

Hard Traveling

Category: Stories

written by Ted Epperly | May 4, 2021



Desperate times
call for
desperate measures...

I heard him coming before I saw him.

Kerflop...kerflop...kerflop...

The sound grew louder as a pale, gaunt man in a red Toyota pickup truck pulled into our clinic's lot. He parked in front of the window where I was seated.

Today was the first day of our COVID-19 vaccination clinic for patients over age sixty-five. As the man shut off the ignition, I couldn't help but notice his truck's front left tire: It was totally destroyed, with rubber shards hanging off the rim. The man, visibly shaken, was ashen gray and panting for breath.

"My name's Robert, and I'm here for my vaccine," he gasped, as I helped him out of the truck and into a wheelchair, then wheeled him into our clinic.

"Robert, I'm amazed that you even attempted to get to us," I said.

"For a whole year, I haven't once left my home," he replied breathlessly. "But there's no way I was going to miss this. My pickup has had that flat for over a year, and I had to drive twelve miles on it to get here. It took more than an hour."

Panting and distraught, he described the trek—how the passing drivers had honked and cursed at him, pointing unhelpfully at his shredded tire as the truck crawled along.

"I have emphysema," he finished. "I had to leave my oxygen tank behind, because the tubing is all worn out."

Hearing these words, I felt stunned. What an ordeal he'd endured to reach our clinic!

After the clinic staff took him to an exam room and gave him oxygen, he started to calm down. Then we were able to give him the first dose of his Moderna vaccine.

"Robert," I asked, "how are you planning to get home?"

"The same way I got here, Doc—driving my truck twelve miles back on that same flat tire."

"Would you mind if we changed the flat and put your truck's spare tire on?"

He looked up at me with dark, deep-set eyes. "Won't make any difference; it's flat too."

I asked him if he had any family he could call to get him safely back home. He said he had none, and that his pickup was his only way of getting around: "Can't leave it."

"Well," I said hopefully, "would you mind if we bought you a new tire?"

He stared into my eyes, in seeming disbelief.

"Would you do that?" he asked.

"We most certainly would!" I assured him.

Slowly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his car keys. "Your clinic has always been full of sweethearts!" he exclaimed.

My friend Tad, our chief operating officer, happened to be at the clinic. I loaded Robert's flat spare tire into Tad's truck, and Tad took it to a local tire dealer, who brought over a new tire, plus a mechanic to install it on Robert's truck. When he'd finished, I wheeled Robert outside to the truck.

His eyes darted to the front left tire. He didn't say a word, but tears started to roll down his face and into his mask. He was clearly overwhelmed. I wondered whether he was thinking of the vaccine he'd just received, of the honks and cursing he'd no longer have to suffer on his journey home—or of everything at once.

Eyes wet, he thanked me profusely for our care.

"Don't worry about it," I told him. "Consider this one covered by the clinic, since it matters to us how people navigate through life."

"Would it be all right if I just sit here in the wheelchair for a while with the oxygen tank before driving back home?" he asked.

"Sure, take your time," I said. We agreed that he'd take the oxygen tubing, for use with his tank at home. Five minutes later, I helped him into the truck, handed him the tubing and watched him steel himself, turn on the ignition and drive off.

Later on, reflecting on Robert, I was struck once more by his desperation.

His having left his house for the first time in a year to drive on a remarkably flat tire down a road that must have felt endless, all the while feeling increasingly suffocated from lack of oxygen, testifies to just how much this vaccine meant to him.

It is powerful proof of the vaccine's value to people who have sheltered at home this past year, people who are now catching their first glimpse of hope amid this long, dark pandemic. For me, Robert's new tire seemed to perfectly embody this renewal of hope.

Four weeks later, I saw Robert again, when he returned for his second vaccine shot.

"I'm doing much better," he told me. "I drove here in fifteen minutes—and I have my oxygen with me. Thanks to your clinic and this vaccine, I'm ready to give life a shot again."

"Wow, Robert looks a lot better than he did last month," a nurse said to me, as he drove away. "And so does his truck."

At times like these, may we all pull together and take every opportunity to look out for one another.