

Wheels Within Wheels

by Richard Lewis

Jake was weary from lack of sleep and one too many disappointments as he cruised highway 101 into Los Angeles. The great whale of Mt. Lukens lay beached on the eastern boundary of the City and it was show time, as ahead the LA basin revealed its seething pool of neon and yellow light. The lake of fluorescence competed with the show above, a glittering multitude of stars that shone their ancient radiance from a dead sky, as a lazy moon cast its heavy beams on all below.

The black tongued road seemed to be swallowing him up as the Buick muscled its way towards the hungry city. Jake had a sickening feeling that he was losing control, the car somehow not holding the road in the usual way. He struggled to steer the beast around corners, wondering if the wheels had jumped out of alignment. The car started to swerve about as if the road was smeared with oil, its tyres fighting to grip the tarmac. He hit the brakes but nothing happened, the Buick refusing to cooperate.

'This could be a scene from a Hollywood movie,' he thought. Then, as he careered on down Bunker Hill, Jake saw a young woman in the distance, stepping off a red street car onto the moonlit pavement. She was struggling with a push chair, starting the long climb up the hill. His mind became strangely detached from the perilous situation and the job of getting the car under control. Fleeting he imagined how the woman might be heading home, thinking about what to have for dinner, passing apartments with steaming kitchens and tired couples yelling at their children, while TV sets flickered into life.

Coming to his senses Jake tried the brakes again but there was no resistance as his leaden foot hit the floorboards. Then he heard a loud bang and the front wheel started clonking, he knew it was a blow out as the car lurched off the road towards the woman. "My God no, he shouted, this can't be happening." Seeing the car bearing down on her the woman froze in terror and seemed to let out a silent scream, then desperately tried to yank the pushchair with its precious cargo out of harm's way.

He closed his eyes as the Buick careered past, missing by inches and slamming into a low wall that stopped it in its tracks. Jake never wore a seat belt so he just kept going, shooting through the windscreen, out into the cool night air.

He woke with a start, his heart pounding in his chest but filled with a profound relief that he was still alive. The dream was so vivid that he had to check the car first thing in the morning; that's when he discovered it. The bald tyre screamed out, 'change me before it's too late.'

It took him back to his first set of wheels many years ago; the old Ford, when he'd often allowed the tyres wear down to the canvas before changing them. There was the time he'd careered off the road and slammed into a tree, having been lucky to escape unhurt. As the cogs turned he remembered those early days when all was looking forward. The envelope of time opened up as he drove under blue skies, singing to the radio, along the open road that spooled out to a bright horizon.

Now he felt the very rubber of his soul was worn down by all the pot holes of life. He knew he was losing his grip and found it hard to stay on track sometimes; his mind wandering as if the internal steering mechanism had come loose. His old frame creaked along like a wooden cart and after a lifetime of throwing himself into things, the dead end roads and twisting turns, he knew he was going nowhere.

Then it hit him, he had never really changed, it had always been this way, forever rushing headlong, careering into things. That strange line from Faulkner came to him, "memory believes before knowing remembers," and he told himself, 'maybe I'll never change but I really must change that tyre.'