

Ridin' a Thin Line

By Rick Cogbill
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“I think you’re cutting it too close for comfort, Tooner.”

Tooner didn’t reply as he set up the finish cut on the rotor spinning before him. Flipping the feed lever, he stood back to let the brake lathe do its work. “Nonsense, Beanie; there’s lots of life left in this rotor.”

Our apprentice shoved a shock of unruly hair out of his eyes. “I’m not talking about the rotor; I mean your wife’s Christmas present. It’s Christmas Eve and you haven’t bought it yet.”

“Relax! Stanley’s Hardware stays open ’til five.” Tooner rubbed his hands together gleefully. “An’ I already got her present all picked out!”

“Stanley’s Hardware?” Beanie groaned. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Tooner shot him an icy glare. “Are you trying to tell me an 8’ bench vise don’t carry no weight as a Christmas present?”

“Well, you got the weight part right,” I interrupted. “They’re about 80 lbs. However, we’ve got heavier issues to discuss, like Clyde Dayle’s car.”

Tooner squinted out the bay door window. “You mean that red Geo Metro out there? What’s his problem?”

“He’s got a growling noise in the front when he turns slightly to the left. I figure it’s a wheel bearing.”

Our grizzled technician rubbed his chin and glanced at the clock on the wall. “Hmm, half past four. I got just enough time for a quick test run. Then The Bean here can start the repair while I go shopping.” He winked at me. “Don’t want him losin’ sleep about the stability of my love life!” With that, he grabbed a seat cover and headed out the door whistling a warbly Christmas carol.

I looked at Beanie. “There. You feel better now?”

“Well, sort of. But Slim, a bench vise? Is he serious?”



“He is, and Mabel will love it. After 30 years of marriage, they understand each other perfectly. I’ll bet you anything that when Tooner wakes up on Christmas morning, there’ll be a brand new sewing machine waiting for him under the tree.”

The minutes ticked by and when Tooner finally returned he looked as sour as the Grinch. “Put this thing on the hoist, Bean!” he hollered as he skidded into the bay. Getting out, he slammed the door. “I don’t know what Clyde’s been putting in his eggnog, but the only thing making growling noises right now is me!”

We sent Beanie upstairs to man the controls as we all gathered below with our stethoscopes. But no matter what speed or angle the wheels spun at, the drive train was quieter than a kid sneaking downstairs to spy on Santa. Tooner eyed the clock again. “Get Clyde out here,” he ordered. “The hardware store closes in 10 minutes!”

I called Clyde out from the waiting room. “Honest, Slim,” he protested, “it does it when *I* drive. How about Tooner and I go out on the main highway and I’ll show him where it always happens?”

Tooner was sweating bullets now, but he reluctantly agreed and the duo headed out with Clyde at the wheel. The rest of us cleaned up our tools, with visions of a peaceful holiday dancing through our heads. After all, we’d finished our Christmas shopping yesterday.

Soon the front door opened and Tooner entered alone, seat cover over his shoulder. “Well, don’t leave us in suspense!” I exclaimed. “What happened? Where’s Clyde? Is he...did you...?”

Tooner waved off my concerns. “Relax; Clyde’s alive. Just feeling a little foolish, that’s all.”

“So it wasn’t a wheel bearing?” enquired Basil.

Tooner snickered. “Nope. It turns out our buddy Clyde likes to drive close to the centre line. When he turns the wheel slightly to the left, he hits the rumble strips in the middle of the highway. That’s the source of his noise!”

Suddenly the mail slot in the front door flipped open and an envelope fell to the floor. When I picked it up I found \$20 inside with a note from Clyde. It read, “Sorry for all the trouble; I feel so stupid. I hope you all have a Merry Christmas... especially Tooner!”

I handed over the money. “Clyde sends his regards, but I’m afraid the stores are all closed by now.”

Tooner shrugged. “Not to worry. I got Plan B.”

At that moment our local tool dealer burst through the front door. “Merry Christmas, boys! Am I too late? Tooner called on his cell phone and said you had an emergency.”

“Yer right on time, Billy,” said Tooner, draping one arm around Billy’s shoulder and steering him back out to the tool truck. “It’s Christmas shopping time,” he continued, “and I know a little lady who’s had her eye on a certain chrome socket set.”

Basil laughed and Beanie just stared. “Now I get it. Instead of trying to figure out what his wife wants, Tooner and his wife buy their own presents, give them to each other, and then trade.”

I slapped him on the back. “And everybody’s happy, Bean; just the way it should be. After all, it is Christmas!”