

RUNAWAY RIG

The kid burned out the rig's brakes on the Corkscrew grade at eleven thirty that night. Then, panicking as the ten-wheel combo—tractor and semi-trailer—gained speed, he raced the diesel, double-clutched, and tried to jam into a lower gear ratio. The stripping grind from the transmission jarred up into the bunk behind him. Barney Conners came awake fast.

"Easy, kid!" he yelled, even before he got his eyes open. But he knew he was too late. He also knew, without seeing, but just by feel, that they were rolling unchecked downgrade. And that could only mean the Corkscrew, the truckers' graveyard.

"Lay on the horns!" he shouted, so Joel Nichols and the other highway troopers stationed on the grade would be alerted to the emergency. He swung out of the bunk. Ahead, sharp red clusters of taillights and beady truck markers brokenly traced the dropping twists of the divided highway. It was the Corkscrew, all right. And worse, they were already past the patrol-car spot!

Fingers of fear squeezed his stomach. It was a sickness worse than the indigestion he'd been trying to sleep off—the only reason he'd let the kid drive up the Hill, with a strict order to wake him at the top. But the kid hadn't obeyed. He'd boomed across the ridge's level four miles. Now the Corkscrew had him.

But this was no time for jawing. Not with five miles of murderous downgrade ahead of the runaway rig loaded with tons of machine parts.

Barney shouted. "Let me have it!"

"Barney, I didn't mean to take her down. But you looked so comfortable I thought I'd take her across the top and then—"

Barney jammed his left forearm on the wheel ring. He

hoped the blasting air horns would carry back to the patrol-car station. Ahead, the driver of a hay rig heard it and changed his mind about cutting out to pass a tanker.

That's what the kid had probably done. Swung out to pass a box or something big enough to hide the large illuminated sign warning about the downgrade, ordering trucks to use low gear. Then he was into it, burned out his brakes trying to check her, and then stripped her because he was going too fast for the next lower ratio.

"Barney!" the kid shouted above the horns as the rig's headlights plowed faster and faster into the darkness.

"Shut up!" Barney snapped. The kid's hands fluttered as though to help with the wheel. Barney elbowed them away, then shot a glance in the big outside mirror. Not a sign of a police car coming to help them down to the emergency escape ramp for runaway trucks, the one night when he needed some citation-happy trooper like Joel Nichols breathing into his rearview mirror!

"Better get out, kid," Barney yelled through the clamoring horns. The kid stared down at the streaming blur of the divider. Then he turned back, his face like a white mask punched with wide holes for eyes and mouth. Barney didn't give him a chance to protest. "Jump while you've got the chance. I don't want to shove you out, but I need room." He reached over, grabbed the door handle, and crowded the kid's trembling body. "Out! Break it with your feet. Relax. Then double. Knees over stomach. Arms around head. Don't try to stop it. Here you go, kid!"

Barney bumped him out to the step, but the kid hung onto the door. Wind roared into the cab. The rig's heavy treads machine-gunned the pavement. Barney slid solidly behind the big wheel. Inching as close as he dared to the streaking edge, he kicked on the far beams. Weeds waved in the night wind, leaning away from the onrushing rig. Glass and beer cans glinted among them. The kid was in for a cutting-up, but that was better than being mashed to pulp. Willowy bushes swept into view.

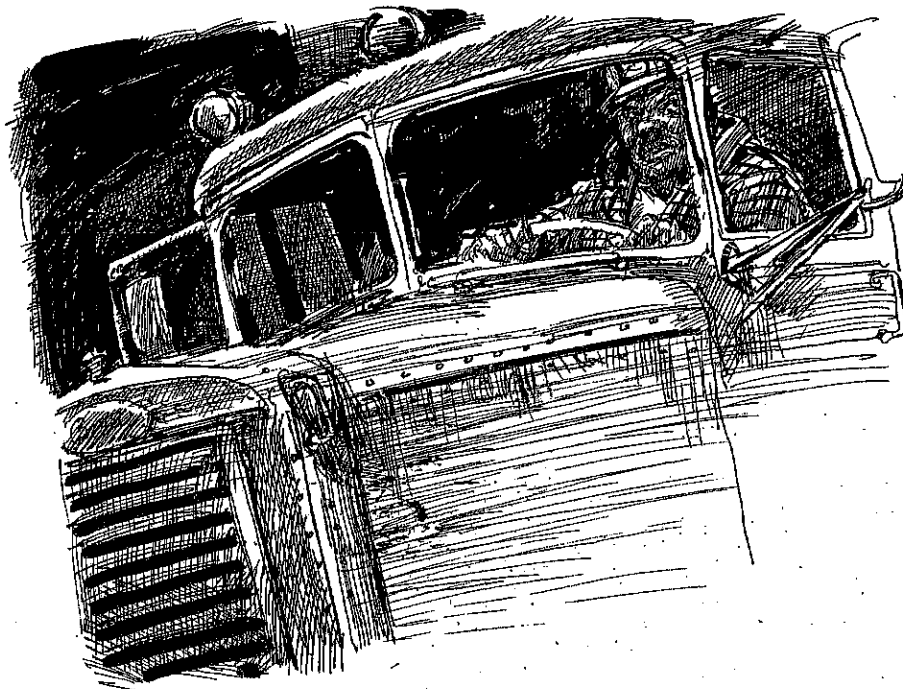
"The bushes, kid!" Barney shouted. "Hit 'em!"

He didn't wait for the kid to find his nerve. He hammered his fist on the fingers hooked over the windowsill. From the

corner of his eye he saw the kid sail out of the cab. He twitched the wheel, angling away, then gave a sharp but smooth swing back to whip the trailer box away from the rolling body. He played the wheel to get that whipsawing trailer in line again.

His glance darted side to side to the mirrors again. In the left one he vaguely glimpsed the kid staggering to his feet. In the right one he hoped to spot a highway patrol booming around a curve after him. But all he saw was the glare of truck headlights.

Where the devil were the troopers tonight? Joel Nichols, he remembered now, from the grapevine, was probably off duty to stand by his wife, who expected her first baby. But usually there was someone riding Barney's tail in this sector, because years ago, wheeling a rush shipment, he'd gone overboard, telling off Joel Nichols for delaying him with a truck inspection. After that he figured he'd better watch his driving, his gross axle loads, his lights, everything. So maybe, in a way, he could



thank Joel and the others for the way he began winning safety awards.

But he didn't feel like a safety-award driver now, at the wheel of a runaway monster on the Corkscrew. He squinted ahead, the wheel trembling in his fists. Even if those two gearshifts just under his right hand had anything left beneath them, it was no good to him now. He was going too fast to mesh anything. He flicked his far beams on and off as a warning to other drivers.

Just stay out of my way, boys, he prayed. Let me look good, like a reckless driver who only gets by because the other guys have sense enough to let him through. Give me a chance to get down to the emergency turnoff ramp.

Rocketing down the dark grade, horns blasting, lights flashing, he rubber-burned around a curve and spotted the twin bull's-eye taillights of a car. A half mile ahead on the straightaway, and in his lane!

His forearm jostled the ring. His foot beat a frantic tattoo on the light button. Words that might have been a prayer or a curse burst up from deep in his chest. But he never knew what they were. They jammed in panic in his throat. That driver didn't hear or see him coming. That driver was doing a legal fifty-five, but this runaway truck didn't know any of the rules.

Come on, come on, guy! For the luvva Pete! Don't those lights blazing in and out of your rear mirror mean anything?

Barney's eyes searched desperately. To his left was the divider, sort of hollowed like a shallow gully. He couldn't take the rig in there. But he couldn't go to the right either. Not with the serpentine line of hay haulers, pole dollies, tankers, boxes, and stakers creeping down the Corkscrew. But that guy ahead could slip in between them. He would burn rubber, slide onto the shoulder maybe, go into the ditch, but wasn't that better than what could happen?

Hadn't he been reading the papers lately? Hadn't he seen the pictures of what happened to a guy like himself? The big wheeler went right over that other guy, flattened him and his passengers and the new car right down to a fourteen-inch pancake and kept going.

Barney held the wheel steady, locked in position like his teeth as he bore down on the ranch wagon's taillights. Then, at

the same instant that the driver must have become aware of him, Barney saw the tousled little head lift just inside the rear window, a pink blanket draped around the tiny shoulders. And ahead of the waking child his blazing headlights caught the woman beside the driver as she jerked around to peer back.

Barney winced. This was like his family traveling at night because it was cooler and the kids could sleep—and because he knew he could count on the nighttime wheelers to give him a break if anything went wrong.

Yeah, he'd have to play along. Looming down on that ranch wagon with his runaway rig crammed with tons of machine parts, he knew he could never wipe out this family and then face Flo and his own kids. He eased the combo toward the sunken divider.

But then the ranch wagon began frantically seeking an escape niche in the wall of trucks to the right. Barney shook his head. There wasn't time or room enough for him to get by. The box would careen the rig over. He'd lose control completely, go gouging on his box sides right across the divider into the oncoming upgrade lanes. A nightmarish shambles. He wasn't too sure he could prevent it by deliberately swinging into the sunken divider. But maybe, at least, he could keep it all for himself right there in the weeds between the strips of pavement.

Then blue smoke burst from the ranch wagon as the driver gunned her. Barney nodded grimly, holding his thundering rig steady. Maybe this was an out. Maybe not. But he wasn't thinking just about himself. It was that guy ahead.

Watch yourself, mister. You ain't geared for this. You've been driving easy back and forth to work every day, Sunday picnics. You can't suddenly come out here and let all those horses run wild with you. I've picked up too many of you guys who thought they could.

Barney sucked breath through his teeth as the light car, matching his own speed, slowed on a turn and threatened to sideswipe a semi, inching down in creeper gear. Barney took his heavy rig around as though he were on tracks. But even so, he was scared, wondering if all the pushing-weight in the trailer would jackknife his unit.

His eye caught a flash of red from the big outside mirror. He waited until he had the rig lined up smoothly on the

straightaway, a hundred feet behind that fleeing ranch wagon. Then he whipped a glance toward the mirror. That red light came from a pursuing police car. At last!

Barney smiled tightly. Then he heard the siren undulating in the surging rhythm that was the distinctive style of Joel Nichols. Barney shook his head. He'd been right in telling Joel he took his job too seriously. Out here chasing a truck instead of standing by his wife in the hospital.

The police car closed in behind Barney's trailer, bobbing over a rough dip in the pavement. The siren screamed to give warning ahead. Barney, going downgrade faster than he'd ever driven in gear under control, began overtaking the ranch wagon. But why? That job had more soup than that packed under her hood. And the guy should be able to hold her on this straightaway. Then, looking over and beyond the car, Barney saw that the driver was planning to swing into a long gap in the trucks in the right lane.

"No!" Barney shouted, blasting his horns, flicking his lights. "Keep going!" he yelled, waving his right arm. Behind him the siren shrilled frantically. Ahead, a hay-hauler whipped off onto the shoulder in a cloud of dust. Two hundred feet farther on a flat-bedder with a tarped-load shot a plume of black smoke toward the stars as the wheeler spurted ahead to clear the entrance to the emergency ramp, a strip of pavement that gradually angled away from the highway, and went up a hill that would slow a runaway truck and then bog it in soft sand.

But the ranch wagon swerved into the right lane, blocking Barney's chance to ease into the escape route. The bull's-eye stoplights blazed, the guy's tires smoked to keep from rear-ending the flat-bedder. His arm came out, waving Barney on by.

Barney's locked teeth combed his curse into explosive hisses. Why shouldn't he try to hit that ramp? His life was just as important as that guy's. He would smack across the rear of that ranch wagon. Maybe the guy could keep from rolling over or slamming ahead into the heavy flat-bedder while Barney steadied his rig on that ramp. Barney nodded, and in that split instant of decision, words came from way back in his memory, as clear as though he were speaking them again.

Barney held his runaway rig straight on its way down the Corkscrew. He flicked his markers off and on twice to the

white-faced driver of the ranch wagon. That's the way you usually thanked a guy for giving you a chance to keep rolling. But thanks for what now? Just a chance to live a little longer and wonder if he could somehow manage to die alone.

The police car shrieked right after him. Tailgating. A sure citation if Joel Nichols caught somebody else doing it. Not a chance to stay out of it when Barney hit something or piled over. "Cut it out, you fool," Barney muttered.

He fought the swaying combo around into another straightaway, surprised that his rear tractor wheels were still in contact with the pavement. Another curve. This one to his left. Thank God there was nothing on it, because he couldn't hold her in this lane. She screamed rubber across the white line and kept on scorching toward the shoulder. Leaning to his left, bracing into the wheel, fighting to hold her on the last inch, the corner of his eye caught the police car squalling by on the inside of the turn. Its black top tilted toward him like a gleaming ebony table reflecting his markers. She slewed right in front of him.

Faster, faster, faster they went down through the Corkscrew. The black-and-white police car screaming interference for the rocketing runaway. But Barney felt no elation, no triumph, no hope. What good was this going to do with that final spine-busting S a mile ahead? Neither of them could take it at this speed. And they would take a lot of other guys with them. Downgraders and upgraders. Because there wasn't any divider in there. Too narrow. Just a little hump of concrete between the opposing lanes of traffic.

Barney wished he had thought of that sooner. Why had he let Joel lead him into this trap? He should have piled her up before he caught other wheelers and people in private cars in a rending, smashing charnel of litter. He desperately sought some way to do it now. But how in this canyon with rigs and cars lining both shoulders? It would be just as horrible as in the S.

Wait a minute. Both shoulders? Yeah. Nothing moving on either side of the highway. Nothing except a police car on the upgrade side. It swung into a turnoff, made a wild U-turn, and began to race down on the wrong side, trying to pace him, like Joel ahead of him.

That could mean only one thing. Joel had been shouting

into his radio way up and back there on the way down, maybe almost from the moment he spotted the runaway. He'd gotten them on the job down here. They'd stopped traffic, got it off the pavement. But what could anybody do about that S?

Barney saw he was creeping up on Joel. Creeping? He was catching up as if Joel had his brakes on. Barney began flicking his lights. An arm reached gingerly out of the police car into the blast of wind. It waved for him to come on. Then the car spat exhaust smoke and barely held its lead.

Bewilderedly, Barney tracked after it. Here came the S. Joel and the others were fools to think he could make that first swing to the right. Never. Not even at half this speed. Then he sensed, rather than saw—because his eyes were on that police car—there were no trucks or cars in here! Both sides, both shoulders were clear! Joel's car didn't even try to take the start of the curve. It went straight over the six-inch hump as though it weren't there, to the far side of the road.

"O.K. Gotcha!" Barney muttered, eyes unblinking. Maybe he could straighten this thing out enough to get through. It was his only chance. He never felt his left tires cross the hump. And he didn't unfreeze the wheel until he was sure the right trailer wheels were over too.

He swerved a bit, then held her straight to streak across the far shoulder, skinning by the canyon wall and the drainage ditch. Back on the pavement. Over the divider hump again. Then the other shoulder.

All he saw was straightaway. He yelled. No words. No meaning. Just a bottled pressure that had to get out of him, and it came as a yell. He would bet they could hear it way ahead. Even beyond Joel's police car shrieking yards in advance of his front bumper.

Far ahead down there, red lights winked on police cars. Minutes later he waved as he flashed by them. On past drive-in eateries, people out of their cars, staring, holding half-eaten 'burgers, bottles of pop.

Seven miles farther down the valley, where it leveled off, he scraped his sidewalls screechingly along a curb. The rig slowed, but still rolled across an intersection against a red light. But Joel was holding back traffic while another police car leapfrogged ahead to the next intersection.

Finally the rig stopped.

Barney sat on the running board. Nothing would hold still in him. His clothes stuck and dragged with sweat. He wanted a cigarette, but his hands were all fingers that wouldn't behave. Joel came back, his boots glistening. His face had a grin that looked as sickish as Barney felt.

"Hi," Barney managed to say. It was silly, crazy, but it was enough. Joel sat down beside him and put both hands around Barney's right one holding the pack of cigarettes.

"Now try it," Joel said shakily. "And get one for me."

Some other trooper struck a match for them. Barney stretched his legs out, then drew them back. Everything shook, no matter what, even his left hand gripping the edge of the running board. Joel blew out a deep puff.

"Nice wheeling, Barney."

"The other guys, you mean. The ones who got out of my way. Except one darn fool."

Joel looked at him. "Why didn't you jump, after you got the kid safely out?"

"Why didn't you stay at the hospital?" Barney retorted. He stood up. "Before you write out a citation, I better set out my flares and reflectors."

Joel, smiling, stood up, too. "I'll help you. It's a boy, Barney."

"Congratulations," said Barney, holding out his hand. "I hope the stork gave him a better ride than we had."

His legs felt wobbly, but the rest of him began to feel good. Real good.

Reading for Understanding

Main Idea

1. The story demonstrates the importance of (a) fun and games (b) courage and cooperation (c) curiosity and daring (d) truck inspections and licensing of drivers.