



## ***The Jam***

*Henry Slesar*

They left Stukey's pad around eight in the morning; that was the kind of weekend it had been. Early to bed, early to rise. Stukey laughed, squinting through the dirt-stained windshield of the battered Ford, pushing the pedal until the needle swung 20, 30 miles over the speed limit. It was all Mitch's fault, but Mitch, curled up on the seat beside him like an embryo in a black leather womb, didn't seem to care. He was hurting too much, needing the quick jab of the sharp sweet point and the hot flow of the stuff in his veins. Man, what a weekend, Stukey thought, and it wasn't over yet. The fix was out there, someplace in the wilds of New Jersey, and Stukey, who never touched the filthy stuff himself, was playing good Samaritan. He hunched over the wheel like Indianapolis, pounding the horn with the heel of his right hand, shouting at the passing cars to *move over, move over you . . . watch where you're going, stupid, pull over, pull over, you lousy . . .*

"You tell 'em, man," Mitch said softly, "you tell 'em what to do."

Stukey didn't tell them, he showed them. He skinned the paint off a Buick as he snaked in and out of the line, and crowded so close to the tail of an MG that he could have run right over the little red wagon. Mitch began to giggle, urging him on, forgetting for the moment his destination and his need, delighting in the way Stukey used the car like a buzz saw, slicing a path through the squares in their Sunday driving stupor. "Look out, man," Mitch cackled, "here comes old Stukey, here comes nothin'."

The traffic artery was starting to clot at the entrance to the tunnel, and Stukey poured it on, jockeying the car first left and then right, grinning at the competitive game. Nobody had a chance to win with Stukey at the controls; Stukey could just shut his eyes and gun her; nobody else could do that. They made the tunnel entrance after sideswiping a big yellow Caddy, an episode that made Mitch laugh aloud with glee. They both felt better after that, and the tunnel was cool after the hot morning sun. Stukey relaxed a little, and Mitch stopped his low-pitched giggling, content to stare hypnotically at the blur of white tiles.

"I hope we find that fix, man," Mitch said dreamily. "My cousin, he says that's the place to go. How long you think, Stukey? How long?"

*Whish!* A Chevy blasted by him on the other lane, and Stukey swore. *Whish!* went an Oldsmobile, and Stukey bore down on the accelerator, wanting his revenge on the open road outside the tunnel. But the tunnel wound on, endlessly, longer than it ever had before. It was getting hot and hard to breathe; little pimples of sweat covered his face and trickled down into his leather collar; under the brass-studded coat, the sport shirt clung damply to his back and underarms. Mitch started to whine, and got that wide-eyed fishmouth look of his, and he gasped: "Man, I'm suffocating. I'm passing out . . ."

"What do you want me to do?" Stukey yelled. Still the tunnel wound on. *Whish!* went the cars in the parallel lane, and Stukey cursed his bad choice, cursed the heat, cursed Mitch, cursed all the Sundays that ever were. He shot a look at the balcony where the cops patrolled the traffic, and decided to take a chance. He slowed the car down to 35, and yanked the wheel sharply to the right to slip the car into a faster lane, right in front of a big, children-filled station wagon. Even in the tunnel roar they could hear its driver's angry shout, and Stukey told him what he could do with his station wagon and his children. Still the tunnel wound on.

They saw the hot glare of daylight at the exit. Mitch moaned in relief, but nothing could soften Stukey's ire. They came out of the tunnel and turned onto the highway, only to jerk to a halt behind a station wagon with a smelly exhaust. "Come on, come on!" Stukey muttered, and blew his horn. But the horn didn't start the cars moving, and Stukey, swearing, opened the door and had himself a look.

"Oh, man, man, they're stacked up for miles!" he groaned. "You wouldn't believe it, you wouldn't think its possible . . ."

"What is it?" Mitch said, stirring in his seat. "What is it? An accident?"

"I dunno, I can't see a thing. But they just ain't movin', not a foot——"

"I'm sick," Mitch groaned. "I'm sick, Stukey."

"Shut up! Shut up!" Stukey said, hopping out of the car to stare at the sight again, at the ribbon of automobiles vanishing into a horizon 10, 15 miles away. Like one enormous reptile it curled over the highway, a snake with multicolored skin, lying asleep under the hot sun. He climbed back in again, and the station wagon moved an inch, a foot, and greedily, he stomped the gas pedal to gobble up the gap. A trooper on a motorcycle bounced between the lanes, and Stukey leaned out of the window to shout at him, inquiring; he rumbled on implacably. The heat got worse, furnace-like and scorching, making him yelp when his hands touched metal. Savagely, Stukey hit the horn again, and heard a dim chorus ahead. Every few minutes, the station wagon jumped, and every few minutes, Stukey closed the gap. But an hour accumulated, and more, and they could still see the tunnel exit behind them. Mitch was whimpering now, and Stukey climbed in and out of the car like a madman, his clothes sopping with sweat, his eyes wild, cursing whenever he hit the gas pedal and crawled another inch, another foot forward . . .

"A cop! A cop!" he heard Mitch scream as a trooper, on foot, marched past the window. Stukey opened the car door and caught the uniformed arm. "Help us, will ya?" he pleaded. "What the hell's going on here? How do we get outa this?"

"You don't," the trooper said curtly. "You can't get off anyplace. Just stick it out, Mac."

"We'll even leave the . . . car. We'll walk, . . . I don't care about the damn car . . ."

"Sorry, mister. Nobody's allowed off the highway, even on foot. You can't leave this heap here, don't you know that?" He studied Stukey's sweaty face, and grinned suddenly. "Oh, I get it. You're new here, ain't you?"

"What do you mean, new?"

"I thought I never saw you in the Jam before, pal. Well, take it easy, fella."

"How long?" Stukey said hoarsely. "How long you think?"

"That's a stupid question," the trooper sneered. "Forever, of course. Eternity. Where the hell do you think you are?" He jabbed a finger into Stukey's chest. "But don't give *me* a hard time, buster. That was your *own* wreck back there."

"Wreck?" Mitch rasped from inside the car. "What wreck? What's he talkin' about, man?"

"The wreck you had in the tunnel." He waved his gloved hand toward the horizon. "That's where *all* these jokers come from, the tunnel wrecks. If you think this is bad, you ought to see the Jam on the turnpike."

"Wreck? Wreck?" Mitch screamed, as Stukey climbed behind the wheel. "What's he talking about wrecks for, Stukey?"

"Shut up, shut up!" Stukey sobbed, pounding his foot on the gas pedal to gain yet another inch of road. "We gotta get outa here, we gotta get out!" But even when the station wagon jerked forward once more, he knew he was asking for too much, too late.