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Road Fever

Tim Cahill

It's Hot Hot Hot

(Boom, Bam, Ka-Pow)

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There were about three thousand of us for dinner that night at the Bally Casino Resort in Las Vegas. We were seated at large round tables accommodating ten people apiece, and each place setting bristled with flatware. There were at least ten separate utensils per person: knives and forks and a few mysterious surgical-looking devices with shiny sharp points. I counted almost four hundred tables in the cavernous convention hall. During the meal an odd group of musicians played understated dinner music on a raised stage at the front of the hall. There was a bass, an accordion, and ten women playing violins. They played 'Hava Nagila' and 'Roll Out the Barrel.' They played 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree.'

An army of waiters and waitresses, moving with military precision and import, delivered the food so that everyone - all three thousand of us - got his or her melon simultaneously. Next we were served a dish in a shell-shaped chalice that contained small pieces of shrimp and lobster in a cream sauce. The following course, designed to clear the palate, was a frozen peach cut in half, hollowed out and filled with sherbet, which was followed by steak with sautéed mushrooms. Broccoli with cheese sauce. Baked Alaska.

The women playing the violins wore green empirewaist shoulderless dresses and they produced 'symphonic' polkas, with their eyes closed in feigned ecstasy.

As the waiters whisked away the gummy remnants of the baked Alaska, Nashville comedian Minnie Pearl took the stage and told a lot of jokes about the kneelapping problems of the elderly. She gave the impression that she

herself was too old to enjoy anything much and that the audience, a reasonably flamboyant collection of auto dealers and their spouses from the Western states, should find this amusing. Minnie Pearl remarked upon a female acquaintance of certain years who wanted female pallbearers at her funeral. No men. The acquaintance saw this as a form of revenge for disappointments suffered regarding heterosexual romance in her latter years.

'If they won't take me out when I'm alive,' Minnie Pearl quoted the embittered woman, 'then they ain't gonna take me out when I'm dead.'

Minnie Pearl wore a large garish bonnet with a price tag hanging off one side and said that a few years ago, in her hometown of Grinderswitch, there was a fad called streaking, in which people ran around naked as a means of self-expression. One of these erstwhile streakers was yet another older woman, who, Minnie Pearl suggested, was revealing her body in order to arouse men who might make her life a garden of sexual delight. Concerned onlookers pointed out the spectacle to an older gentleman known as Grandpa, who didn't see so well.

'She's streaking, Grandpa,' they said.

'What's that?'

'Why, Grandpa,' the concerned onlookers explained, 'she's wearing her birthday suit.'

Grandpa squinted his eyes and said, 'Looks like it needs ironing.'

Three thousand people laughed heartily at this and there was a smattering of applause.

Exit Minnie Pearl. Enter John Rock, the general manager of GMC truck, a forceful and solid-looking man who appeared to be well named. Rock said that he wasn't going to waste a lot of time, but that the audience, which included a healthy sampling of the automotive press, should know that he was pretty excited about the new truck GMC was introducing. The Sierra pickup had been designed from the wheels up at a cost of \$2.8 billion. It was the first redesign on the old workhorse in fifteen years. It was a tough truck. It was easy going on the road. It was hot.

The trucks, we were given to understand, would sell like hotcakes. The typical buyer, Rock thought, might be defined as an 'upscale cowpunk.' The way Rock pronounced the words, he seemed to think upscale cowpunks were some pretty fine fellows completely aside from the fact that he expected them to make him and everyone in the room fabulously rich.

'Our typical buyer,' Rock said, 'he's an easy guy. He comes to a meal like this one, he's going to have about four forks and a couple of knives left over.' Everyone laughed because we all had a bunch of gadgets left over, inexplicable little scalpels and picks scattered about, marking us all as easy guys, likable upscale cowpunks.

The easiest thing about the easy guy, John Rock said, is that he only wants the best. That would be how one ad for the new truck might read: 'I'm an easy guy, I only want the best.' Rock thought GMC dealers would be in fine fettle vis à vis the easy upscale cowpunk buyer in that they had a product that was, in his opinion, clearly the best pickup on the market.

Another thing about the easy guy, Rock said, is that he would like this show, and he'd love the next act: 'Ladies and gentlemen, the fabulous Mr Roy Clark.'

Later, at a booth near the entrance to the dining room, several attractive young women handed out free clothes that the dealers might want to wear at tomorrow's test drive. Members of the automotive press in attendance snapped up the easy-guy gear: leather driving gloves, Levi's jackets lined in something like sheepskin, and 4x Beaver Stetsons. There were parties that night in various private suites - lots of Tanqueray, goblets of Wild Turkey, laughter, and the sound of tinkling ice cubes behind closed doors.

A few of the dealers, their spouses, and the automotive press in particular looked a bit musty the next morning at six. There were lots of hung-over clones in denim jackets and cowboy hats; it was the dawn of the dead upscale cowpunks. We were bused to a large convention center on the outskirts of Las Vegas. GMC had booked the center's parking lot for a demonstration of its rear-wheel antilock brakes. The parking lot, aimless acres of concrete, had been cordoned off from the general public and was sprayed with a mixture of oil and water. A mechanic disabled the antilock brakes in one of the trucks, and a stunt driver pushed it into the water and oil at top speed. The truck made a sweeping turn and the driver hit the brakes at the apogee of his arc, the point where centrifugal force wanted to send the vehicle spinning out of control. There was a bucking motion, the tires lost their grip in the oily water, and the truck spun off at an odd vector, doing doughnuts and tossing up oily rooster tails in the early-morning desert sun. The falling sheets of water had that vague multicolored rainbow effect characteristic of petroleum products and water.