

Surface Solutions

By Rick Cogbill
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I opened the side door to the shop and stepped inside. The familiar odors of dirty oil, stale exhaust, and tire rubber attacked my nostrils as I inhaled deeply. The compressor rattled away in the back room, filling its discolored tank with warm, moist air, ready for another attack on the air guns of my staff. Ah, yes, I thought, it's good to be back home.



The boys were getting into their coveralls in the coffee room as I entered. “Ohayou Gozaimasu!” I said, showing off the one phrase I’d picked up on my recent trip to Japan.

“Gesundheit yerself,” replied Tooner. “How was the vacation?”

“It was great!” The rest of the crew grabbed refills for their coffee as I filled them in on the highlights of my recent travels. “The best part was the tour of the Aisin Automobile Test Track in Hokkaido.” I described how parts of the track were designed to imitate road conditions from around the world – from cobblestone streets in Britain to broken concrete highways in Poland. “That way, they can test new suspension systems for the vehicles designed for and sold in those markets.”

“Hey, I’ve heard of that!” piped up Beanie. “Isn’t it part of that ‘Test Track’ ride at Tokyo Disney Resort?”

“Very funny,” I replied dryly. “So, what’s been happening while I’ve been gone?”

Quigley poured a third cup of coffee. “Same old same old,” he said. “We’ve actually been pretty busy.”

“Yes,” added Basil, who’d overseen the shop while I was away. “And since you’ve just had a crash course on suspension, Japanese-style, we’ve got a job for you. Take old Rufus’ car for a test drive. He’s complaining of a vibration problem, but we can’t find it.”

I took the keys that he handed me. “You mean you can’t find the cause?”

Basil sighed. “No, we can’t even find the problem. It never acts up when we drive it.”

“Yeah,” added Tooner. “We’ve had it for a week. Checked the suspension; rebalanced the wheels; driven at low speed, high speed... nothin’. I’m startin’ to think it’s all in Rufus’ head.”

Rufus was getting on in years, but he was still quite spry for his age. However, the car rode as smooth as silk during my test drive, making me wonder what we were supposed to be looking for. Fortunately, Rufus was waiting outside the shop when I returned, having just completed his morning walk.

“Hey, Slim; welcome home!”

“Good to be back, Rufus!” I shook his hand. “Say, about your car... the boys tell me they can’t put their finger on your problem. Why don’t we go for a test drive together and see what we can find?”

“Sounds good to me,” he replied with a good-natured wink. “Your boys think it’s all in my head, but there’s definitely a problem there. You’ll see!”

Rufus had done a few tours in the armed forces when he was younger, so we discussed the virtues of foreign travel as we drove around. But after 15 minutes of smooth sailing, even Rufus was having his doubts. “I can’t understand it!” he cried. “I deliver ‘Meals On Wheels’ to shut-ins four days a week, and it *always* acts up for me!”

My spidey senses began to tingle. “Uh, Rufus, where do you pick up those meals?”

“At the hospital kitchen, of course. Why?”

I quickly did a U-turn and headed across town. A large building project had been underway for months near the hospital, and I had driven that street the day before, just to see how things had progressed in my absence.

As we drove up the main road in front of the project, the car began to vibrate and drone in the most annoying fashion. Rufus nearly choked on his false teeth in his excitement. “See? What’d I tell you, Slim! I knew I wasn’t losing my mind!”

I pulled over and we clambered out to take a look around. “Here’s your trouble,” I said to Rufus, pointing to the pavement in front of us. At some point over the past few months, one of the heavy equipment operators had driven his bulldozer down the street, and there, sunk into the pavement, were deep imprints from the cleats of a D9 Cat.

Back at the shop, the crew howled when I told them the story. “Say, Boss,” wheezed Tooner, wiping the tears out of his eyes, “I’m now a firm believer in the value of training courses.”

“You are?” I was amazed; Tooner always hated learning new things.

“Yeah,” he grinned. “Only, next time there’s a suspension course in Japan, can we all come?”