

Starving for Inspiration

A dramatic fuel problem threatens to drop the curtain on a 1994 Dodge Dakota.

By Rick Cogbill
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Ham Hockley sagged against the doorjamb of the front office, clutching dramatically at his heart as he extended the car keys in my direction. “Do what you must, Slim, but remember... I am but a poor educator of youthful minds, fulfilling my calling in the midst of severe economic deprivation.”



I rolled my eyes. Ham was the teacher of dramatic arts at the local high school, with a lot healthier pension plan than most technicians I know. Plus, he got the summers off to boot. “I’ll let you know what we find, Ham,” I replied, taking the keys. Ham’s problem was an intermittent misfire under load with his 1994 Dodge Dakota.

I turned the truck over to Tooner for Act II. “You know the drill, Toon,” I said. “We have to watch the bucks or the production will fold.”

“Lemme guess,” Tooner replied. “Ham gave you the old song and dance about how poor he is, right?” He opened the hood and pointed at the new spark plugs installed in the 3.9 V6. “See? He’s already tried to fix this problem on his own.”

We always double-check what the customer did, just in case new problems get created during an attempt to fix the original one. But this was not the case. “Amazing!” Tooner announced later. “Ham got the plug gap right for once.” He went on. “The compression’s good, and the ignition system is solid. I got some misfire codes on the OBDII, and a balance test shows a slightly lower output on injector #2.” He rubbed his chin. “I think this truck is runnin’ lean.”

I grimaced. This was pointing to dirty injectors caused by rust, a common problem with the returnless steel fuel rails used on these models. “How about a new fuel filter?”

“Been there, done that,” Tooner grunted. “I think it’s the injectors; it kinda feels like a misfire on one or two cylinders.”

“All right,” I sighed. “Let’s hope you’re right.”

The injectors survived cleaning and testing at the injector shop, and \$300 later, the Dakota was performing like new – until Ham went out of town to visit his aging mother. “It was running great until I was just about back to town,” he said over his cell-phone, “but I have to stop for gas right now, Slim. Let’s talk when I get back.”

This is a Greek tragedy, I thought; no matter what you do, the gods are against you. But by the time Ham reached our shop he’d changed his tune. He practically danced into the front office. “False alarm, Slim. It’s cured! It’s cured! Now I can afford to buy Mother her new dentures! So, until we meet again...” He bowed and made a hasty exit, his wallet still intact.

But something told me this drama wasn’t over. And I was right. The plot thickened when Ham took Mom her new teeth on the following weekend. Once again, the truck began to miss just as he hit the edge of town on his way home.

“Tell me,” I said, acting on a hunch. “Does this always happen when your gas tank is low?”

Ham twirled the tips of his moustache. “Now that you mention it, it’s only when I get down around a quarter tank.”

I told Tooner at coffee time. “What about the filter on the bottom of the fuel pump canister, inside the gas tank?” I asked.

He wasn’t convinced. “If that was the problem, it would act up all the time, full or empty.”

Hearing his cue, our resident guru cleared this throat. “Ahem,” said Basil. “I know it’s a silly question, but have you boys checked out that new Identifix website we just signed up for?”

Tooner and I looked at each other. “Of course,” I said indignantly. “D’ya think we’re stupid?” Tooner sniffed in agreement, but after coffee we snuck over to the shop computer.

“Should have done this sooner,” muttered Tooner.

“Shush, keep it down!” I keyed in the truck info and a description of the problem. “I’ll bet there’s nothing here anyway...” But sure enough, there was.

“Intermittent misfire,” read Tooner, squinting at the screen. “Especially under heavy load with less than 1/2 tank of fuel. Only on vehicles with returnless fuel system.” He looked at me. “Boy, do I feel dumb.”

“Never mind that,” I said. “What’s the fix?”

We read on. The problem was indeed a plugged inlet strainer. However, we learned that if the tank is over half full, the pump can also get fuel from a small bypass tube.”

“So,” said Ham later, eyeing me sternly. “I didn’t need the injector work after all?”

I squirmed on my stool. “Well, they were dirty, but the real problem was the in-tank strainer.” I sighed. “I suppose you’ll want a rebate.”

Ham brightened instantly. “Not at all!” He pulled a booklet from his sport coat pocket. “I just happen to have tickets for my upcoming play at the community theatre.” He winked at me and whispered. “I’m starring in the lead role, you know.” He counted off six tickets, enough for me and the crew. “They’re normally \$10 each, but I’ll sell you all six for only \$180.”

I almost choked. “But that’s 30 bucks a ticket!” I paused. “Hey, wouldn’t you rather have your money back?”

Ham looked stricken. “Oh no, my good man; I’m an actor. I’d much prefer an audience over the money.” He grinned slyly. “But this way I get both.”