

The Flat

By Stephen Ribuffo

The heat from the sun hammered mercilessly against the back of his neck and shoulders. There was a faint breeze, but it did very little in the way of relief; it ultimately made him more uncomfortable as it pushed the heat rising from the sun baked road against his already fatigued body. Sweat stung the open abrasions of his knuckles from his labor and grains of sand sent piercing pain as he moved. Perhaps what made it worse was how changing the flat tire was taking longer than it should have. Lack of use and preventive maintenance over the years had caused the threading on the jack to stick; then there was the rust.

“I told you this would happen,” the old Chevy said.

“What,” Jack said, wiping sweat from his brow with his equally sweaty forearm. “I told you!”

“Prove it,” Chevy said with a smug tone.

“Uh, okay, does this sound familiar?” Jack forced himself off his knees and began pacing out of frustration. “Chevy, I think you’re alignments off; we should have that checked. ‘No, Jack everything’s fine. Don’t worry about it,’” Jack said in a mocking voice, “Are you, sure? ‘Oh, totally! I’m the smartest, most bestest and greatest—”

“Okay! I get it!” Chevy conceded, “I might have said *something* to that effect.” Jack sighed and leaned against the scorching hood of the old Chevrolet sedan. In spite of the thin layer of dust-like sand covering Chevy, its white paint still glared

blindingly from the sun. Jack considered retrieving his sunglasses from the dashboard, but that required an effort he was severely lacking.

“You can’t get tired.” Chevy told him, “You still have something to finish.” Jack ignored him. He scanned the two-lane divided road; there was nothing in either direction for at least twenty miles. That was good. Save a couple of tumbleweeds and a lizard scurrying quickly across the hot highway, they were alone. The last vehicle he had seen was around thirty minutes ago and headed in the opposite direction. The sun was at its peak in the open, blue sky. Jack became slightly anxious about the time of day and the chances of someone driving by them.

“Will you calm down?” It wasn’t really a question.

“I *am* calm.”

Almost mocking his current situation, Neil Diamond’s *Sweet Caroline* began playing from inside his pocket.

“You gonna answer that?” Chevy prompted.

“Not really, no.”

“It could be important, you know.”

Jack rubbed at his eyes. “I don’t really want to hear Caroline asking me a million questions right now, Chevy.” He told the car.

“But, Jack! What if she’s in trouble?” Chevy exclaimed, “I mean, what if some serial killer has been stalking her? Then hit her over the head, shoved her in the trunk of his car, and is driving out into the desert to bury her body!”

The two were quiet for a moment as they mulled over the point then suddenly burst into helpless laughter.

“Thanks, Chevy I needed—”

There was a very sudden and deliberate thumping noise coming from the back of Chevy. Between each thump, there was a muffled yell.

“Looks like our friend is awake,” Jack said rubbing his eyes at a sudden ache.

“You should’ve hit him harder.” Chevy pointed out as Jack made his way around to the trunk.

“And *you* should’ve listened about your alignment.”

“Touché...”

Jack popped the trunk open and inside, bound and gagged, was a slightly perturbed looking gentleman with a gash in his head, and blood stained clothes. The menacing look in his eyes said it all and Jack was confident that if the guy had happened to free himself he would have torn Jack limb from limb. Fortunately, duct tape was a remarkable material.

“May I help you, Jared?” Jack asked.

Jack knew Jared—well, not really—he knew *of* Jared; if anything Jared had probably known more about Jack, but that was neither here, nor there. Jared was fuming and thrashing about in the cramped trunk space in a fruitless effort of resistance.

“I’m afraid I can’t understand you when you mumble Jared,” Jack said with a smirk. “Although, I’m quite surprised your legs haven’t fallen asleep.”

“Jack?” Chevy whispered.

“What is it?”

“You need to come here.”

Jack sighed. “Just tell me what it is, Chevy.”

Jared furrowed his brow in confusion and his eyes darted around curiously.

“Jack!” The anxiety was present in Chevy's voice.

Jack peered from behind the open trunk and did his very best to remain calm. On the opposite shoulder of the road was a car, and some guy was quickly closing the space between himself and Jack. Quickly, Jack grasped the tire iron that he had used to club Jared over the head.

“Hey there, pal.” The man called, “Do you need some help?”

Luckily, the unfortunate stranger was approaching the vehicle from an angle where he could only see Jack's face and was far enough away that Jared's muffled cries wouldn't be all that noticeable; Jack hoped.

He swore; was this seriously happening? Whenever you needed help on the side of the road nobody stops, but the moment you're *actually* content...

Jack eyed Jared intently. “You have two choices,” he said with a chill in his voice that made Jared's hair stand on end, “You can cry out and then there'll be two bodies in my trunk. Or, you can be a hero and save this man and his baby's life.”

The sudden loss of all hope faded from Jared's eyes, and he slumped limply back into the trunk without a word or sound. Jack hadn't the foggiest idea if the man had a baby. Judging from how the Good Samaritan looked Jack wasn't sure if he even had a wife or girlfriend for that matter, a boyfriend maybe... Regardless, people tend to go all limp and docile when babies were threatened, he noticed.

“No thanks, neighbor,” Jack said slamming the trunk closed, “just looking for my tire iron.” He held the rusted, metal rod up triumphantly.

It was perhaps another twenty minutes later before the man left. He insisted on helping Jack with the spare tire. It was a bit awkward to get the spare out of the trunk with Jared there, but Jack kept the man busy by having him remove the bolts from the flat. After that, they chatted for a bit before the happy helper continued on his way; there was no baby in his car, Jack noticed.

“Jeez, I thought that guy would never leave!”

“No kidding.” Jack agreed, “at least the spare’s on.”

Chevy pleaded, “Are we done? All this sand is caking onto my gears.”

“Almost. I need to call Caroline,” he said, “you know how she gets.”

“Are you going to say anything about Jared?”

“Uh, are you crazy?” Jack asked incredulously.

“You’re the psychopath who thinks cars can talk.”

“Touché.”

Jack pulled the phone from his pocket and went back to Chevy’s trunk. He opened the trunk just as the phone was dialing. With the tire iron in his other hand, he pressed a single finger to his lips; Jared nodded apprehensively.

“Hey babe...yes, I know I’m late...uh-huh...tell your mother to calm down...yes, I’ll be at the rehearsal soon...no, I don’t want to keep my bride waiting...Okay...Yes...I just have to drop something off...I love you, too.”

Jack placed the phone back in his pocket and tapped the tire iron gently in the palm of his other hand.

“You know the best gift a husband could give his new wife-to-be, Jared?” Jack asked his whole manner stoic. “Bury all her worthless ex-boyfriends.”