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INSIDE:

COST OF SERVICE

COACH TALK

- STEERING WANDER
- WIGGLE WAGON
- POOR AIR CONDITIONING II
- MILES PER GALLON
- LP-GAS APPLIANCE OPERATION
- HIGH ALTITUDE
- DISCHARGED BATTERIES
- PERKO SWITCH
- BACKWARD TOWING
- GENERATOR SHUTDOWN PROTOCOL
- TOILET BOWL LEAK FIX
- HARDWOOD FLOOR
- INVERTER AIR CONDITIONING
- LEVEL DIRECTION

CLASSIFIED ADVERTISEMENTS

GALLOPIN' GAS GOBBLERS

by William C. Anderson

Climbing out of the Kansas flatlands into the rising rangelands of Colorado, Rocinante took the ascension in good humor. Then, on an exceptionally steep hill, I heard a honking behind us.

We were in the slow lane, so I stuck my hand out of the window and motioned for the honker to pass. As I did, a black-and-white Volkswagen sputtered past. I idly eyeballed the passing car, then suddenly felt my hackles rise. "Well, I'll be hanged!" I said to my wife. "Did you see that?"

"See what?" asked the roommate, looking up from her needlepoint.

"That VW that just passed. A woman on the passenger side gave me the *finger!*"

"She what?"

"The finger!" I demonstrated. "She gave me the finger!"

She slapped my hand. "I know what the finger is. Why in the world would she do that?"

"Beats me. I was hugging the right side of the road. They had plenty of room to pass."

She tried to peer through the curtain of black exhaust. "Can't make out the numbers, but it looks like a California license plate."

"Figures." I shoved back and forth in my seat, trying to coax more speed from the low-g geared engine. "They would have to pass us on this steep hill. Now we'll never catch 'em."

"So, relax. They're just smart-aleck kids. Sticks and stones will break your bones, but a finger will never hurt you. Simmer down and forget it."

"It really gripes me!"

A half hour later we were peaking a long hill coming into Limon, Colorado, and I had all but dismissed the incident. Then I saw something that fanned my embers. Up ahead, pulled off at the side of the road, was the black-and-white VW, its hood lifted in the distress signal. Lounging against it was a young man wearing an army-surplus shirt and frayed Levi's; a beaded headband held shoulder-length hair out of his eyes. He held out a laconic thumb in the hitchhiker's position.

"Hot damn! Do you see what I see?" I asked the wife, pulling onto the shoulder of the road.

"Looks like your friends."

"Sure does." I pulled up behind the VW.

"What are you going to do?"

"Looks like our friends are in trouble. I'm gonna lend a hand, soon as I get the tire thumper."

"Andy Anderson! You're not going out there and start something with those kids."

Deaf to her protestations, I swung out of Rocinante with my tire thumper in hand. The young man started toward me. Then, as if seeing something distasteful, he turned to retrace his steps. I followed him, sizing him up as I advanced. He appeared to be college age, as did the longhaired blonde girl peering at me from the passenger side of the VW.

"Hi, there," I said.

"Hi," said the youth, leaning back against the car and casting nervous glances at the tire thumper.

"You had your thumb out. Got a problem?"

"Well...uh...I..."

"Maybe I can help." I moved to the passenger side of the VW and looked in at the blonde staring up at me. "Your friend here gave me the thumb," I said, addressing her. "That I understand. But about 20 miles back, you gave me the finger. That I do not understand. Would you care to explain?"

The young man shot a threatening look at the blonde, then turned pleading eyes on me. "Look sir, there must be some mistake. Milly doesn't go around..."

"Oh, Mike, shuddup!" interrupted the blonde, cutting him off with her eyes. She turned to me. "I gave you the finger."

"I know. Did you learn that in charm school?"

"I gave you the finger for good reason." She jerked her thumb toward Rocinante and said, "Because you drive that big gas-guzzling hog. Don't you know we have an energy crisis in this country? Every decent-minded citizen is trying to conserve

Continued on Page 9