me to put a couple'a bucks in the bank every time I made money mowin' lawns, cleanin' out garages, or haulin' tree branches out of a neighbor's yard."

Sal waited to see if Vince wanted to say something, but his friend seemed interested, so he went

⁶⁵ **manual transmission** is commonly referred to as 'stick shift' in a car, bus, or truck, where the driver has to shift the gears to make the vehicle go slower or faster

on. “When I was in high school, I worked weekends in winter teachin’ kids how to snowboard at the ski resort, and in the summer every year, I sold snacks by Lake Washington. I put some of the money away I earned in those jobs, too.”

“Big shot, eh?” came a stranger’s voice from behind Sal’s left shoulder. “Hey, moneybags,” came the **gruff**⁶⁶ male voice again, “you’re sittin’ in my spot!”

“Huh?” Sal said as he turned in the bearded man’s direction.

“You’re in my spot!” the man said again, impatiently.

“Hmm, sir, we’ve been sittin’ here enjoyin’ our meal for close to an hour.”

“Well, buddy,” the stocky older man started in on Sal again, “that’s my spot. I been comin’ here and sittin’ right there every day for ten years!” The man tugged on his bread company baseball cap and shoved his fists into the pockets of his bread company **windbreaker**⁶⁷ and stared at Sal with a look of impatience.

“Oh, well...” Sal answered. “I guess that’s cool. I see a booth opened up over there by the window. My friend and I can sit there now.”

Vince, watching this exchange, didn’t say a word.

⁶⁶ **gruff** means someone using their voice in a rough, low pitch, trying to sound tough

⁶⁷ a **windbreaker** is a lightweight, usually thin, plastic jacket, that is somewhat waterproof

“Yeah, that’s right,” the surly man scowled. “This stool’s my spot! You got that?”

“Yes, mister. I got it,” Sal said in a rather quiet voice. He picked up his coffee cup and turned to Vince. “Vince, let’s go finish our coffees in that booth over there.”

Vince followed Sal over to the booth he had pointed out. The surly man swung his leg over the now empty stool and started grumbling, in a rather loud voice, to no one in particular, “Can I get some coffee over here?!”

When Sal and Vince had sat down again, Vince leaned in toward Sal and said, “Hey, Sal, why’d ya’ let that guy talk to you like that?”

“It’s no big deal,” Sal answered softly.

“Yeah, but you’re a lot bigger than he is,” Vince pressed, “and besides, we were there first!”

“Don’t worry about it,” Sal shrugged, picked up his coffee cup and took a sip.

“Yeah, but, I mean--” Vince spurted out.

Sal took a breath and leaned a bit over the table toward Vince, sitting on the other side, “What good would it do to face off with a guy like that?” Sal paused a moment and continued, “He’s probably been doing that to folks who sit on that stool, for what did he say, ten years?”

“Huh, yeah,” Vince mumbled. “I think that’s what he said.”

“I don’t know him, but if I was to guess, that might be the only thing that guy’s got goin’... stoppin’ in here and challengin’ guys for that seat,” Sal suggested.

“More coffee, fellas?” Flo called toward Sal and Vince from behind the counter. She finished pouring the impatient man at the counter his coffee and walked over to their booth. Flo smiled at Vince and then toward Sal.

“Thank you, ma’am. Coffee’s great,” Sal said.

“No, *thank you*,” Flo whispered.

“Doesn’t that guy get on your nerves the way he talks?” Vince whispered up to Flo, who appeared even taller now.

Flo smiled shyly and leaned down again, “That man, his name is Dean, has been comin’ in here for years. He wasn’t always like that. He used to be so nice and friendly. His wife died of cancer ‘bout two years ago. No kids. Hasn’t been, you know, the same since.”

“Oh, sh--,” Vince blurted out. “Sorry, ma’am. I mean that sucks. Oh, I mean, sorry again.”

“I know, right?” Flo said, forcing a smile. “Life can be way tougher for some folks than others. Thanks for not pushin’ back on him. How ‘bout I get you boys a couple slices of pie, **on the house**⁶⁸.”

Sal smiled and said, “You don’t have to do that.”

“Honey, it’s my pleasure,” Flo smiled. “Glad to have you here. What kinda pie you young men like? We

⁶⁸ **on the house** means no charge, or for free

got peach, cherry, strawberry, lemon meringue, an' apple."

Sal and Vince looked at each other and grinned. "Maybe not apple," Sal said and Vince nodded in agreement. "A slice of cherry'd be great," Sal said as he looked up at Flo's smiling face.

"That sounds good!" Vince chimed in. "Can you make it two? By the way, Ma'am, that chicken fried steak was amazing!"

"Amen," Sal grinned.

"Sure thing, and thank you, fellas. Be right back," Flo said with a **twang**⁶⁹ in her voice. She headed around behind the brightly lit pie display case near the entrance. She was back in less than a minute and slid the pie plates onto their table. "Hope you'll come back next time you're in this part of the country."

Sal nodded and Vince did, too. After Flo moved on to serve other customers, the two men sat in silence eating their pie and sipping their warm coffees, watching the traffic hum by outside the tall diner windows.

"Sal," Vince cleared his throat gently to break the silence. "So you were sayin', Sal, that you had those jobs growin' up, and that you had saved your money..."

"Not all of it," Sal confessed. "I bought music, some clothes, shoes, and a couple'a video games."

⁶⁹ a **twang** is a vibrating sound made by a stretched rubber band or the string of a musical instrument like a guitar or violin

“And don’t forget movie tickets, right?” Vince smiled as he recalled the memory of going to the movies together with Sal. “Still, I gotta hand it to you. Savin’ money like you did...that was smart.”

“Yeah,” Sal sighed. “I gotta thank my **old man**⁷⁰ for teachin’ me to do that. ‘Made it a lot easier to ask my dad for the other half. The truck cost twenty-eight thousand dollars, used. I’m payin’ my dad the rest back, five hundred a month.” Sal took another sip and sighed. “I’m tryin’ not to miss a payment. I don’t want to let him down.”

“Man, Sal, you really saved up fourteen thousand?”

“Been savin’ a little bit every week since I was eleven,” Sal answered, and took another sip of his coffee.

Vince was curious. “How much you still owe your dad?”

“I still owe him six thousand,” Sal answered. He shook his head and kind of forced a smile. “In a year and a month more, if I keep makin’ money drivin’, I’ll be out of **debt**⁷¹.”

“That will be great,” Vince said encouragingly. He leaned against the backrest of the red vinyl booth, smiled, and gestured with his fist out over the table. Sal returned the fistbump. Vince’s eyes grew big as something

⁷⁰ **old man** is another way to say ‘dad’

⁷¹ **debt** means money that a person owes for a car, a house, or other purchase made, like on a credit card, with a promise to pay the borrowed amount back, usually with interest

occurred to him. “Hey, wait, Sal... You said six thousand. That’s twelve months. What’s with the extra month?”

“Yeah, that...” Sal answered. “In my mind, I’ll still owe him five hundred more.”

“Oh, hey, it’s none of my business...” Vince said shyly.

Sal sat quietly for a moment and tilted his head back and sighed, in apparent **reflection**⁷². “Nah, I feel like I should tell somebody. I mean, I almost didn’t tell my dad when it happened.”

“Uh-huh,” Vince barely nodded, not knowing what Sal was talking about.

“Back when my dad was working construction, I was like 15 years old. He was out on a job when a delivery of window glass came to our house. My dad would store materials there before he needed them at a job site. There were many sheets of glass packed in a large wooden **crate**⁷³. The crate was about the size of a house door. Before he had left the house that morning, my dad had told me to have the glass guy wheel it into the garage and for me to sign for it. When the glass delivery came, I asked the guy to set the box up on its side and lean it against the workbench.”

⁷² **reflection**, in this case, means thinking back on something that happened in the past, wondering if it could have been handled differently

⁷³ **crate** is a wooden box made out of boards nailed together used to hold heavy and fragile items for shipping and storage

“Hmm....” Vince was amazed by how clearly Sal remembered this event. He started to **anticipate**⁷⁴ where Sal’s story was going next, but didn’t want to interrupt.

“Anyway,” Sal went on, “Later, I was waxing my snowboard on top of the workbench and accidentally tipped the crate over.”

“Ouch!” Vince said quietly.

“Yeah, ouch. I stood the crate back up, but when I did, I could hear the sound of broken glass moving inside.”

“Aw, man. That’s too bad,” was all Vince could say.

“I didn’t know how to tell my dad. When he came home later that evening, he asked me where the glass was because he needed it for the job he was on the next day. I pointed to it in the garage. He checked the **invoice**⁷⁵ for the five large **panes**⁷⁶ that the paper said were inside and asked me to help him lift the crate up on the workbench. As we lifted it, he could hear the sound of broken glass **instantly**⁷⁷. I heard him **grumble**⁷⁸, but I couldn’t look at him. My dad opened the crate with the **claw side of a**

⁷⁴ **anticipate** means that a person, knows, or thinks he or she knows, what is going to happen next

⁷⁵ **invoice** means a list of goods sent or services provided, with a statement of the amount due for these; a bill

⁷⁶ **panes** is the way rectangular sheets of glass used for windows are referred to

⁷⁷ **instantly** means ‘right away’

⁷⁸ **grumble** means to make a low, annoyed, angry sound

hammer⁷⁹ and found two of the sheets of glass were broken.”

“Man, that sucks,” Vince threw in.

“Yeah. My dad looked at me from across the workbench to see what I would say. I think he knew what happened. I didn’t know what to do. I guess I must’a stood there like **a deer lookin’ in the headlights of an oncoming car**⁸⁰.” Sal paused. “You know what I mean?”

“Huh, hmm... I think so...” Vince mumbled.

“I guess I waited so long, he asked me if I thought the glass had been delivered broken. I can still remember it like it happened yesterday....”

“Seems like it....” Vince said in a quiet voice, again, without making eye contact. “What’d’ya say to your dad?”

“I was about to try and get myself off the hook and say I thought that that might have happened...that it was delivered broken. But then I thought a minute about how it wouldn’t be fair makin’ the glass delivery guy take the blame,” Sal explained.

“Yeah...” Vince said in a sorrowful voice.

“So I told my old man the truth, that I was the one who broke the glass,” Sal sighed.

“You were...right,” Vince said cautiously. “I mean...it was an accident, but you were right to do that.”

⁷⁹ **claw side of a hammer** is the curved part, opposite the hitting part, that is used to pull nails out of wood

⁸⁰ **a deer lookin’ in the headlights of an oncoming car** is a expression that means ‘frozen’ in place, out of fear

“I know that now. But it was the scariest thirty seconds of my life,” Sal confessed.

“What did your dad do when you told him?” Vince asked.

Sal went on, “I thought the next thing I was gonna see was smoke comin’ out of his ears. But he didn’t yell or anything. I remember him turning and takin’ a couple steps back toward the house. But then he turned back around, looked me in the eye and said, ‘I’m glad you’re man enough to admit what happened.’”

“Wow...” Vince said after a long pause. “Your dad was so cool about that.”

“He was.” Sal agreed. “He had to pay to replace those panes, wasted a day of work, and he lost money on that job.”

“He didn’t ask you to pay for the glass then?” Vince asked.

“No, he didn’t,” Sal replied. “I think he could tell I was sorry about what I did. He just said, ‘Accidents happen,’ and that was the end of it **as far as he was concerned**⁸¹.”

“Uh-huh...” Vince mumbled.

“But,” Sal continued, “I still want to do what I can to pay him back for not getting mad at me, and raising me to know I should tell the truth. That’s what that last five hundred is for.”

⁸¹ **as far as he was concerned** means ‘what he thought about that’

The Stuck Truck

“Makes sense to me,” Vince said with a nod of admiration.

Chapter 6

Near the counter in another booth, behind where the men were sitting, a sandy-haired boy was sitting across the table from his mother, head down, eyes fixed on a pad of paper. A neatly arranged line of colored pencils lay nearby. His mother was drinking coffee and reading a paperback book. Her cell phone was plugged into an **outlet**⁸² beneath the table.



The boy's mother looked up from her book and glanced at her son's artwork. "That's nice, Mike."

She picked up one of the boy's pencils from the middle of the lineup and examined the tip. The boy made a low whining sound and seemed stressed in the

⁸² **outlet** means an electrical wall outlet where appliances that run on electricity are plugged in, or devices that run on rechargeable batteries, like cell phones and toys, are recharged

shoulders, but didn't look up. "I'll sharpen this one for you, Mike," she said in a soothing voice. "It looks a little **dull**⁸³." She took a clear plastic sharpener from her purse and twisted the blue pencil inside. The boy began flicking his fingers rapidly near his eyes. Through his **anxious**⁸⁴ **digits**⁸⁵ he was watching the movements of the pencil as his mother returned it to the table, at the end of the neatly arranged line, so as not to disturb the others. The boy's finger movements slowed and came to a stop. The boy picked up the newly sharpened pencil and **critically**⁸⁶ examined the tip, raised his eyes a bit, and sheepishly smiled at his mother. He then put the pencil back in its original position in line and **engrossed**⁸⁷ himself back in his drawing.

Suddenly, the sound of ceramic dishes shattering thundered from behind the diner kitchen doors. Vince and Sal stopped their pie-filled forks in mid-air. The hum of conversation throughout the diner stopped. The boy in the booth behind them dropped under the table and started screaming uncontrollably. Flo called out over the counter to the dozen or so customers that were there, "Sorry, y'all. Everything's okay. Just a few broken plates and cups to clean up back there." She paused to work the

⁸³ **dull** is the antonym (opposite) of sharp

⁸⁴ **anxious** means 'nervous', or not at ease

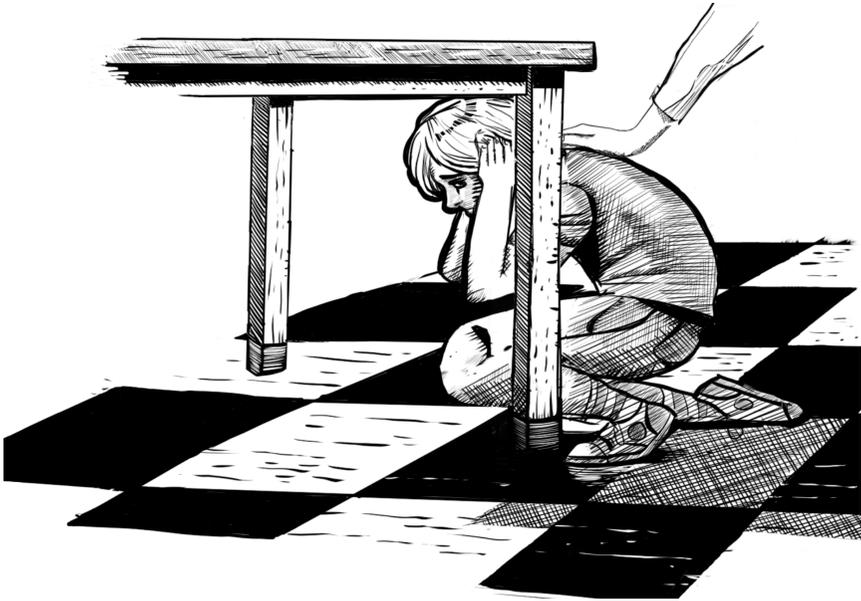
⁸⁵ **digits** is a synonym for fingers

⁸⁶ **critically** in this sentence means 'carefully'

⁸⁷ **engrossed** means to focus very seriously in what one is doing

gum she was chewing to the other side of her mouth. “Nothin’ to worry about.”

The boy’s mother crouched down and peered under the table. She gently placed her hand on her son’s shoulder. She made a gentle shushing sound that gradually faded as the boy’s screams died down. While his mother gently patted his back, the boy’s panicked screaming changed into worrisome **asthmatic breathing**⁸⁸.



“Wow, that kid’s really messed up,” Vince whispered to Sal. Sal could hear the boy’s screams begin

⁸⁸ **asthmatic breathing** is the fast breathing pattern of someone struggling to get enough air to breathe

to **subside**⁸⁹. Sal snuck a peek over his shoulder and noticed the boy's mother calming her son down.

“He’s gonna be okay,” Sal said quietly. “I think it was just the sudden noise.”

The boy slowly came up from under the table and began to **realign**⁹⁰ his pencils, which had scattered. His mother smiled to herself and looked at her phone. “Mikey, we can go now. Our phone is fully charged.” She waited patiently as the boy carefully put all the pencils back in a narrow metal box with all the tips facing the same direction. They got up together. The boy’s mother held out her hand for her son, and the two headed for their car.

Vince and Sal watched as the mother paid their check and walked out to their **station wagon**⁹¹. Vince looked at Sal and commented, “Boy, that mom’s got her hands full, eh?”

“Looks to me like she knows her boy, and how to take care of him,” Sal answered. “Say, we **ought’a**⁹² get going ourselves, don’t ya think?”

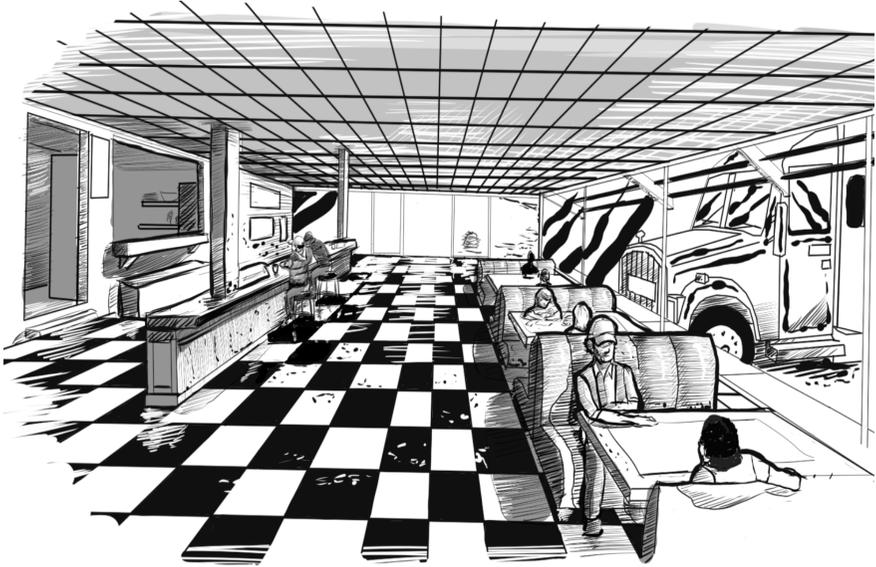
“Right, Sal,” Vince agreed.

⁸⁹ **subside** means to become less intense or serious, toward relaxation, in this case

⁹⁰ **realign** means to put things back in line, in an orderly manner

⁹¹ **station wagon** is a kind of car popular in the 1960’s-70’s made to carry as many as 7-8 people, usually kids, before minivans were invented. They looked like regular cars, but longer.

⁹² **ought’a** means should, as in, ‘we ought’a wash the dishes so mom doesn’t have to’



Sal put three twenty dollar bills on the counter and set a salt shaker on top. The men started for the door. Sal turned in the direction of the dish cart where Flo was picking up the last pieces of the broken plates and cups. “Thank you, Ma’am. Everything was delicious.”

Flo stood up and called out, “You’re mighty welcome. Y’all come back real soon, you hear?”

The two men left the diner and headed out to their truck. The night air was even colder than when they walked in. Sal reached up and unlocked the passenger side door. He opened it and climbed in. He tossed the keys down to Vince and said, “I’m gonna get some **shuteye**⁹³. You okay drivin’ for the next few hours?”

“Sure am!” Vince said enthusiastically. “You get some sleep. We’ll be in L.A. before you wake up,” Vince

⁹³ **shuteye** means a quick nap

yelled over his shoulder as he made his way around the cab to the driver's side.

“Hey, Sal,” Vince called back to his friend again as he settled into the driver's seat, “You said your truck trailer was bigger than normal size, right?”

“Yep,” Sal answered as he climbed onto the skinny mattress and fastened the seat belts. He didn't mind that Vince had forgotten their earlier conversation. “There's lots of trucks like this one that are long,” Sal explained, “but this one's a little taller than standard ones.”

“How much taller?” Vince wanted to know.

“Not much. About a foot and a half taller. Hey, Vince...” Sal changed the subject. “Before I fall asleep, I wanted to tell you a joke I heard since the last time I saw ya.”

“Okay, shoot,” Vince said, enthusiastically. “I ain't heard a good joke in a long time.”

“Well, it goes like this,” Sal began while lying on his back. “A kid was sitting in his high school Algebra class waiting while the teacher passed out the papers for the big test they were gonna take....”

“Is this really going to be funny?” Vince interrupted. “I mean, it's about Math class?” Vince started the engine and checked his mirrors.

“Wait and see,” Sal sighed a bit, wanting to get on with his joke. “So anyways, this kid had his backpack on

the floor next to his desk, and it was open. The teacher, who, row by row, was droppin' a test paper on each student's desk, noticed that this kid looked a little nervous as he walked by. He also noticed that there were a whole bunch of cracked-open Chinese fortune cookies on his desk and more new ones inside the kid's half-opened backpack....”

Vince pulled the truck slowly out of the truckstop onto the highway onramp, shifted through five gears and built up some speed. Sal continued, “The teacher stopped at the kid's desk while he was opening another one and asked him why he had so many fortune cookies. The student looked up and told his teacher, ‘My mom always says, ‘You never know where you're gonna find the answers.’ ”

“Hah!” Vince laughed. “That was pretty funny, Sal. I gotta hand it to that kid for thinking that way. I should'a thought of that when I was in school!”

Sal smiled as he lay back on the cot, happy that Vince enjoyed his joke. The two men **reminisced**⁹⁴ a little more about their high school days as Vince drove through the night. Vince asked Sal again if he didn't remember Sally Ferguson. It was getting near midnight. Sal yawned and said to Vince, “No, sorry, can't say I do. I'm gonna rest my eyes for a couple of hours. You got this, right?”

⁹⁴ **reminisced** means remembered happily about an event in the past

“Yeah, no problem. Take a break,” Vince said, “I’ll be fine.”

“Thanks,” Sal said, yawning a bit. He was asleep in just a few minutes. Vince drove on, keeping his hands carefully on the wheel and his eyes on the road. He wanted to impress his friend with his safe driving and reliability. After all, Vince thought, *This is Sal’s truck*. He kept repeating the lines to Sal’s joke to himself, hoping he could remember it, and someday, tell it to someone else. As the truck neared the beginning of the highway that **traversed**⁹⁵ the southern end of the California Sierra Nevada mountains, something unexpected happened.

⁹⁵ **traversed** means crossed over or through

Chapter 7

A **rockslide**⁹⁶ that spread across all lanes, with thousands of **tons**⁹⁷ of dirt and boulders, had forced the closure of the highway in both directions. A **CalTrans**⁹⁸ worker in a reflective orange vest and helmet was waving an orange flashlight from side to side that blinked red and white. Vince pulled the truck to a stop where the worker was standing. The highwayman tilted his helmet back and looked up in the direction of Vince's window. "Just happened about an hour ago," the CalTrans worker reported. "Gonna have to send you over to the old highway if you want to go south. This highway's expected to be closed for a couple of days until we can clear this **massive**⁹⁹ rockfall away."

Even in the darkness, Vince could make out the sloped mass of dirt and dozens of scattered **boulders**¹⁰⁰ that weighed hundreds of tons each blocking the highway.

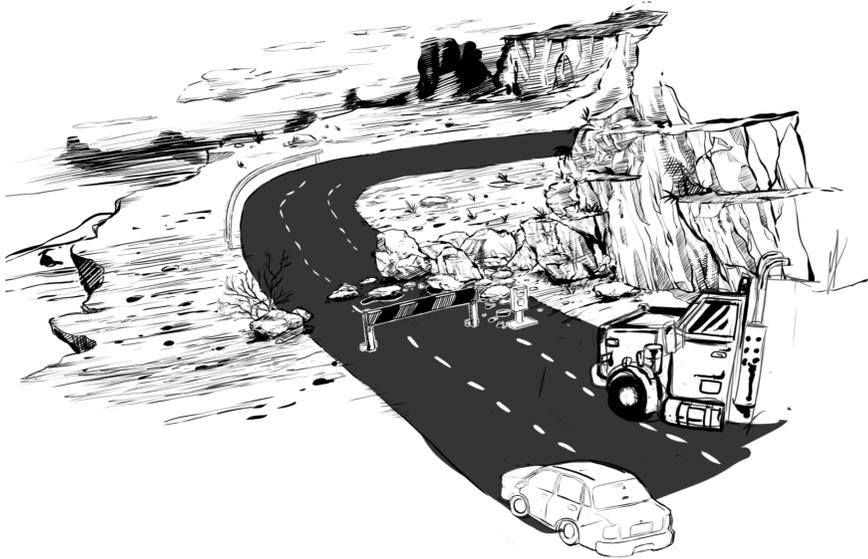
⁹⁶ **rockslide** when lots of rocks fall from a mountainside and end up in a big pile below

⁹⁷ a **ton** is a measure of weight. A small family car weighs about 1 ton = 2000 pounds

⁹⁸ **CalTrans** is California's transportation agency that takes care of mountain roads and city freeways

⁹⁹ **massive** means very big, enormous, gigantic

¹⁰⁰ **boulders** are gigantic rocks that can be the size of cars or bigger



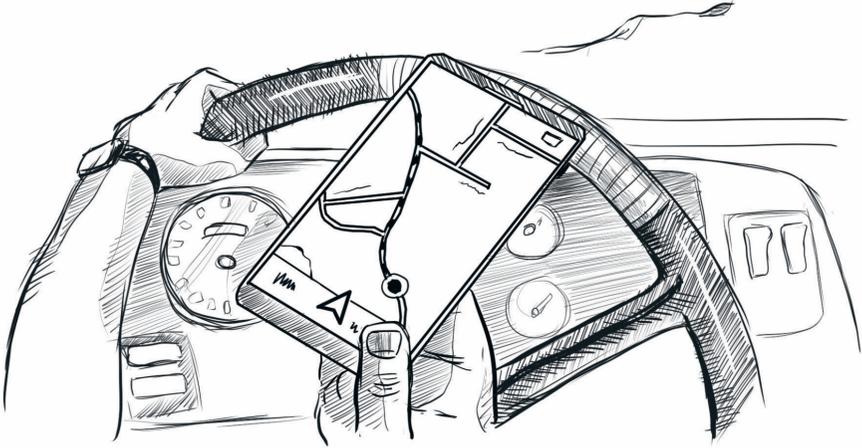
“Bet you’re gonna need to bring some bulldozers up here to move all of the mess,” Vince said.

“We got three comin’ at sun up,” the CalTrans worker replied. “I’ll direct you so you can turn your truck around. I wouldn’t want you to drive it off the cliff.”

Vince followed the flashlight guidance of the highwayman, and with more than a few turns forward and back, was able to get the truck turned around. “Just go back 17 miles, then take Old Road 41 south for a **few**¹⁰¹ miles. When you get to Valley Ridge Road, there will be another CalTrans worker there to direct you back to the main highway. Shouldn’t take but an extra half hour or so.”

¹⁰¹ **few** is a word that usually means 3 or 4 of something

Vince thanked the man and thought to himself, *‘This must’a just happened. I know Sal checked the road conditions on his phone before we headed out.’*



Soon after Vince had turned the truck around, he pulled over to the side of the road to enter the new directions into his phone’s navigation app. He then pulled back onto the highway and found the **detour**¹⁰² that was set up to direct cars, buses, and trucks away from the new highway. All **vehicles**¹⁰³ were forced to make another U-turn and were being **diverted**¹⁰⁴ onto the old, seldom-used highway a few miles east. Unlike the newer highway, the old one had only one lane in each direction, was quite **narrow**¹⁰⁵, had lots of cracks and potholes in

¹⁰² **detour** is another way of going somewhere that was not expected

¹⁰³ **vehicles** means cars, trucks, buses, and anything else with wheels used to carry people or stuff

¹⁰⁴ **diverted** means to change directions to avoid something

¹⁰⁵ **narrow** is the antonym of wide

the **pavement**¹⁰⁶, and still had **decaying**¹⁰⁷ tunnels in some places. Fortunately, the detour was only three miles long and required them to pass through only one of those old tunnels.

Vince, who had been driving now for about three hours, thought about waking his friend to tell him about the route change. But, behind him, he could hear Sal softly snoring and didn't want to wake him. He figured it wouldn't be a big deal to take the detour, and should only add about an extra half hour to their trip.

¹⁰⁶ **pavement** is another word for asphalt or blacktop, used for road surface material

¹⁰⁷ **decaying** is a term that means going bad, falling apart and getting worse, aging, over time; bad teeth falling out

Chapter 8

It was about 3:30 am in the dark of night when Vince approached a tunnel on the old highway that ran along the mountain's edge. From a distance, in the gloom, lit only by the truck's headlights, it looked like a very old tunnel. Ivy was growing around its mouth, and there were many broken pieces of **concrete**¹⁰⁸ lying in the roadway. Vince could tell that a lot of the fallen pieces had once been part of the tunnel itself.

There was no traffic on the road at that early hour, so Vince slowed down to try to see if there was a clearance sign posted to indicate the height of the opening. He remembered Sal telling him that the truck's trailer was eleven feet in height. On top of the truck's wheels and **chassis**¹⁰⁹, Vince figured that the overall height had to be nearly fifteen feet. The tunnel's top had to be higher than that for the truck to fit through.

As he rolled the truck slowly toward the entrance, he saw what he thought was a sign. Vince **squinted**¹¹⁰ his eyes upward, but the sign's letters and numbers were still

¹⁰⁸ **concrete** is the material made from sand and rocks used to make sidewalks, walls, and tunnels

¹⁰⁹ **chassis** is the word used for the base (bottom) frame, usually made of metal, of a motor vehicle

¹¹⁰ **squint** means to squeeze the eyelids narrowly together to better focus one's vision, to see small or far away things better

indistinguishable¹¹¹ from fifty **yards**¹¹² away, where he had stopped. The faded sign, that once must have been bright yellow with black painted letters, was unreadable. The numbers on the sign appeared to have been worn by years of rain, snow, sun, and wind. Paint was peeling off at the corners. Vince pulled the truck forward to within ten yards of the opening. The truck's air brakes whispered a squeak as it stopped. Vince left the engine running, but secured the emergency brake.

Vince grabbed Sal's flashlight that was magnet-mounted on the metal of the door frame and jumped down from the truck's **cab**¹¹³. He walked around in front of the tunnel **archway**¹¹⁴, scanned the opening, checking to see if there were any other signs. Seeing none, Vince then stood between the truck and the tunnel, swiveling his head from side to side, as though he were watching a tennis match, comparing the height of the tunnel's opening with the top of the **trailer**¹¹⁵. He put the flashlight in his jacket pocket and climbed slowly from the truck's side step to the driver's seat to the top of the truck's cab. He raised himself from a crouched position and stepped softly on the roof, while his friend slept just

¹¹¹ **indistinguishable** means that the viewer cannot be sure what something is

¹¹² a **yard** is a distance of three feet. A football field is 100 yards long

¹¹³ **cab** is the place where the truck drivers sit, in front of the cargo trailer

¹¹⁴ **archway** is an opening like a half-circle

¹¹⁵ **trailer** is the name given to the long rectangular box part of the truck used to carry the cargo

below. Vince grasped the **leading edge**¹¹⁶ of the trailer as he stood **perilously**¹¹⁷ on top of the damp metal surface of the truck's cab. He bent his legs a bit for balance, then felt a **chill in his spine**¹¹⁸ when he noticed the steepness of the mountainside below. He could see his own breath as he exhaled in the cold mountain air. He pointed the flashlight's beam at the tunnel's highest point, again from his squatted position, and then turned carefully atop the wet metal roof to look again at the leading edge of the trailer just behind him.

Vince mumbled aloud, to himself, "I think we can make it through...just barely." He almost slipped off the hood of the truck as he lowered himself back to the roadway.



¹¹⁶ **leading edge** means 'front edge' of an object as it is moving forward, like an airplane wing or skateboard nose

¹¹⁷ **perilously** means in a position of danger where caution should be taken

¹¹⁸ **felt a chill in his spine** is an expression that means he felt a shiver (shaking) in his backbone because of the danger

Vince continued with his self-talk. *“What would Sal do now? I don’t think he’d try to turn this truck around on such a narrow mountain road.”* Vince could feel himself **shiver with worry**¹¹⁹. The last U-turn he made was done with six lanes of space and a man directing him with a flashlight. Here he wouldn’t be able to do it at all. He **sighed deeply**¹²⁰ when he considered how long it would take to finish the journey if they had to have another truck hook up to theirs from behind and pull it backwards down that road, and then take another highway hundreds of miles away to get to Los Angeles. *“Why didn’t the CalTrans highway guy warn me about the tunnel?”* Vince wondered. *“Maybe no one had told him either. Maybe he didn’t notice the height of the truck....”*

While he had been **surveying the situation**¹²¹, a car pulled up behind the truck. It was an older blue Volkswagen bus with a crack in the passenger side of its windshield. The **VW**¹²² couldn’t go around because the truck was blocking the tunnel opening. The driver behind the wheel was a tall man. There wasn’t enough room for

¹¹⁹ **shiver with worry** means to shake inside, like when you’re cold, or maybe nervous about something

¹²⁰ **sighed deeply** means to show disappointment using body language, lowering the shoulders, and letting out a long breath

¹²¹ **surveying the situation** means to look at a problem for a long time, hoping to come up with an answer

¹²² **VW** is short for Volkswagen, a German car company. In German, ‘Volkswagen’ sort of means ‘car for regular folks’, named that way because they were less expensive and easier to repair

even a small car to get by. Vince figured more cars would come along soon, and that he'd better do something.

Chapter 9

Sal was still asleep on the narrow mattress in the back of the cab. Vince didn't want to wake his friend. Sal had driven many hours yesterday while Vince rested. He looked back and forth at the tunnel and the truck again, for what now must have been the fifth or sixth time. He was **fairly certain**¹²³ that he could make it through.

Vince **counseled himself**¹²⁴, *"If I stay in the center of the road, and I go slowly, I'll make it."* As he started to climb back up into the cab, another car pulled up behind the Volkswagen bus.

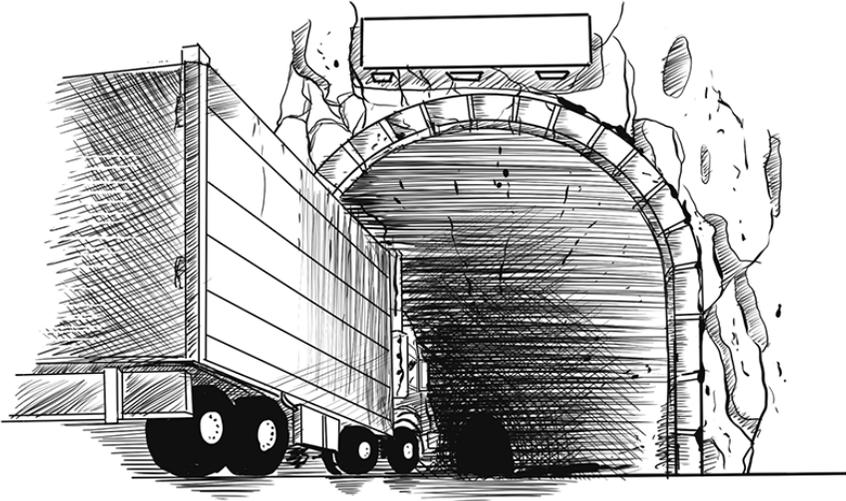
Vince didn't look long to try to make out who that driver might be. From where Vince was, this car looked like it was driven by a woman with big hair, big enough to touch the ceiling inside her car. Both of the cars' drivers waited patiently as Vince revved the truck's engine and slowly rolled forward. Vince made sure that his **high-beam headlights**¹²⁵ were on. For even though the sunrise was beginning to brighten the mountain sky,

¹²³ **fairly certain** means "pretty sure"

¹²⁴ **counseled himself** means talked to himself as though he was giving himself advice like, 'I can do it, I can do it...'

¹²⁵ **high-beam headlights** are extra-strong lights that shine straight ahead, as well as down

it was dark in that old tunnel, and it didn't appear to have any overhead lights.



In just under a minute, Vince brought almost the truck's entire length through the opening. As the wheels rolled slowly forward, his eyes **darted**¹²⁶ up and down between the road's faded center line he was trying to **straddle**¹²⁷, and the darkness overhead. Vince scrunched his shoulders down as though it would help the truck make it through. The cars behind, and now there were nearly a dozen lined up, stood idle. Some of their drivers had gotten out to see what would happen.

Vince continued **inching**¹²⁸ the truck forward. He started to hear a scratching sound come from overhead. The truck kept moving, and after a few seconds, the

¹²⁶ **darted** means moved really fast

¹²⁷ **straddle** means keeping one leg (or wheel) on one side, and one on the other

¹²⁸ **inching** means moving slowly, only a few inches at a time. An **inch** is about the width of your thumb

sound faded. Vince kept going. He knew the fit was going to be tight, but the back of the truck had now completely passed under the entrance arch, rolling slowly in the darkness.

The tunnel appeared to be less than a few hundred yards long by Vince's **estimation**¹²⁹. He was already able to see the small opening **faintly**¹³⁰ at the other end. The going was slow, but he smiled as the truck kept moving. "*Sal would be happy about this,*" he said softly to himself. A moment later though, he heard the scratching sound of rock against metal again, but this time louder, and even painful to his ears. To Vince, it sounded like that awful 'fingernails-on-the-chalkboard' sound troublemaking kids sometimes made in class back when he was in school, when the teacher wasn't looking, and when there still were chalkboards.

Though the truck slowed somewhat, it didn't stop. Vince kept his foot pressed gently on the gas pedal. He was afraid the engine could **stall**¹³¹ at that slow speed, and might not restart.

The truck's **pace**¹³² picked up again, and the screeching sounds faded. It was quiet in that tunnel now, even with the engine running. It was so quiet, Vince could even hear Sal snoring behind him. Vince began to

¹²⁹ **estimation** is a best guess, made without measuring tools

¹³⁰ **faintly** means 'hard to see', or 'fuzzy', or 'dim'

¹³¹ **stall** means when an engine stops running

¹³² **pace** is a synonym for speed of movement

relax as the opening at the tunnel’s opposite end grew bigger. He looked in his rearview mirror and noticed that the cars behind him had started their engines. They were beginning to inch forward toward the entrance of the tunnel, right behind him, **single file**¹³³.



Suddenly, the truck stopped. Vince thought he had heard the scratching sound announce itself again, but it stopped suddenly. He heard a loud **thud**¹³⁴, and then its echo, almost as loud. The truck’s engine stalled. Sal **stirred**¹³⁵, grunted, and sat up, “What the heck was that?”

Vince felt a lump rise in his throat. He slowly turned his head to the right, and back. Sal unbuckled himself and leaned over the back of the passenger seat. The two men’s eyes met for a moment as Sal dropped down into

¹³³ **single file** is the way students are expected to line up, one behind the other in a fire drill, or cars on a single lane road

¹³⁴ a **thud** is a low, deep sound, like when you drop a heavy book on the floor, or a bag of cement mix on the ground

¹³⁵ **stirred** means “moved a little”

the seat next to Vince. “We’re in a tunnel...,” Vince muttered.

“Tunnel...what...why...,” Sal asked, his voice trailing off, his eyes darting this way and that to look out the windows on all sides.

“Well, it’s an old tunnel,” Vince said sheepishly. “It’s off the main highway. I thought we could make it through....”

“Why are we off the main highway? We had the whole route planned out, didn’t we?”

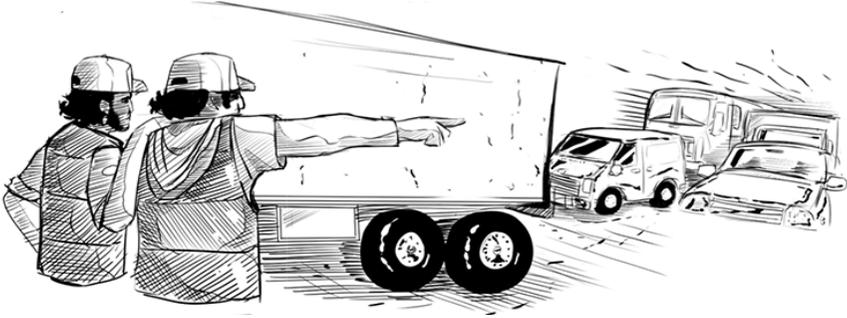
“Well...yes,” Vince stammered. “But there was a rockslide on the main road a few miles back, and I was directed by a CalTrans guy to take this road.” Vince’s voice **trembled**¹³⁶ as he continued to explain what had happened. “I thought I could make it....”

Sal could tell his friend felt bad. “Don’t worry about it, Vince.” Sal paused, “Hmm... I’m sure I would’a done the same thing.” Sal punched Vince’s upper arm the way guys do when they try to help another guy feel better. “Hey, it’s probably not so bad,” Sal said calmly. “Let’s get out and check.”

As the two drivers got out of the truck, several of the cars’ drivers began honking. Vince was about to raise his fist and yell back at them, but Sal stepped in front of Vince and just put his arms out, palms up, in the direction

¹³⁶ **trembled** means a little shaky, with a voice; it can show nervousness

of the cars in a ‘What can I do?’ gesture. Sal put his hand on Vince’s shoulder, “Those guys are probably in a hurry to get to work,” Sal chuckled to Vince.



The honking died down. Sal and Vince walked all the way around the truck to see if there was any damage to the truck. “Nothing wrong down here,” Sal said. “The trouble must be up on top.” The two men stood together near the back of the truck and noticed that there was a loose dusty trail of rock material on the road behind the truck.

Sal sighed.

“I’m real sorry, Sal,” Vince said **apologetically**¹³⁷.

¹³⁷ **apologetically** means talking to another person in a way that expresses an apology, saying ‘I’m sorry’

Chapter 10

Sal started walking out of the tunnel toward the line of waiting cars. “Vince, I’ll be back in a minute,” Sal said as he made his way out into the morning light. He tapped the tailgate of his trailer a few times with his knuckles as he turned. He pulled the cap off his head, ran his other hand through his hair, and then replaced the cap. Sal called back to Vince as he stepped toward the waiting cars. “I’m going to let these people know that we’re working on a solution.”



Sal approached the Volkswagen bus where the man was inside listening to his music, slapping the dashboard and bobbing his head up and down. Sal tapped on the driver’s side window because the man inside had his ear buds in and seemed not to notice him standing

there. The man had a startled look on his face as he turned toward the window. He rolled the window down by turning a handle around and around. It was an old van. “Sorry about the delay, buddy,” Sal said. “We’re trying to get the truck out of everyone’s way. It might be a little while, though.”

The man nodded his head and smiled, and went back to listening to his music. Sal smiled and continued down to the next car.

The next car was driven by a woman in what appeared to be some kind of uniform. Her hair was red, and it was done up very tall, practically tall enough to touch the roof of her car. She lowered her window with the touch of a button. She stuck her head out as she saw Sal coming her way. “Good morning, darlin’,” she said.

“Uh, good morning, ma’am.” Sal returned her greeting, a little less enthusiastically.

“What’s going on up there?” The woman wanted to know.

“Well, we kinda got our truck stuck inside that tunnel. We’d never driven this road before.”

“Me neither, honey,” she offered, shaking her head.

“It might take us a little while to get out of the way so you folks can get through. Sorry if we’re makin’ you late for an appointment.”

“The only appointment I got is with the pillow on my bed. I just put in ten hours at my diner. Say, didn’t I see you and your friend back there before?”

“Oh, yeah that was us. Boy, your diner sure does make some good pie,” Sal said. “Well, sorry again for the delay.”

“Don’t worry, honey. I’ll just catch some shuteye here in my car while you fellas figure out what to do.”

“Thanks, ma’am.”

The next car was a station wagon with a woman asleep in the driver’s seat. Sal didn’t want to wake her. He noticed a boy in the back seat with his head down, focused on some kind of video game. Sal took a step to the right and looked in the back window. He tried to get the boy’s attention, but when the boy saw Sal’s face close to the window, he turned away as though he were looking out the window on the other side. Sal noticed a completed Rubik’s CubeTM on the floor of the back seat, along with a drawing pad open to a page with hand-drawn cartoon figures on it. To Sal, there seemed to be something familiar about that kid, but he just couldn’t place it.

Sal scratched his head and continued walking toward the next vehicle, which was a light blue painted bread delivery truck. He didn’t see anyone inside, so he walked toward the back. He noticed a man sitting on the

open tailgate, facing away from the tunnel, legs hanging down, snacking on an open bag of tortilla chips.

“Excuse me,” Sal said as he reached the back of the man’s truck. He spoke to the man from behind, over his shoulder, “We got a little problem with our truck inside the tunnel. It might take us a little while to get it out.”

The bread driver sat slumped over his knees. His head was still down as Sal made his way around to face him. Sal thought he recognized the man from the diner before. The man spoke without looking up. “Huh..?” he grunted. His cap was tilted down and still covered most of his bearded face. “You were saying?”

“Yeah, I wanted to tell you we were sorry for holdin’ you and the other drivers up,” Sal said apologetically.

“Oh, sure, okay, yeah,” the man said as he looked up at Sal. He had his blue and white bread company windbreaker zipped all the way up to his neck.

“I’m sure you got places to go,” Sal offered. “Sorry if we’re makin’ you late for your deliveries.”

“Nah, not really,” Dean said solemnly. My truck’s empty. I’m on my way back home, but I ain’t in no hurry.”

“Oh,” said Sal. “Sorry just the same.”

“Want some?” Dean said as he held out his bag of chips.

“Uh, sure.... Thanks,” Sal said with an embarrassed smile. He took a few and popped one in his mouth.

“No problem,” Dean said as he got to a standing position. He shook his head and shoulders quickly in an effort to warm himself up. “I got some bottles of water, too, if you want one.”

“Thanks, mister. I’m good,” Sal answered.

“Got any idea how you’re gonna get your truck out?” Dean asked.

“Not yet. It’s kinda wedged in there pretty good, Sal answered. “But if you got a suggestion, don’t keep it to yourself.”

“Sure, will do,” the bread driver’s voice brightened a bit. “I’m sure you guys will solve it.”

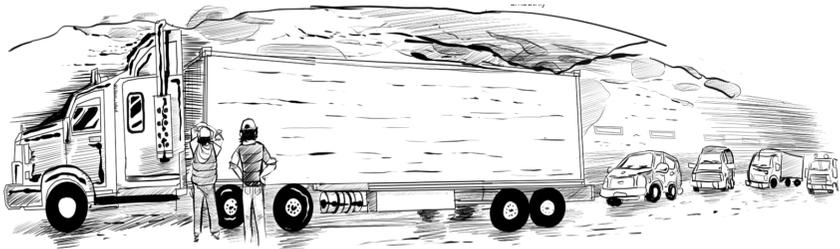
“Thanks,” Sal said. “If you can spread the word to the other folks waitin’, we’d appreciate it.” Sal headed back passing the drivers he had spoken to and in the direction of the tunnel and the truck inside.

The boy in the back of his mom’s car had resumed playing his video game. His mom, now awake from the noise of the game, was checking on her son from time to time in the rearview mirror. In the car just ahead, the woman with the big hair opened her purse and

rummaged through it¹³⁸. In a few seconds, she pulled out a stick of gum. She unwrapped it, held the new stick in one hand, spit the old gum into the paper from the new, then closed the paper around it and added it to the mound of discarded gum that was forming in the tall Styrofoam cup by her seat. She folded the new stick in half with her tongue. Her back teeth then began working it into a chewy ball. Her lips smacked every few seconds as the saliva flowed back to provide the needed **lubrication**¹³⁹. As Sal passed the VW van, he noticed it jiggled a bit on its shock absorbers as the energetic man inside bounced around in the driver's seat.

Sal walked back over to where Vince had been waiting. "Are they mad about this, Sal?"

"Nah," Sal answered. "Not really. The folks I talked to were cool about it."



While Sal and Vince continued looking over the situation, some other drivers got out of their cars, walked

¹³⁸ **rummaged through it** means moving things around in a bag, box, or closet until the person finds the item being searched for

¹³⁹ **lubricate** means to moisten, or make wet (in this case, with saliva); or to make a machine work more smoothly with oil or another liquid

over to the truck, and started **gazing**¹⁴⁰ up. Some walked to the front to look at the place where the top of the truck's trailer first made contact with the top of the tunnel. A few of the drivers stood at the sides, pointing fingers upward and sharing their ideas. Though it was still rather dark in the tunnel, the morning sun was shining in from the far end and **illuminated**¹⁴¹ the truck and the rocky archway it was stuck to.

Sal and Vince knew they couldn't go forward any more without further damaging the truck. Vince asked Sal if they ought to try and back the truck out. "It's worth a try," Sal said. "Hop up there and try to start the engine. I'll get these cars to back up."

Vince got the engine started. The drivers of the cars behind the truck, one by one, started their engines and slowly moved back out of the way. The boy playing the video game noticed his mother start their car and shift into reverse. He called up from the back seat, "What's going on, Mom?" without lifting his head or slowing the movement of his fingers. "Why are we going backwards?"

His mother answered, "I'm not sure, honey. The truck driver waved at us to back up."

Once there was enough room behind, Sal, standing near the back end of the truck on the driver's side, gave

¹⁴⁰ **gazing** means looking and wondering

¹⁴¹ **illuminated** means lit up

Vince a wave to go. He held his two hands up, close together, indicating to Vince to back up just a little. Vince looked in the side mirror to look for Sal's signals and slipped the gear shift into reverse. He gently pressed the gas pedal. The truck did move a tiny bit, but Sal waved at Vince to stop, because not only did he hear a terrible grinding noise, but he also saw sparks **cascade**¹⁴² from the top of the truck down to the **asphalt**¹⁴³.

Vince **cut the engine**¹⁴⁴ and slowly stepped out onto the road. His head was down and his shoulders were slumped as he walked toward Sal. Sal again tried to lift his buddy's **spirits**¹⁴⁵. "We'll solve this problem. Don't worry." Sal thought for a moment and then continued, "Vince, get on the **radio**¹⁴⁶ and call to see if there are any truckers that have any ideas. If there are any driving nearby, maybe one of them can give us a hand."

Vince called around, and while all the truckers who answered were happy to help, the only idea any of them had was to unload the truck's cargo into another truck. Vince thanked them, but said he hoped another solution could be found.

¹⁴² **cascade** means for things to pour down, like water in a waterfall

¹⁴³ **asphalt** is the black material used for road pavement, parking lots, school playgrounds, and other durable surfaces

¹⁴⁴ '**cut the engine** means to turn off the engine, also called 'turning off the ignition' (engine start switch, usually with a key)

¹⁴⁵ **spirits** means feelings that a person has that can be good or bad

¹⁴⁶ **radio** means something like a walkie-talkie or cell phone truckers use to talk to each other

Chapter 11

After backing their cars away from the tunnel, several of the cars' drivers returned to where the truck stood. One suggested that they gather as many people together as they could and rock the truck side to side to try to **dislodge**¹⁴⁷ it from its stuck position. About two dozen people volunteered to help. They assembled on both sides, placed their hands on the sides of the trailer, and pushed back and forth, but it was no use. The truck was fully loaded and too heavy. It just wouldn't **budge**¹⁴⁸.

Once that effort failed, Sal used the radio to call for a large, super-sized tow truck to pull them out. There was one not too far away. The tow truck driver said he could get out to their location **within the hour**¹⁴⁹.

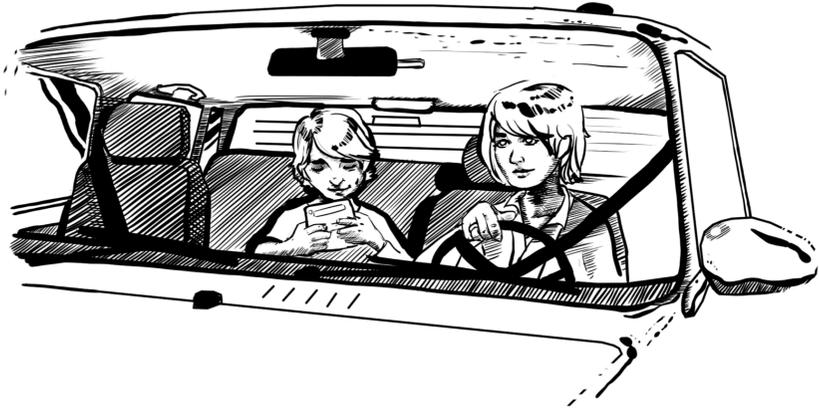


¹⁴⁷ **dislodge** means to loosen something that is stuck in place

¹⁴⁸ **just wouldn't budge** means that the truck wouldn't move

¹⁴⁹ **within the hour** means in an amount of time that is less than one hour

“Ah, shucks!” the boy announced. “My battery died.” He looked out the window and saw lots of people gathered just outside the tunnel. “Mom...” the boy asked shyly, “...can I see what’s--what’s going on?”



“No, Mikey,” the boy’s mother said with a big yawn, fighting to keep her eyes open. “Just stay in the car where it’s warm and let those grown ups figure it out.”

“But, but... What’s happening?” The boy asked.

“I’m not sure, but I think there’s a truck blocking the tunnel,” the boy’s mom answered.

“But--but...can I go see?” the boy **persisted**¹⁵⁰.

“Mikey. Just relax, honey,” the boy’s mother responded calmly. “Everything’s going to be okay. We’ll just have to wait a bit.”

¹⁵⁰ **persist** means to keep doing something, even when it is difficult

While they waited, some of the delayed drivers and their passengers milled around in the tunnel, looking up in the darkness. Many shook their heads, and others rubbed their chins. A few put their hands on their hips and pointed, while still others scratched the hair on the back of their heads just next to their ears.

The boy called again from the back seat, “Mom....”



“Sweetheart,” his mother called back, with a big yawn, and without turning. “Don’t you have a book or puzzle back there you can play with? Or maybe you want to work on more of your drawings....”

“May--maybe...I can help,” the boy whispered. His mother didn’t answer. She yawned again as her head **slumped**¹⁵¹ over to one side.

An older man, tall, thin, with wrinkled skin, whose car was further back in the line, got out and shut his car

¹⁵¹ **slumped** means leaning over, to one side, a bit lower than when something or someone is up straight

door. He slowly walked past the line of cars and into the tunnel. He stopped and stood just behind Vince. He mumbled to himself, but loud enough for the people around him to hear, “Maybe they could use one ‘a those big **crowbars**¹⁵² up on top to loosen it up, or maybe call the fire department to come with those ‘**jaws of life**¹⁵³’.” Vince just nodded his head politely when he heard the man’s suggestion. No one around thought either of those were ideas worth trying due to the size of the truck.

The man stood behind Vince for a few more minutes, but then headed back to his car. As he walked out of the tunnel, he passed a boy who appeared to be about eight years old, standing by the side of the tunnel’s archway entrance. “Hey, kid. How you doin’?” the man said as he nodded in the boy’s direction. The boy took a couple steps back and turned his head away as the man passed.

Flo, the diner owner with tall red hair, walked up to Sal, swinging her hips. She was still wearing her red skirt and apron, the front of which had the shape of an oversized spoon sewn on it. She looked Sal over, then took a step back. Sal could see Flo’s name **embroidered**¹⁵⁴ on her apron in white letters. She was

¹⁵² **crowbar** is a long metal bar used for prying two connected things apart, like a door stuck in its frame

¹⁵³ ‘**jaws of life**’ is a powered tool firefighters use to open stuck car doors to free accident victims after a serious car crash, kind of shaped like bolt cutters that are powered, but to push two stuck things apart

¹⁵⁴ **embroidered** is lettering, or a design of some kind, sewn onto material like an apron, shirt, or ball cap

working another wad of chewing gum from side to side. Sal looked back at her, wondering what she had in mind. Flo put her hands on her hips, tilted her head upward to the right, smacked her lips and said, “Honey, you got one heck of a jam up there, an’ it ain’t strawberry!” Flo laughed at her own joke, but Sal just gave her a polite smile. “Why don’t you try slatherin’ some cookin’ oil up’ on there and try to slide ‘er out!”

Sal looked at Flo and politely smiled. “Hmmm... Thanks...,” Sal said. “We got a couple of other ideas we might try first.”

“All right, Darlin’, Flo replied. “Y’all figure it out, then.” She swung her hips again as she turned away. “Good luck, and make sure you stop at my diner next time you’re in town!”

“Thanks, Ma’am. We will,” Sal answered, kind of thankful that she had kept it short. “Cookin’ oil, **geez**¹⁵⁵...,” he whispered to himself as an **involuntary**¹⁵⁶ smile grew on his face.

A few minutes later, a huge tow truck arrived. The driver pulled it carefully past the line of cars. The left side tires rolled **perilously**¹⁵⁷ close to the mountain’s

¹⁵⁵ “**geez**” is an old-fashioned way to say ‘OMG’ (Oh-My-God!); ‘geez’ is slang for *Jesus*

¹⁵⁶ **involuntary** means to do something without meaning to; it just happens, like goose bumps that appear on the skin when someone is scared

¹⁵⁷ **perilously** is a synonym for dangerously; usually about dangers related to falling

edge. Pieces of gravel under the tires kicked outward and tumbled down the mountainside. The tow truck driver stopped his truck near the entrance of the tunnel. To be safe, he had to get out on the passenger side. Slowly he walked toward tunnel and the stuck truck inside. Sal and Vince walked back to meet him. “Thanks for comin’,” Sal and Vince said together.

The man, wearing dark blue overalls, just stood there, gave a little grunt, and nodded. He had a name embroidered on his shirt too, in **cursive**¹⁵⁸, centered in a white oval with blue trim. It read, ‘Willy’.

“Do you think you can help us?” Vince asked.

“Depends on what you mean by ‘help’,” Willy answered in kind of a low, scratchy voice. His head was down, and his long sandy blonde hair hung down over his eyes.

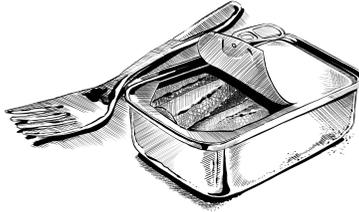
“Can you pull our truck out?” Sal **inquired**¹⁵⁹.

The scruffy tow truck driver walked a few steps along the side of the trailer looking up, and then a few steps back, now noticing the rock fragments in the road. Willy replied, “I could, but I think the top ‘a ‘yer trailer’s

¹⁵⁸ **cursive** means handwriting as it is done in a signature; celebrities write in cursive when they sign their autograph. Here are a few examples: *Sal, Vince, Flo, Willy*

¹⁵⁹ **inquired** means ‘asked’

gonna peel off like the top ‘a sardine can¹⁶⁰ if I do. Is your trailer full or empty?”



“Full,” Sal and Vince answered in **unison**¹⁶¹.

Willy continued, “I can help ya try an’ take the trailer box down off the rig, but you’re gonna have to unload it first. Got another truck comin’?”

“Nope. We was hopin’ you’d have better news for us,” Sal said.

“Sorry, boys. The only way I know is to unload. I’ll hang ‘round awhile in case you change your minds.”

“Thanks,” Sal and Vince said together.

“Man, I’m real sorry for screwin’ up like this, Sal,” Vince said. He had his head down again and had his hands in his pockets. He kicked a piece of fallen concrete to the side of the road and it tumbled out of sight. “How come you ain’t mad?”

¹⁶⁰ **sardine can** is a small, flat can of small fish. The tops of these cans open with a thin sheet of metal pulling or rolling back, as the person pulls on a finger tab, or, long ago, turned a “key” with the thin metal coiling around it (ask your grandparents about them...)

¹⁶¹ **in unison** means that two or more people speak or sing together ‘as one voice’ (uni- means one, like a unicorn or unicycle)

“Stuff like this happens to everybody,” Sal answered. “Like I said, don’t worry ‘bout it. We’ll think of somethin’.”

Chapter 12

Lots of people were walking round and round the truck now, some talking to each other, and some silent. While Sal and Vince were talking, another man approached. The boy watched him as he passed. The man was wearing a wrinkled white button-down shirt, brown pants, and a blue and green striped tie. He wore glasses that kept sliding down his nose that he kept pushing back up toward his forehead. “Uh... I was wondering if you men needed any help.” He paused, waiting for some response. Sal turned his head a bit and nodded. “I was sitting back there in my van thinking about your **predicament**¹⁶². My name’s Lee.”

“Got any ideas?” Sal asked as he again looked up to the top of the truck, scratching his head.

“Well,” said Lee. “You guys got any rope?”

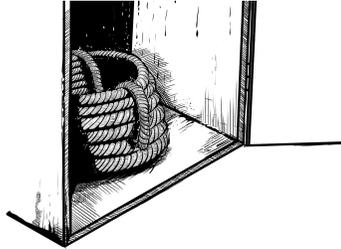
“Sure, lots!” Vince said, excitedly, hoping Lee had the answer to the problem.

“Well,” Lee started again, “If you had enough rope and enough people to help, maybe you could slip lengths of rope through the cracks over the top, hanging loops down on the sides, and people could pull down. Maybe that would lower the truck enough to get it back out.”

¹⁶² **predicament** is a difficult, problematic situation

“I don’t know--” Sal started to say, but Vince got more excited.

“Sal--” Vince interrupted. “It might work. Don’t you think it’s worth a try? I mean, we got a lot of rope!”



“Yeah, okay,” Sal said. Vince smiled, took a little hop and turned toward the truck’s cab. He rummaged around inside for a minute and came back with a long coil of heavy rope. He dropped the coil on the ground, held one end and climbed over the cab to the top. He nearly hit his head on the tunnel’s rocky ceiling in his excitement.

He started feeding the rope through the first gap over the top. The end of the rope came out the other side. Sal walked around the front of the truck to the passenger side to grab it as it came down. He pulled most of the rope through, leaving a single length hanging on the other side. The boy standing at the opening of the tunnel watched with great interest.

Vince asked Willy, the tow truck driver, for a ladder to lean along the side so he could put the rest of the rope through. Back and forth, this went on, leaving U-shaped loops, hanging down, on both sides of the stuck truck

every five feet or so. With Willy, Lee, and several other people helping, they completed the weaving project in only ten minutes. But the line of cars behind the truck, outside the tunnel, kept getting longer. And while they were working on this plan, drivers from cars backed up at the other end of the tunnel were wandering in to see what was going on. When they were done, Sal called out loudly down the highway for more volunteers. More than twenty people came and took hold of a loop after Vince, Willy, and Lee showed them where to stand and how to pull. The boy stepped forward to help too, but Sal politely waved him away, saying that they had enough helpers.

When everyone was in position, Vince jumped up into the cab, revved the engine, and threw it in reverse. Sal called out, “1, 2, 3, pull!” Everyone pulled. The trailer box appeared to drop a bit. Vince pushed the gas pedal down. The truck lurched back, but moved no more than a few inches.

Vince wasn't ready to give up. “One more time!” Vince yelled out. Sal counted and everyone pulled, this time harder than the last. Vince hit the gas harder. Lots of black diesel smoke came out of the exhaust pipe near the ceiling of the tunnel, but the truck didn't move at all this time. The rope pullers in the tunnel let go off the rope

and started coughing, their throats **irritated**¹⁶³ by the **foul air**¹⁶⁴.

Vince got down from the driver's seat and stood next to Sal, wondering what he would say. Sal thanked all the people for trying, shook a few hands, and patted a couple others on the back as they walked back out of the tunnel toward the fresh air.

¹⁶³ **irritated** is a synonym for “bothered”

¹⁶⁴ **foul air** is smoky, smoggy, polluted, bad-smelling air

Chapter 13

Sal went back to the cab and grabbed a bottle of water. He turned away from the truck and walked out into the light, hoping some idea would occur to him. He sat down on a large rock, leaned over with his elbows on his knees and stared at the pavement. It was warming up now, and Sal could feel the sun's heat on the back of his neck. About a half dozen people came up to Sal, one at a time, and offered a suggestion for how to get the truck out. One person mentioned detaching the truck's cab from the trailer and using the tow truck to pull the trailer out. Another thought trying to chisel away the lowest protruding rock surfaces in the truck's path might work, but in each case Sal smiled and offered his thanks for their **well-intentioned**¹⁶⁵, but unworkable ideas. When the last one of the **Good Samaritans**¹⁶⁶ walked away, Sal sat back down on the rock, took a gulp of water, and started to consider the unloading option.

“Mom! Mom! Mom!” Mike had gotten back into the car and tried to wake his mother by shaking her shoulders from the back seat. His mother's eyes squeezed open and

¹⁶⁵ **well-intentioned** means wanting to have good effects, although sometimes there are unexpected results

¹⁶⁶ **Good Samaritans** are people who are helpful to other people when they are in need

shut a few times until the morning light forced them open further. “Tires!”

Michael’s mother pressed her shoulders up against the back of her seat and pushed against the car’s floor in order to sit up. “What...what did you say, Michael?”

“Tires, Mom. Tires. They can get unstuck....”

“Michael, what are you talking about?”

Michael leaned over the top of the front seat and put his face right in front of his mother’s. He held her cheeks in his hands to make eye contact with her. “I got an idea how to get... to get their truck out!” Michael said excitedly.

“Oh,” Michael’s mom said. “Do you want to tell the men your idea?” She opened her car door and started to get out. Michael tugged on her coat to try and pull her back inside the car, but his mom was leaning the other way. “Come on, Michael. I know you can do it.”

Michael **grudgingly**¹⁶⁷ followed his mom out of the car and tugged again on her coat. She turned around, knelt down, smiled, and spoke slowly and softly to her son. “Michael, all these people are waiting, just like us. They might have important places to go and don’t want to be late. Maybe you can help.”

“Um...no....” Michael looked down at the ground. His mother waited patiently. She could see that her son

¹⁶⁷ **grudgingly** means that a person will do something, but, often out of fear, doesn’t really want to

wanted to tell the men something, but Michael didn't think he could. Now down on both knees, she raised Michael's chin just a bit and placed her hands gently on Michael's cheeks.

"Sweetheart, I don't know what your idea is, but I bet it's a good one." She bent down a little more and raised Michael's face so they could see each other, eye to eye. She smiled and patiently asked, "How about if we walk over there together?"

Michael at first shook his head no, but then gave an anxious smile and nodded his head once. "Good," his mother said. Michael and his mom walked hand in hand nearing where Sal was sitting. She gently gave Michael a nudge to step forward.

The boy stood in front of Sal without saying anything. His mother cleared her throat gently causing Sal to look up at the boy. Sal smiled and nodded at Michael. "Hey...hey, Mister..." the boy called in a voice that was barely loud enough to hear. Sal thought he heard something and nodded his head a bit in the boy's direction. Michael's mom took one step back and then another. Michael stepped cautiously closer to Sal.

"Son, I don't think you should be out here," Sal said, without raising his head much. The boy tried to get a quick **glimpse**¹⁶⁸ of Sal's face in the light as he stepped closer. Then he turned his eyes back down toward the

¹⁶⁸ **glimpse** is a quick look

pavement at his feet. Sal's face looked pale. "You might get hurt," Sal said faintly.

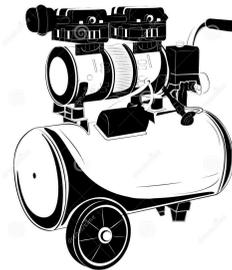
"But I--"

"What?" Sal said, too quickly. He was starting to show signs of frustration. He caught himself and said again, "What?" this time in a softer voice. Now, he thought he recognized the boy.

"I just wondered if--," Michael struggled to say, "...if that tow truck driver..."

Sal was listening to the boy, but the boy couldn't seem to finish his thought. Michael tried again, stammering a bit, and in a shy voice, "...if that tow truck driver had one of those air hoses on his... his truck?"

"Uh? Oh, an **air compressor**¹⁶⁹? Sure. All tow truck drivers do," Sal said to the boy. Michael smiled a bit. Sal continued, noticing the boy's interest. "You know, they gotta fix a lot of flat tires... just about every day, I imagine. Why?"



¹⁶⁹ **air compressor** is a powered air pump that can pump up car tires and other large inflatable objects, like rafts and air mattresses. They are usually available to drivers at gas stations, and are carried on tow trucks to help motorists.

The boy sheepishly stepped closer to Sal. “What if you--”

“Uh?” Sal didn’t look up, but he didn’t tell the boy to go back to stand with his mother either.

“What if you, you...,” the boy stuttered a little, “...if, if you let some air out of the tires? I mean, not all the air, just some. Could the truck still go?”

“Yeah, I suppose,” Sal answered.

The boy went on, again in his quiet voice, his **stutter**¹⁷⁰ falling away, “If you let some of the air out of each tire, wouldn’t the top of the truck be lower?”

“Hmm, well, yeah--” Sal stopped. “Sure!” he blurted out. Slowly his eyes got bigger and rounder. Blood was flowing back to Sal’s cheeks. His mouth turned up at the corners. He grabbed his water bottle and took a big gulp. Some water leaked out of the sides of his mouth and ran down onto his shirt. “What’s your name, son?”

“M-Mike, I mean, Michael,” the boy said softly, not really looking up.

Sal took a breath and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. “So you’re saying, if we let some of the air out of each tire, without lettin’ each tire go completely flat, the

¹⁷⁰ **stutter** means to speak in such a way that the rhythm of speech is interrupted by repetitions, blocks or spasms

truck might be low enough to get out? Is that the idea, Mike?”

Michael smiled. “Uh-huh. I think it...it...it would work. You only gotta get the truck down about an inch...or two inches, right?”

“Seems like it,” Sal answered. “Where did you get this idea, anyway?”

Michael was silent for a moment, but Sal could tell he was thinking of what he would say. Sal waited for the boy to answer. “Sometimes I gotta ride my bike with soft tires ‘cause...‘cause they leak a little,” Michael told Sal. “If I don’t ride my bike for a week or more, the tires get low. I...I don’t have a pump at my...my house. I gotta ride my bike over to the gas station to fill...fill ‘em back up. It’s hard to ride that way, but it’s still better than walking. Once you get the truck out, maybe the tow...tow truck driver could fill your tires back up.”

Sal was listening **intently**¹⁷¹ to the boy’s words. “Hey, Vince, come here!” he called to his friend. “This young fellow, Mike, gave us an idea that might work!”

Vince was standing by the tow truck, talking to Willy. They both came over, and so did a couple of other people who were nearby. “Hey, ain’t you the kid we saw in the diner a ways back?” Vince **blurted**¹⁷² out.

¹⁷¹ **intently** means listening carefully

¹⁷² **blurted** means to say something suddenly and without careful consideration

Sal gave Vince a quick elbow to stop him from **inhibiting**¹⁷³ the boy. Sal asked Michael to tell Vince his idea. Michael kept his head down and kind of looked at Sal out of the corner of his eyes while he explained his idea again, this time for Vince to hear. Vince and Willy had to lean closer to the boy to hear him. Michael's voice was still very soft. Vince smiled just as big as Sal had when he first heard the boy's suggestion. When Michael was done describing the plan, Willy whispered, "Yeah, that might work...." The circle of people grew larger around the boy and heads were nodding all around.

Sal confirmed with Willy that the air compressor on his tow truck was working well, and that he'd be able to re-inflate all the tires if they got the truck out of the tunnel. "I just bought a new tire pressure gauge, too. Works great!" Willy said **reassuringly**¹⁷⁴.

The buzz of voices grew louder and fingers were being pointed up and down in the direction of the truck. Sal heard the voices of people offering to help. Sal told those that were going to help that they would need to remove the valve cap on each tire, hold the center pin down, and **bleed the air out**¹⁷⁵, and that they would need

¹⁷³ **inhibiting** means to psychologically make an effort to stop someone from doing something

¹⁷⁴ **reassuringly** means to say something to someone to inspire their confidence

¹⁷⁵ **bleed the air out** means to let the air out of a tire slowly by pressing the pin in the center of the valve stem

to do it **simultaneously**¹⁷⁶. He asked Michael where his mom was. He turned to look for her. She was now standing quite a way back with a big smile on her face. Michael pointed in her direction. A single tear was slowly rolling down her cheek. Sal asked Michael to wait at the entrance to the tunnel to watch.

Sal called the volunteers to gather around the front left tire of the truck. He noticed that Dean, the bread truck driver was one of them. Sal demonstrated for the group how to bleed the air out of a tire. When he had released enough air, the tire slumped and the left side of the truck's cab **listed**¹⁷⁷ noticeably. Sal reminded the folks offering to help that the tires on an eighteen wheeler were all **paired up**¹⁷⁸, except for the two at the front of the cab. He brought the group over to the other side of the cab to let the volunteers each bleed a little bit of the air out of the tire there. Then the huddle of helpers broke apart **like a football team ready to start a play**¹⁷⁹. Everyone in the group spread out and stood near a wheel on either side of the truck.

Sal and Vince thought it would be too dangerous for the well-meaning folks to bleed the air out of the

¹⁷⁶ **simultaneously** means at the same time, 'together'

¹⁷⁷ **listed**, in this context, means to tilt, or lean to one side, making one side of a ship or motor vehicle lower than the other

¹⁷⁸ **paired up** means in sets of two, close together

¹⁷⁹ '**like a football team ready to start a play**' (is a simile, using the word 'like' or 'as'), in this case, to compare members of a football team standing together in a huddle, to plan their strategy, before approaching the ball to begin a play

inside tires, so they did that themselves. The two men crawled on their knees on the asphalt road bleeding the air from the inside tires. They did this, one at a time, from each side, from front to back. But when they were done, the truck's height hadn't dropped much. Sal hadn't expected it to. The outside tires on each axle were still fully inflated, supporting the truck.

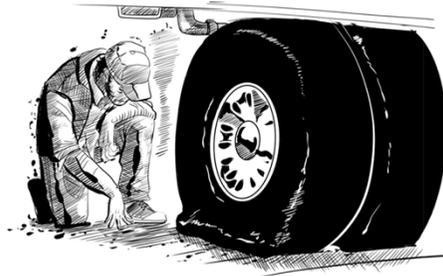
Now they were ready to try the outside tires. They had volunteers stationed at every wheel, kneeling down, at the ready. Michael watched the action from the shadow cast at the tunnel's entrance. Sal started his count, "1, 2--".

Vince interrupted Sal's count and called out, "Remember, don't let all the air out!"

"That's right," Sal echoed Vince's reminder. "We'll tell you when to stop." Sal started again, "1, 2, 3!" The sound of air **hissing**¹⁸⁰ from the tires filled the tunnel. The next sound heard was the faint sound of glass juice bottles jiggling inside their cardboard boxes. Squeaks, groans, and creaks came from the truck's suspension springs. The truck started to slump. First an inch, then two, then more. Sal took a few steps back from the tire he was working on. He could see light between the tunnel's ceiling and the top of the truck. Sal scanned the tires

¹⁸⁰ **hissing** is the sound tires and balloons make when air is escaping; people can make this sound by pressing their tongue to the top of their mouth and gently blowing air out

from front to back as they sagged. “Hold it, everyone!” Sal yelled. “That’s good!”



Sal double-checked each tire to make sure they were all deflated about the same amount. Vince ran around to the side where Sal was inspecting the tires. Sal pointed out two that he thought were still standing a little too tall. They each let a few more pounds of pressure out of those tires to ensure that the truck was level.

Satisfied now with the tires’ appearance, Sal retrieved the tow truck’s ladder and set it up next to the truck. He climbed up to check the top of the truck while Willy held it for him. Sal noticed a small rip in the metal and a few scratches along the top and a small dent here and there, but no major damage. Vince called up to Sal, “How’s it look up there?”

“It’s all good,” Sal called back down and gave Vince a thumbs up. “*Nothing Gabe can’t fix...*,” Sal said to himself. But most importantly to Sal, he was happy to see a gap of about six inches between the truck and the top of the tunnel. He grabbed a section of rope that still

draped¹⁸¹ down from the top. He gave it a good yank, and the whole length of rope came cascading down. Vince hurriedly gathered all the rope and coiled it up. Then he called up to Sal, “Sal, do you think we can back the truck out now?”

“Back?” Sal laughed as he climbed back down. “I’m pretty sure we can get it all the way through. There must be close to six inches of clearance up there now.”

“I think so, too,” said Willy, as he held the ladder and waited for Sal to climb back down. “I was watching as you all bled the tires. It’s a lot lower.” Willy continued, “I’ll follow you in my truck, and when you come out the other end, I pump ‘em all back up!”

“What a difference...” Sal muttered to himself. He turned toward the entrance of the tunnel to see if he could see Michael, but the crowd of onlookers blocked his view. Sal turned back around and looked up toward the cab of the truck and yelled enthusiastically, “Let’s go!” Vince hopped back up into the cab and **turned the engine over**¹⁸². He was so **fired up**¹⁸³, he gave it some extra gas. He **rapped**¹⁸⁴ on the outside of the door with his left hand. He grasped the shift knob with his right and shoved the long lever into first gear.

¹⁸¹ **draped** means hung down; long window curtains that nearly touch the floor are called ‘drapes’

¹⁸² **turned the engine over** means started the motor

¹⁸³ **fired up** means excited

¹⁸⁴ **rapped** means hit a few times with an open hand, in order to make a sound or get attention

“Take it easy, Vince... Remember, the tires are real low now,” Sal reminded him. “I’ll walk on ahead. If I see a problem, I’ll give you the signal to stop.”

The truck started forward. Sal walked along the road, right next to the cab on the driver’s side. It took more gas to get the truck moving with the sagging tires, but Vince had no problem with that. He was ready to push the gas pedal through the floor if he had to. As the truck started to roll, it wobbled a bit from side to side, but not a single scratching sound was heard up above. Sal could hear the sound of loose rubber from the slumping tires rubbing against one another. He had to caution Vince once again not to go too fast. Within two minutes though, even at their careful pace, the truck exited the tunnel into the bright sunshine. A loud cheer came from the people in the tunnel, and from the drivers on either side of the entrance who were waiting now, as far as a half mile back.

Chapter 14

Vince pulled the truck to the side, off the road, to let the waiting cars roll on by. Willy drove his tow truck through, and positioned it right up behind Sal's truck. He ran around to the back of his truck, grabbed the long **retractable**¹⁸⁵ hose and started refilling the tires on Sal's truck. The air compressor was powerful enough to refill the air in each tire in about thirty seconds. He refilled the inside ones from each pair first, assuring that the pressure was right around **100 psi**¹⁸⁶.

The sun was rising in the sky, and the day warmed. Drivers waved as they went by, gave a thumbs-up sign, or tooted their horns. Sal and Vince smiled and waved back. About half an hour later, the traffic had eased up and the cars and trucks were moving past at nearly the speed limit. Willy filled the last tire and the truck was standing tall again.

The two truckers thanked Willy for his help. The three men shook hands and Sal paid Willy with ten twenty dollar bills. Willy made a U-turn and headed back

¹⁸⁵ **retractable** means that something that can be unrolled, like an air hose or electrical cord, can roll back up automatically

¹⁸⁶ **100 psi** refers to the recommended air pressure for a semi-truck tire of **100 pounds per square inch**. Most passenger car tires have pressures of around 35-40 psi.

to his service station. “Sure was a nice fellow,” Vince said.

“Sure was,” Sal replied. He scratched his head and looked around.

Vince noticed Sal’s eyes scanning the roadway. “What’cha lookin’ for, Sal?”

“That kid,” Sal answered. “That kid who thought of the tire trick. I wanted to thank him.”

“Oh, yeah, right. Hey, maybe his mom was in a hurry. You know those people were waiting a long time back there.”

“Yeah, probably,” Sal replied. “All the same, he really helped us out.”

Just then, one of the last cars going by pulled to the side of the road ahead of the truck. It was the station wagon driven by Michael’s mom. The passenger side door opened. “I’ll...I’ll be back in a second, Mom,” Michael said as he hopped out and shut the door. Michael’s mom smiled and nodded.

Sal and Vince were just climbing back up into the truck. When they saw the boy coming, they got back down and met the boy at the roadside. Vince tried to **tousle**¹⁸⁷ the boy’s hair, but Michael ducked away. Vince slowly reached over and instead patted his back and Michael let him. Sal crouched down and put his hand out

¹⁸⁷ **tousle** is when a grown-up puts their hand on a child’s head (usually a boy’s) and messes up his hair

to shake Michael's hand. "Thanks again, kid. I mean, Mike." Sal paused and saw a big grin grow on Michael's face. "For a while, I thought we were gonna be stuck in that tunnel all day!" Michael seemed not to hear Sal's words. He was staring at the truck's tires. Then he looked up. "Mike?" Sal said again, trying to get the boy's attention. Sal noticed where Michael's gaze was focused. He was looking up at the cab. Sal waited and the boy slowly turned his head and looked at Sal.

"Do you want to climb up there and take a look inside?" Sal asked. Sal and Vince looked toward the boy's mom to see if it was okay with her. She nodded her head and said that he could, but just for a minute because they needed to get to an appointment in the city. Vince hopped up into the cab first, removed the keys from the ignition, and made sure the emergency brake was **secured**¹⁸⁸. He got down and held the driver's side door open for Michael. Michael's eyes opened wide as he climbed up into the driver's seat with Vince's help. His eyes eagerly **panned around**¹⁸⁹ inside the truck's cab. He looked at all the **gauges**¹⁹⁰ on the dashboard and even at the sleeper compartment. He stood up on the seat to get a closer look.

¹⁸⁸ **secured** means safely in place

¹⁸⁹ **panned around** means looked around

¹⁹⁰ **gauges** means controls like the speedometer, fuel level, oil level, temperature of the engine, etc... on the dashboard of a vehicle

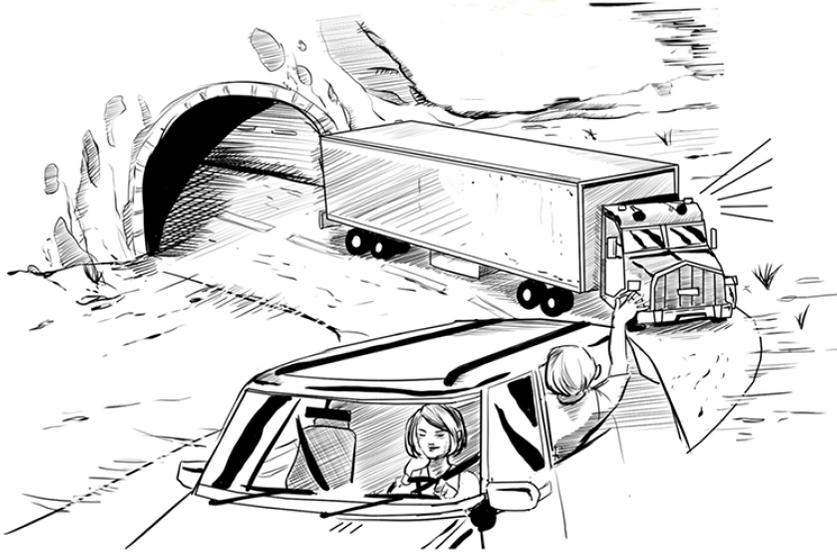
Michael knelt back down and his wide-eyed gaze stopped on a cord hanging by the driver's side window. He looked down at Sal standing by the open door. Sal nodded 'yes'. Michael reached up gave the cord a gentle tug. A faint puff of air came from the horn's chrome **bell**¹⁹¹ above, but no real sound. Michael looked down at Sal with a look of **embarrassment**¹⁹². Vince hopped up in the cab from the passenger side and drew Michael's attention. Michael looked to his right and watched as Vince raised his arm, formed a fist, and made a strong downward pulling motion with his arm. "Go ahead!" Vince encouraged Michael. "You gotta pull hard if you want to really hear it!"

Michael grasped the cord again and pulled down as hard as he could. A huge, joyous blast of air came from the top of the truck, echoing from the mountain walls down to the valley below, and sounded again and again. Michael laughed heartily, and grinned from ear to ear. The two men cheered, and Michael hopped down and headed back to his mom's car. Sal and Vince called out another thank you to Michael as he hopped in the back seat of his mom's car. Vince held the truck's keys out to Sal, but Sal waved them off and climbed in on the passenger side. Vince smiled and took his place as the driver. They closed their doors and Vince started the engine.

¹⁹¹ **bell** (of a horn) is the part that widens out into a circle where the sound comes out

¹⁹² **embarrassment** means a feeling of shame

Michael's mom **pulled the car away**¹⁹³, following the line of cars heading back to the main highway. Michael leaned out the window and made an up and down pulling motion with his arm. Vince noticed the gesture he had taught the boy and was happy to **oblige**¹⁹⁴. He **yanked**¹⁹⁵ on the truck horn's cord up above, over and over, until Michael's car was out of sight.



“You know,” Vince said to Sal once the honking had stopped, “I remember the **punchline**¹⁹⁶ of that math class, fortune cookie joke you told me yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Sal said. “Really?”

¹⁹³ **pulled away means** ‘drove off, back onto the road’

¹⁹⁴ **oblige** means to agree to do something because you are expected to

¹⁹⁵ **yanked** means pulled hard

¹⁹⁶ **punchline** means the final phrase or sentence of a joke or story that makes it funny

“Yep,” Vince continued, as he put the truck in gear and pulled back onto the road. “You never know where you’re going to find an answer!”

Sal smiled and nodded his head in agreement, “You can say that again.”

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