Drivers Wanted

Until the day the waters freed me and pushed me into the embrace of the fence, what I held onto was the memory of the car washes. Sure, the washing actually took place in a bathroom sink. But it was the act of kindness, respectful kindness, the removing of the afternoon's dirt that made those three little girl drivers so special. They would lather their hands with soap, splash it along my sides, making sure to get my wheels, too. Then, they would pat me dry and even wax my blue paint. Of course, the "wax" was really Theresa's mother's face cream, but they would cover my hood and doors with it, wrap me in toilet paper to let the "wax" set, and then buff it all off before putting me away. I spent a lot of time remembering those car washes, to my delight and horror.

Let me assure you that I never received the same treatment when girls' little boy friends took me out. It could be the same roads, the same sidewalks, even the same mud. But, if a boy was the driver, I was just a machine, an endless crash and burn fantasy, easily dismissed in favor of other games. If I was lucky, I'd get a rinse before being tossed into a toy chest after someone screamed "Clean up all these damned toys before someone falls and breaks their neck!" Between you and me, I actually became quite forgiving later, and I began to remember smacking into the wood wall of the chest with a wistful fondness. At least after being lobbed into a toy chest, I had the hope of rolling my wheels along another sidewalk.

The day it all changed was the day the fill dirt arrived. I'd seen dirt mountains before, of course; we all had. I'd driven the sharp curves of the dirty cliff road. I'd even lurched perilously close to the edge, careening along on my two right wheels before miraculously speeding into a mountain tunnel. Once or twice, I'd collided head on with another car, my tumble down the soft, fluffy pile punctuated with the sounds of squealing tires, twisting metal, and a booming explosion. Then, I'd be picked up and put back onto a new dirt road, sometimes newly made just for this run. A dirt pile is a great and changing landscape.

So what was different this time? That's a question I've had plenty of time to ponder. Was it the call of "Christy, Theresa, Lisa, dinner time!" just as I'd swerved into a tunnel, gearing up for the next big collision? Was it the rain I could see washing out the road in my silver-painted rearview mirrors once the drivers went away? Did the hired men just happen to start on my side

of the pile that next morning, not realizing there was a half-collapsed tunnel nearby where I was trapped? Was I the only car left on the pile? Is that why they didn't rescue me?

Whatever the sequence of events the dirt walls obscured, I remember the tunnel giving way under the pressure of shifting earth. I heard the hiss of the shovel blade hit the pile, too close to the tunnel wall. I felt dirt collapse around me, trapping me as the shovel carried me away. More and more pressure and weight, so much so that I could only shift with the dirt as it wobbled back and forth in the wheelbarrow. Then the world tilted and I tumbled, briefly free. But more fill dirt piled on top of me. Jagged metal tines tore the earth around me, easing the pressure. They never snagged me in their metal jaws, though I would have been helpless to do anything if they had. Maybe it would have been better if they had caught me, but I remember being relieved at the time that at least the metal teeth didn't scratch my paint. I was still convinced I'd be found, that the girl drivers would take care of me, that there was a wash and an extra special wax in my immediate future. But that wasn't to happen.

Instead, the dirt settled into my wheels. Sometimes, it would be cold and wet, which I thought must mean it rained above me. I could feel my axles freezing and stiffening with each soaking rain. To occupy my time, I thought of the many adventures I'd had: I'd rescued boys and girls from a variety of villains, both on horses and in other cars. I'd been the getaway car in so many heists that I'd lost count, always zooming away with the loot and outrunning the poor police cars and fire trucks that tried to chase me down. How many times had I barely made it around a dangerous curve or gone sailing down a closed race track? How many times had I miraculously recovered from a fiery crash only to be "all fixed up" by a young mechanic who took me for another check up ride before parking me for the night? Eventually, I figured out there would be no kindly mechanic this time and there was less and less chance my wheels would ever work again.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there. The memories of past games and the care of the girls and the indifference of the boys began to shimmer and blur at the edges. I started to forget the feel of wind rushing past my doors as I rolled down the driveway, barely missed by my larger cousins as they cruised down the street completely unaware of our near collision. My reality was dirt and damp and unmoving wheels. Was I forgotten? Was I even missed? Matchbox cars don't

rise from the grave. Until one day, the water became even more insistent and my back fender felt strange.

I really thought I was still dreaming, this time of the day my drivers and I practiced, and often failed, water jumps. But, when I tried to think of another memory, the feeling of the water didn't go away. I realized the dirt had shifted a bit and I could feel the pull of real water. Of course, the dirt still held me nose down, but the water had worked its way to my back doors. Even trapped, I felt freer than I had in so very long. Surely with my back end sticking up into the water, the drivers would find me again! All I had to do was wait out the flood and they would see me.

But the rain didn't stop right away. The water battled the dirt, turning it into mud and washing it away from me, layer by layer. Soon, I felt the water pulling against my front wheels and I finally broke free! But the muddy water that dragged me along the ground didn't let me go. I couldn't see where I was going or where I had been. Finally, I brushed against a piece of metal and my front end swung around to rest against another. It would be a long time until the waters receded and I would discover I'd been snagged by the chain link fence under a bush at the edge of the drivers' domain.

So, here I sit, waiting. I can see the sun through the bushes now, and I feel the breeze on my dirt-caked doors. Every once in a while, a dog or a cat passes by, though they pay me no mind. So far, no driver has found me. But I know one will someday.