

THE EVIL PLACE

No sooner had I decided it was time to leave Pootren and Ko, and charged myself up, than an opportunity presented itself almost immediately. There was a short outflow and then a longer inflow. I moved swiftly, without hesitation, to valve-leave. I made the manoeuvre with complete success. Once inside the pump-place, I wanted to wallow in my success. I knew, though, that I had to give my full and undivided attention to absorbing all available information so as to make a judgement on when to valve-enter. Pippo had explained that there are useful signals which can provide a guide on the next travel. For example, there might be several inflows and outflows to one tyre without a space between them, but that a space (in other words a good few seconds of no activity) always occurs between tyres. I also knew that, in most cases and depending on the habit of the vehicle-owner, there are outflows and usually inflows at all four tyres. Of course, I had no idea if there had been an inflow or two or three before the one in which I had left Pootren and Ko. I decided to wait for the space after Pootren's tyre, and then to wait for another space, if there was one. I knew there was a risk of losing the vehicle altogether, but I was ready for that. I hoped I might be lucky and visit the interesting girl my mother had spoken of.

Unfortunately, as you will have already guessed by the title of the chapter (the publisher is a real pain in the spine!), I was not so lucky a second time. Isn't that always the way: you try hard for something and don't get it; and when you don't try, things turn right with ease. On my first valve-entry out of the pump, I had simply reacted instinctively, because I was hurt, and arrived exactly where I hoped. Now that I was fit and well and trying to organise my travels, I ended up exactly where I didn't want - in the tyre my mother had called 'The Evil Place'.

The inflow came, I whipped myself into shape and dashed through the valve. I was surprised how easily I could do it. I pulled myself in and I was about to say, like Pippo had done: 'Hi, I'm TomSpin. I see you got a nice place here,' when I realised my mistake. There was an atmosphere thick with ugliness. I could feel there were spinners everywhere, but there was no way I could penetrate the fog of information filling the tyre. I started elongating with the aim of flying out on the next inflow (I was even prepared to chance my luck on an outflow), but there was no further valve opening and I was trapped.

After my experience with Pootren and Ko, I was not expecting anyone to welcome me at all. But, in this, I was mistaken. Three young spinners came bouncing over; they didn't say much, instead they started bustling me, pushing me around, bouncing off me, and trying to change my shape. I thought it was a joke at first but

when I tried to talk to them, they only laughed, and they poked me harder and then harder, until I was uncomfortable. I got cross first and made it clear I didn't like what they were doing, and then I became angry and started shouting. This only made them laugh more. The more I shouted the more they laughed and prodded me.

When a move started, I dressed in the best sphere I could so as to roll around fast. All three of them chased me, as though it was the best fun they had had for ages, and they carried on bumping, nudging, pushing, charging me in any and every way. I tried to avoid them at first and then I pushed and charged back, all to no avail, like fuel to fire, as you might say. It didn't matter physically because, as a sphere, it was almost impossible to hurt or damage me. When the move stopped, they carried on, so I stayed dressed as a sphere and let them knock me until they got bored. When they realised I wasn't prepared to play any longer, one of them introduced himself as JoJoSpin and the others as MoSpin and MillySpin. MillySpin was shy. She rolled away as soon as her name was mentioned. JoJoSpin asked my name.

'Do you always attack your visitors like that?' I said. This made both of them laugh.

'Cor, we got a delicate one here,' JoJoSpin said to MoSpin. 'What do you reckon. Six months would be my guess.'

'Three months,' said MoSpin.

'Four weeks, maybe.'

'A week, no more.'

'A day.'

'No, you're right, not even a day. An hour.'

'A minute.'

'A second. Whoops, he's gone.' And they both dissolved into the most horrible laughter. I was afraid to roll away in case they started chasing me again. So I just stayed quiet and closed off, uninterested.

'Come on what's your name?' JoJoSpin tried again.

'Why were you laughing?'

'Oh nothing really, only we . . .' more laughter, 'only we don't think you'll survive long in this place. We've seen more visitors . . .'

'Don't tell him, save it for later,' MoSpin interrupted.

'I can't wait, MoSpin. Dear whoever you are, the truth is, visitors don't last very long here. There's as many fade away as ever get to leave. We try and look after them of course, but there's not much we can do.' More laughter. Then they scuttled away.

Whether this was true or not true, the rascals achieved their purpose of upsetting me. Did travellers really die here? How would I ever get onto the hub to spin? What would life be like constantly pestered by the likes of JoJoSpin and

MoSpin? I found myself thinking that if this evil place was to be my end I would have been better off never leaving home. But no sooner had that thought come, than another followed it immediately: how stupid to let the taunts of little spinners upset me before I had even looked round for myself.

It didn't take long to find the dying spinner. I went straight to it, because, although there were plenty of bad smells in the tyre, he or she (without any kind of recognisable life force it is impossible to tell much about a tyre spinner) gave off the very strongest atmosphere. The dying spinner was a mis-shapen flat splodge of rubber stuck on the tyre wall. Although perturbed by the smell, I thought, at first, it was one of the young spinners playing tricks, but, when I tried to talk to it, there was nothing but an intensification of the smell. I tried nudging it for a response but there was none. And it was so firmly attached, it was as unmoving as the tyre wall itself. As soon as I realised that the spinner was actually dead, I backed off instinctively, both frightened and appalled by the discovery: frightened that this might indeed be a traveller who had failed to escape; and appalled that death could be such an ugly, lonely event.

It was a ghastly experience, but I suppose it had to happen at some point in my travels. From then on, I knew the smell of death and dying and could recognise it anywhere. Like other travellers, I learned to detect such a smell at the moment of entry into a new tyre - a dying smell means either evil or sadness, and no traveller wants to be caught up in either.

'You found him then, you found him then.' JoJoSpin and MoSpin skipped passed, taunting me.

'Isn't there anything we can do?' I asked, remembering how Pootren had saved old JimmySpin. But they had passed by without answering. I tried to nudge the flat shape once more without any success before persuading myself there was nothing to be done. I knew that all spinners die eventually, usually by a process most spinners think of as the reverse of the growing business and thus we call it 'the dying business'. A spinner is usually considered dead when he or she can no longer organise movements or change shape and gives up his or her body to the tyre. That's what I learned from my mother and father. Sometimes, as I was to discover and as happened to JimmySpin, spinners can start the painful process of dying but not be captured by it immediately. It is not uncommon, for example, for an old spinner to run so low on energy during a very long move that he is flattened against the tyre wall, and the dying business starts. When the vehicle stops, though, the spinner may have sufficient energy to peel off and climb up to the hub to wait for the next move; or someone may help him. Of course, the spinner is depleted by the experience and may not survive another similar experience.

But that is enough about dying, a very unpleasant subject, which, unfortunately, I will have to return to again at some point.

As I turned to withdraw from the smell of the dead spinner and continue my explorations, I found a stranger unexpectedly close, right behind me. I suppose I hadn't 'felt' him because of the pungent atmosphere of death.

'What do you want?' the large ugly spinner asked in a gruff unfriendly way.

'Who is he, I mean who was he?'

'Nothing to do with you. Who are you? Not that I care much.'

'My name's TomSpin. You may have met my mother JessieSpin.' I tried to be civil.

'Bah, can't remember your name, so how's you expect me to remember your mother's. Now you're here, I can't do nothing about it. But I warn you to keep out of my way. No-one invited you here. Me and my family always got priority on the hub. And if you can't manage, you shouldn't have come.' The spinner was so rude, I couldn't restrain myself.

'I suppose you'll get rid of me, the way you got rid of him.' I was sure this would anger him and I regretted letting the thought slip out. I was wrong. He laughed grimly.

'Yeah, that's right. TumTumSpin. And don't let me catch you playing with my children either, there's six of us altogether and only two of you, so watch it.' And he slouched off still sniggering to himself. But I was intrigued by what he meant when he said 'two of you'. It didn't take long to find out.

Never has a spinner been so glad to see another spinner as I was when I bounced into Pippo a few seconds later. (There's a surprise - I managed to keep that one out of the chapter titles.)

'Pippo,' I cried, for I spotted him before he saw me.

'TomSpin. Damn and damnation, how did you get here? This is no place for beginners.'

I was so glad to see him, I wanted to hug him, and dance around, as we do sometimes. Pippo, though, did not share my feelings and, if anything, appeared cross.

'Pippo, I'm so glad to see you, I can't tell you what an awful time I've had since valve-entering this tyre.'

'Tell me about it, I've been here since I left you.'

'Oh no, Pippo, that's terrible.' And then, as my excitement calmed down, I realised how weak and ill he looked. He was dressed as a pyramid which is one way of dressing if you want to conserve energy (when not on a move).

'If you can't get out, how on earth will I manage?' But I regretted saying that straight away. How selfish could I get. My hero Pippo was suffering, and all I could think about was myself. 'Are you ill? Are you hurt? Can I help? Why didn't you fly?'

'Questions, questions, questions. Fact is, I tried to turn on the inflow, but it

was a short one, I missed my chance. My own fault. Fact is they took against me the first time I was here, and once back again, I had some trouble.'

'I think they take against everyone, if you ask me.'

'Well, I promised to teach that JoJoSpin a thing or two, like I did with you, but I tricked him proper.'

'Did you trick me too?'

'No, don't be a jelly. I knew JoJoSpin was rotten to the core, but I liked you - you were honest, straightforward, intelligent. Look you're here aren't you.'

'Worse luck.'

'Yeah well that's the luck of travelling for you. Worse luck to end up here twice,' he said. It occurred to me suddenly that I really had no idea what the world was like and, for all I knew, most tyres could be like this one, and not like my home or even Pootren and Ko's.

'Are there lots of place like this?' I asked rather afraid of the answer.

'No, this is one of the worst.' This was a relief, at least until I remembered that we were still here and with every prospect of starving to death.

'Haven't you been able to take a spin at all?'

'Trouble is, I wounded badly soon after valve-entry. What happened was this. Every time I went on the hub the pesky kids started bouncing on me and pulling; led by JoJoSpin they were dead serious and nearly broke me in two twice. I couldn't risk waiting around on the metal all elongated, so I decided to climb on the hub after a move started.'

'You never told me you could do that.'

'I couldn't and I can't. Truth is you made me feel like I could do anything. I should have been more patient, sat on the hub alert and dressed sausage-like whenever the kids came near and waited for the move, but, you know me, it was boring. I thought this would be the easy way. Trouble is, MaSpin hardly ever leaves the metal, and JoSpin's there most of the time too. Doesn't leave much room for manoeuvre. Know what I mean. The move started and, even though the kids were close by, I made a go for it. I elongated as long as I could, swung wildly in mid-air and tried to let the movement of the tyre catch me on the hub. I might have made it, except JoJoSpin, followed by the others, switched dress to a hook-shape and kept catching me as I elongated. Well to cut the story short, I was stretched out alright, but not safely on the hub, instead I got beaten and bruised, twisted and knotted, and ended up flat against the tyre wall. And, it wasn't just any old move. The geezer decided to take a long trek and it was as much as I could do to stop the onset of the dying business.'

'Oh Pippo.'