

Keep The Engine Running

By Rimbo

"So, what's in the sack?"

I'm almost as tired of people asking me that as I am of Frank having to piss every fifty miles. And thinking of that angers me more, as I realize I wouldn't have to answer it so many times if he'd laid off the coffee this morning back at the Waffle House in Amarillo. When you add to it the stench of his gas which made the stockyards on Amarillo's West side seem comparatively odiferous...

"Get outta here."

"I was just curi--"

"Scram."

Frank comes out of the McDonald's with a bag. No wonder it took him so long. He hops in and before his butt has a chance to hit cloth I'm in reverse.

"You do realize we're on a schedule here, Frank?" I take my eyes off the road long enough to give him a glare.

"Man, you gotta see this, though! I haven't ever --"

"Green chile Quarter Pounders."

He stops with his mouth agape as I move our F-150 onto the ramp and back onto I-40.

"Yeah, Frank. I've seen 'em before. But you coulda waited until Santa Fe. The Pink Adobe has 'em on an English Muffin bun with high-quality ground beef, a kind of mustard relish and onions -- and sprouts."

"Sprouts, Dan?"

"Sprouts."

"That sounds weird."

"They're really damned good. But don't worry about it; at the rate we're going, it'll be eight fucking PM before we hit Santa Fe."

"We gained an hour, though."

I glare back at him: *I know, that was my point.* He doesn't get it. He pulls out one of the Quarter Pounders with green chile on it

and looks kinda sadly at it. "Man, fuck you," he says. "I don't care, this thing smells great."

"Tucumcari McDonald's always is. Better than your average McDonald's."

I peer in the rear-view mirror; the sack hasn't moved. It's tied down well enough, but you never can be too careful.

Thirty minutes later we hit the outskirts of Santa Rosa. I glare at Frank. He looks at me and swallows. He doesn't need to say it; I'm already signaling. "You should have a doctor look at that, Frank. That's more than just coffee there. Might be a swollen prostate."

Santa Rosa has a nice long drag off the interstate where you can drive past all the local businesses. Tucumcari's presence is just a one-exit truck stop; Santa Rosa gives you a nice long drag. Of course I just go to the McDonald's again; since he already ate two Quarter Pounders, maybe this time he'll be fine without 'em. I put the car into park and roll down the window while he clambers out.

It had just rained here a few minutes ago. The desert air dried it up real fast, but you can still smell it, and you see some shafts of light streaking in between the clouds, like the glory of -

"Pardon me, sir?"

I raise my eyebrows at the young Dad. The mother's trying to herd two young girls, tired from being cooped up too long, into a ten-year-old minivan. Chrysler. With faux wood paneling.

"Do you know how to get back to the interstate from here?"

"Which way you goin'?"

"Oklahoma City."

"Just turn right out of here and follow it until you hit the interstate. Easy enough."

He looks at the road uncertainly, but nods. He'll figure it out. "Thanks. By the way, where are you takin' that sack?"

I get to practice my glare again.

"Hey, just askin'! Just tryin' to be nice here..." Dad goes back and helps herd the kids in just as Frank returns.

We return to the interstate and the kid gets talkative. He wants to be reminded again why we're going to Los Alamos, and not to

Area 51. I'm not even sure why I keep responding to him. It's not getting through, but each time I tell him anyway, knowing the chances it'll stick haven't improved. He's got his mind stuck on those dumb conspiracy theories and not on reality. I've tried to tell him before that Area 51 is nothing more than an experimental airbase, but he thinks there's aliens up there and that our cargo will somehow be more meaningful there. Kids never pay attention in History classes any more.

We get to Clines Corners, and this time it looks like he can make it. I hit the gas and get started going up 285 without incident. I'm about to cheer for a change of pace when I see red and blue lights flashing in the window.

Frank just about panics.

"Oh shit, Dan, what'll we do? What're we gonna do? Oh my God. What will he do to us?" I let him blubber on like that for a good minute to see if he'll run out of steam; when his pitch and volume only increase, I shush him.

"Quiet. Shut up!" He obliges. Maybe the kid can be trained after all. "We pull over, that's what. And we find out why we're being pulled over."

"But what if he —"

"He won't. Just pay attention and learn."

We pull over and I put on the blinkers. I wait for the cop to come up.

It turns out it wasn't anything worse than expired tags. I sign the ticket, agree to get my tags taken care of and admit I'm impressed that he recognizes Louisiana tags. It's always good to compliment the officers, they have rough jobs and they appreciate it. And we're about to leave when the officer asks, "So what's in the sack?"

Frank loses control of his bowels. I flinch, but I ignore the sound and smell.

"Weather testing equipment," I lie. "Seen that movie *Twister*? Like that. Weatherman there might be tornadoes up around Lamy sometime this week, we wanna catch one."

"Neat stuff. All right, you can go."

"Thanks, officer. Take care out there; there's some crazies on the road." As much as I'd like to get going with the stench

starting to fill the car, I'm not gonna rush or do anything that might be suspicious.

"You said it. My cousin is Texas DPS; he was shot a few years back by some maniac he pulled over."

"Really? That's terrible."

"He got through it, though. And they caught the guy, too. Hey, is your buddy there OK?"

I give the patrolman a wink and a grin. "Green chile Quarter Pounders." I make a dramatic sniff and wrinkle my nose. "Phew... Sounds like that one might have been a wet one."

"Oh maaaaaan, say no more. You ought to wait until you get to Lamy for that kinda food. There's this restaurant..."

"I know. Right by the tracks. Been there many times myself."

The officer nods, and we head off.

Frank is blubbering all kinds of apologies now. He was nervous; he was scared. I just ignore him. I don't want to hear it.

We get about one mile away, then I pull over again. "All right, Frank, clean yourself up. There's a towel in the back; don't bother keeping it, just toss it when you're done." I wait while he hops out, miserable, and tries to clean it up.

I'm beginning to feel this entire trip has been cursed. The thought reflexively leads me to peek in the rear view mirror. Did it move? Did it shift? Maybe it only moved when we pulled over.

I get out of the truck and leave the door open. The engine's turning over in idle, and it's a nice sound to hear. I watch as a few cars pass by us, mostly Japanese imports. I pat the F-150 on the side. Good to know we can still make a damned fine truck.

After a few minutes, Frank comes back. He's wearing a pair of PJ's he'd packed for his shorts. He looks ridiculous. I tell him as much. I tell him his worrying is ridiculous. He blubbers more. God, the kid has no fortitude. Why did I hire this snot-nosed, whiny kid? Why did I bring him along, I wonder for the forty-first time?

As we hit the road, I try to talk sense into him. Another futile gesture, but I do it anyway. I tell him that even if someone were to go peeking in that sack, they wouldn't know what it was. And if we told 'em, they probably wouldn't believe us anyway.

We get past Lamy, and as we hit the mountains, I give our package another check.

It is not in the same position any more.

The roads are getting a bit more curvaceous around here, so I wonder – I hope – that maybe it merely shifted.

I keep giving it checks, hoping that maybe through sheer willpower I could force it back into its original spot. Or spot a tie that maybe came loose.

"DAN! LOOK OUT!" Frank screams. I get attention just in time to avoid careening into oncoming traffic. The Suburban going the other way gives a rude honk. But I lose control of the rear wheels, and we fly off the road, down the embankment on the other side and crash into a boulder.

"Shit, Frank, get out!" I struggle to unbuckle my seatbelt, and turn to see Frank. He's white as a ghost. "Get moving, Frank!" I shout.

His hands are shaking violently as he points surreptitiously over his left shoulder.

It definitely moved. It's moving some more. And it's not just shifting because of the crash. It's getting out of the bag.

I freeze with fear as the nightmare creature rises from the bed of the truck, and it cries into the air with a shriek that sounds like shards of glass cutting your soul. The silhouette that had haunted my nightmares every night, and led Frank and I to sleep with the lights on ever since that fateful day we'd shot it on the farm, rose up into the air.

*But that's impossible,* I think to myself. *We killed you.* "We fucking KILLED you!" I scream.

The beast lumbers off of the pickup's bed and gallops off into the evening gloom with such speed that we lose it in seconds. And suddenly it feels very cold, and I shudder.

It is several minutes before one of us can speak. It's Frank. "Well, Dan. What are we gonna do?"

I look up the embankment at the curve. "We get a lift and hitch a ride back somewhere. From there, we take the bus back home."

"What about... What about that Thing?"

"I'll call the folks at the National Labs as soon as I get a telephone. It's their problem now."

"But they didn't believe us before! Why would they believe us now?"

"Oh, they won't need to believe us." I shudder as I think of the next people to come across it. "They'll hear about it, soon enough."

We pile out of the truck, and limp our way back up to the highway, the sound of the truck's engine still turning over in our ears.