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PALM BEACH GOES TO OAXACA

by Larry Freeman

The April sun rose slowly, scattering the morning mists to spill its warmth on the awakening world below. Its rays spread rapidly across the Mexico-Guatemala border to the pueblo of Tapachula. Palm Beach stirred. He blinked. Then he carefully surveyed the broad, nearly-empty parking lot of the gas station where they had passed the night.

He slowly stretched as the solar rays filled his aching joints with energy. It had been a restless night. He had been attempting to diagnose a nagging malady rumbling in his rear quarters. The long hours of darkness had been shortened by reading his medical guide. Bleary-eyed with research, Palm Beach concluded that he had been attacked by a rare tropical disease picked up from the jungles of the Yucatan. He recalled not having felt quite right since the night of the last campfire on the way to Guatemala. A troop of furry acrobats had chosen his roof top as a stage for their traveling road show. Eva had called them monkeys. "Oh, look at the cute monkeys," she had said.

Palm Beach winced at the memory. He hadn't liked the monkeys one bit. They left stinky splatters on his paint, and constantly scratched themselves through every act. They had scratched him as well. He could imagine the nasty germs they carried. Monkeys were a menace that he hoped to never face again.

Admittedly, his problem could have come from the amateur mechanic in Atitlan. The one with the strange hands that spent the morning fiddling with his rear brakes. Palm Beach didn't like monkeys, but he didn't like strange mechanics performing emergency operations either. They meant well, but often they just stood around examining his innards and uttering mysterious sounds like "ummmmm," and "unhuh," and sometimes just plain... "huh?"

Being closed up with somebody else's spare parts inside made him feel uncomfortable. Once a brake mechanic had delivered a nearly fatal case of arterial sclerosis by administering a transfusion of mismatched hydraulic fluid. The pollution had

clogged his hoses with gunk. Often he yearned for the expert diagnosis of the professional surgeons at Cinnabar Engineering, Inc.

Palm Beach reminisced that at his age he rated special attention. A quarter-million miles should qualify him for senior status. You'd think Larry would schedule him for some of those special exams listed in the medical guide. It was filled with great ideas. A body scan sounded good. Perhaps a face lift, an MER, maybe even a transplant. One couldn't be too careful. Certainly a paint job was in store. The Rockhounds had given Royale an exotic one. She looked great!

Well, for now, a vitamin might do the trick. He'd drop it in the gas tank. Later on he could bring up the rehab program and perhaps a designer paint job with Larry and Eva. He smiled. For sure, Eva would agree. She liked to redecorate. Today, he'd look for a local pharmacaria.

Outside, a gathering of fellow travelers was enjoying the sunlight along with Larry and Eva. They were inspecting a rear wheel. Larry said, "With all the grinding noises last night, I'm surprised we even made it here. I was sure the wheel was just going to fall off and leave us stranded." An Australian motorcyclist, a Costa Rican university student and a teacher from California each nodded in agreement. The three of them were sipping English breakfast tea and munching on Eva's homemade burritos.

Earlier, the Costa Rican had helped Larry understand the local Spanish accent as they talked on the ham radio in search of a local mechanic. Sandy, the Australian, had used his bike to round up cold milk and freshly cooked tortillas. Surf, the teacher from California, had rigged some shade and helped Eva organize breakfast.

Soon, a battered, blue pickup arrived in the gas station parking lot. The left-rear quarter of Palm Beach was elevated. Tires were braced with cinder blocks. Broken bits and pieces were carefully

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