

Highway 21

Fujio shook himself awake at 5 am, rolled up his futon and stumbled down the dark hallway to the toilet. If he'd known what was going to happen today Fujio wouldn't have gotten out of bed. But he didn't, so he did. He could feel the cold air leaking in around the window and he could see the trees bending in the wind. It was another cold March day and the temperature inside was nearly the same as outside minus most of the wind. Fujio took a cold bath and combed his wavy black hair. He put on clean underwear and used the one toothbrush the three guys had in the apartment. Moving back to the dark bedroom he found his uniform and shoes on the floor and got dressed. His roommates didn't have to get up for another hour. He grabbed his jacket, walked out the front door and started down Hitachi, or Sunrise Street.

Fujio Marubeni, a 24-year old Osaka native, had moved with two friends to the small industrial city of Nakagano, Japan seven months earlier in search of work. Fujio had been a part-time truck driver in Osaka for three years until he got in an accident and was arrested for not having a license to drive commercially. In his new city, however, he took commercial driver's training and passed the test. A week later, with certification in hand, he showed up at the right time and place and got a job driving for Okuso Petroleum. For the past six months he'd been making early morning deliveries for Okuso.

Two blocks from the apartment Fujio stepped into a shop for a cup of hot tea. He sat at the window bar for a moment and held the cup in both hands. The warmth of the tea and the shop almost allowed him to stop shaking. He pulled the collar up on his jacket and walked four more blocks to the Okuso yard. He checked out his truck and pulled it to the petroleum filling platform where he took on 14.2 kiloliters, (about 4,000 gallons). Fujio exchanged morning chatter with two other drivers while his tanker was being loaded. He signed for the load, pulled his rig out of the lot at 6:45 am and turned east. This morning's run was up Highway 21, through the Kinpouzan mountain tunnel and down the other side into Toyota City. Fujio made this delivery on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, supplying Toyota's plants #2 and #5 with petroleum for filling each new vehicle with a quarter tank of gas. Depending on the weather and traffic he'd be at the Toyota facilities around noon. He'd be unloaded and on his way back to Nakagano an hour later. He had to remember to buy a toothbrush when he got back.

The morning fog was rolling up the side of the mountain as Fujio ran through the gears and climbed the foothills of Kinpouzan. A

heavy rain started at an altitude of 1600 feet and stayed with him all the way to the tunnel, at 1900 feet. The rather light Wednesday traffic was slowed a bit by the lack of visibility but the regular drivers on Highway 21 were used to this region's morning elements.

Fujio turned up the cab heater, switched on the radio music and settled in for a four hour run. He smiled as he thought about this coming weekend. He was going to visit his girlfriend, Yumie, back in Osaka. They'd been dating for four months before he moved. He'd been surprised and disappointed when she seemed to keep her distance after he'd been fired. But now he had a good job and he was planning to ask her to join him in Nakagano. He wouldn't expect her to move in with him right away but he was hoping they could just start over. Fujio was also looking forward to the summer months. Nakagano was less than an hour from the sea and he and Yumie would spend weekends walking the beaches.

The blinking yellow highway signs announced the tunnel long before Fujio could see the entrance between windshield wiper strokes. He slowed to 50 and the tanker entered the 2.7 kilometer tunnel in the outside left lane. The tunnel was well lit and he was temporarily protected from the rain. The radio died into steady, low static in the tunnel.

Traffic was moving in unison when Fujio noticed the Nissan sedan in front of him speed up. The car created a gap of about fifty meters in front of the tanker when Fujio saw the car spilling, or possibly even spraying, oil on the highway. What was this idiot doing? Fujio steered his rig straight and resisted braking to avoid skidding. He was headed straight toward the Nissan, which by now was sliding sideways across the tunnel.

Reacting involuntarily, Fujio jammed the brakes and his rig slid sideways and began to jack-knife across both eastbound lanes. His rig, with 4000 gallons of petroleum pushing it, slid into the Nissan with a blast of sparks and metal scraping on cement. The vehicle transporter behind the tanker slammed into Fujio and the tanker started turning over on its side. One of the transporter's new vehicles broke loose from the top rack and the momentum caused it to fly up and over the belly of the tanker.

Glancing out the rear window of the cab, Fujio saw a flash of color as a car flew over the midsection of his tanker. The small red vehicle dove into the Nissan and they both exploded in flames. Yumie's smooth face appeared to Fujio as he closed his eyes and held a death grip on the truck's steering wheel. The tanker rolled on its side

and rammed the burning vehicles into the pillars between the eastbound and westbound lanes. As the burning mass of metal slid into the pillars the tanker ruptured and exploded in a thundering fireball. The pillars and then the middle section of the tunnel started to collapse.