

X MARKS THE SPOT

Trouble-at-the-Wheel – Episode 33

Location: The Northern Hinterlands

Date: June 2007

Even though we're up near the Oregon border it's hotter than the hubs of hell. Following the conclusion of a five-day river trip through the middle of Bigfoot country, my pal Billy Clewlow is wisely cooling his hominid heels in the shadow of a towering Douglas fir.

Meanwhile, I'm standing in the middle of a sweat stain on the sun-baked shoulder of California State Highway 96. Cowboy hat screwed down tightly, my sunburned thumb's pointed due east. The brains behind occasional non-profit whitewater adventures, it was my bright idea to once again tempt fate and try hitchhiking fifty miles back to Happy Camp where our vehicles are parked. It's been over an hour now and no brake-lights have flickered. Not an eyeball has strayed from the double-yellow line in our direction.

With plenty of time to kill I've taken this opportunity to regale my sidekick with the details of a near-fatal hitchhiking experience that occurred back in the summer of 98 that involved a pair of ex-convict Cowboys driving a beat-up Chevy truck equipped with stolen license plates and expired tags. Unfortunately, I didn't become aware they were also "under the influence" until after they picked me up on the northbound side of Highway 395 just past Tom's Place. A few minutes after telling Billy this story the sound of squealing tires attracts my attention. On full alert, I take a couple steps backward from the pavement as a dark green, late-model Ford Explorer suddenly crests a nearby hill in the semi-airborne style made famous by the Dukes of Hazard.

Well acquainted with the Baptist Biblical Warning... "Speak of the Devil and he shall appear", this time it turns out to be a woman. Unable to stick my thumb in my trousers before she spots me, I can only watch in amazement as the car comes to a full and complete stop at the end of a long black smoking skid-marks. An enormous tattooed arm connected to the guy riding shotgun motions for me to hop in. Already sprinting toward the car, I hear a familiar voice behind me shouting, "DON'T DO IT SMITH! THEY'RE DRUNK!" Things start happening fast and furious after Billy reluctantly climbs into the backseat with me. Without checking the rear-view mirror, the driver peels out and quickly accelerates from 0-85 mph. With all four tires loudly threatening to break traction in the first turn we come to I try to remain calm as Billy frantically searches for his seat-belt.

I'd be lying if I said I wasn't scared. Struggling against powerful G-Forces that have me pinned against the door, I catch a close-up glimpse of four small white crosses clustered together at the edge of the pavement. Absent a sturdy guardrail, these monuments to a previous automotive disaster are the only thing separating us from the Klamath River five hundred feet down below. Zooming down a short straightaway at full throttle, suddenly something very strange happens. A voice deep inside my pea-brain says something to the effect... "It's okay Smith. You're old enough to die. At this speed it's bound to be over quick." It's worth noting here that Billy's still speechless at this point so this advice is not coming from him.

Although neither the driver nor her boyfriend is wearing war paint, they're both Native Americans from the Hoopa Tribe. The woman's name is Brenda. Trouble at the wheel and prone to steering with only one hand and drinking beer with the other; in between sips she throws lip-locks on Tony who resembles a giant semi-hairless Sasquatch. It's hard to imagine Brenda has a valid driver's license. Apparently, nobody, including Tony, dares mess with the volume control of the stereo that is currently playing her favorite ear-shattering AC/DC album. Brenda yells, "HEY! YOU GUYS DON'T MIND IF WE DRINK DO YOU?" Quick to reply, I casually yell back, "It's your car and just leave it at that. Meanwhile, I can't help noticing Billy's face has taken on a ghostly pallor. Brenda must've seen the same thing because the next words out of her loud mouth are, "IF I'M DRIVING TOO FAST TELL ME AND I'LL SLOW DOWN'. Of course, it wouldn't have been the manly thing to say. Instead, I just stare at her rose-colored sunglasses in the rearview mirror and don't even bat an eye. Not surprisingly, this is the green light for Brenda to go even faster.

Smack-dab in the middle of some sort of insane test of bravery, I mentally prepare myself for annihilation inside a twisted ball of steel. About this same time Billy suddenly snaps out of it and becomes very chatty. I can only imagine the he feels it might be a good idea to get acquainted in the event we all arrive in Hell together. Traveling well beyond the posted speed limit, soon, Brenda's and Tony's troubled life stories begin to unfold. We learn she's the only woman in an otherwise all-man Hotshot Fire Crew. Tony is a kick-ass hoodlum from the mean streets of Arcata California. They're headed to Yreka. Tony "The Bone Crusher" is featured on the second card of a no-holds-barred cage fight. Resisting the temptation to point out that playing with fire and cracking skulls are likely to be dead-end careers, the car suddenly comes to a violent stop.

At first, I think Billy's prayers must've been answered and he won't have to pay the full cost for his sins today. But no... Before he has a chance to leap from the car Brenda peels out again searching for a better place to squat and pee. I feel badly for Billy. However,

there's little time for reflection. Once again filled with an impending sense of doom, Brenda's wrath has become focused upon a pair of motorcyclists on Harleys that dared to pass her on a blind curve. Giving them the middle finger at speeds approaching 90 mph, the chase is on! Juiced up on firewater, Brenda's got blood in her eye and a score to settle. A true road warrior, she races right up to within a foot or two of their rear tires and makes several attempts to pass. Once, she almost pulls ahead of the lead biker, but has to brake hard when it becomes obvious that we're all headed for the same crash scene.

Hanging on for dear life, our only hope for salvation appears to be in the hands of God or the California Highway Patrol. Personally, I'd be overjoyed to hear some loud sirens and see some bright red flashing lights. Up ahead, I settle for an honest-to-goodness miracle in the form of a metaphorical sign from God. A large billboard informs motorists: **HAPPY CAMP 2 MILES - SPEED LIMIT 35 MPH**. Apparently, Tony knows the local sheriff who is a mean-spirited, racist, Indian-hater. Of course, this sounds entirely reasonable to me. Visibly fearful of being pulled over, handcuffed and repeatedly Tasered for the fun of it, Tony begs, then insists that Brenda SLOW THE F... DOWN!

Thrilled to arrive in Happy Camp in one piece with a pulse and within walking distance of our parked cars, I slip Tony a twenty-dollar bill. Watching them speed off toward a predictable fate, I notice poor Billy hugging and kissing the ground. It'll take his legs a while longer before they can stand up without the threat of collapsing. To their credit, his bowels came through the ordeal without any leakage. Having developed a significant nervous twitch of my own, the good news is he never even notices...