

# Tak Tuckerby

*by* Mike Lynch

Tak Tuckerby was a racecar driver. He could drive a racecar fast and handle a racecar perfectly. Unfortunately, Tak could only drive in one direction. Tak refused to turn his racecar in any direction unless he wanted to. No amount of coaxing would convince him. Ever. Circles? Nope. Ellipses? Out of the question. Oddly shaped lines? Don't bother. So you'd figure Tak would perhaps make a great drag racer, right? Wrong. Tak was terrible at that too. Tak wasn't good at starting or stopping his racecar when people told him to start or stop. Tak just went whenever the hell he felt like it. Tak was a damn capable accelerator, that's for sure. As soon as Tak made up his mind as to when the time was appropriate for him to go, well, Tak Tuckerby took off right then. No sooner, no later. But maybe that would be five or ten minutes after the light went green. "Fuck it," Tak would say to his race team, and he'd sit at the starting line while the cars beside his would rumble and take off in a cloud of smoke and screeching wheels.

Tak was nothing else. All racecar driver. He could only be a racecar driver. Tak knew this. He wanted desperately to be a racecar driver but Tak would only be a racecar driver on his terms. And Tak only had two terms. The starting and the turning, I mean. Tak didn't think that he was asking for much. Actually, Tak did have a third term now that I think about it. Tak would not drink alcohol. Tak knew that when he finally won his big race and everyone wanted to spray champagne celebrating his impressive victory, Tak would have to say something like, "Can you spray something other than champagne because I don't drink alcohol." Tak didn't want to be a stick in the mud and wasn't looking forward to asking this of his mechanics, crew, and pit team. Luckily, impressive victory had managed to elude Tak Tuckerby. Tak never won any race he was ever in. On one hand, Tak had all the skills necessary to be an excellent racecar driver. On the other hand, Tak sucked at being a racecar driver. No, that's not true. People are too hard on Tak. Tak

didn't suck at being a racecar driver—but that's not to say that he was doing a very good job of it either.

Again I may have misled you a little bit. In Tak's own mind he did not suck at being a racecar driver. In his opinion Tak won a lot of races. These victories, which were as significant as any other victories to Tak Tuckerby, usually took place when the person Tak was racing against had no idea he or she was racing with Tak. These victories were not against professional racecar drivers, but oftentimes against shopping mall patrons and minivans leaving fast-food restaurants. For this reason, no one recognized the many splendid victories of Tak Tuckerby, no matter how exciting or challenging or how difficult they had been to earn. These were victories. They were real — Tak had defeated real people. Tak didn't care who was driving the other car. A race is a race — winning was all that mattered. Tak drove like a true racecar champion in those races. The ones he won against people who didn't know they were racing with him. And if only Tak could have harnessed that spirit in his recognized racing endeavors he would have been the greatest racecar champion ever to touch the gas pedal of a competitive racing vehicle. Alas, this was not to be.

So Tak quit professional racecar driving and began to seek employment elsewhere. Tak drove Zambonis for a short time at the Oswald Prank Memorial Skating Rink. Tak drove his Zamboni like a true racecar champion. He cleaned the skating rink of powder and skate marks more quickly than anyone had ever seen in the history of the Oswald Prank Memorial Skating Rink. People, after watching Tak pilot the Zamboni, would sometimes approach the former racecar driver and say, "Man, you should try racing automobiles." Every time Tak heard this he would feel his heart dip slightly into his stomach. Tak knew a future in racecar driving was out of the question.

Tak turned to drink. But since Tak didn't drink alcohol his drink of choice was Paddy Sue's Old-Timey Liquid Marmalade. Paddy Sue's Old-Timey Liquid Marmalade didn't contain any liquor, or drugs, or anything else that could be attributed to altering the mental

framework of your average everyday citizen, but in the hands of Tak Tuckerby that Old-Timey Liquid Marmalade was dynamite. So one afternoon while Tak was deftly polishing the Oswald Prank Memorial Skating Rink all hopped up on Paddy Sue's Old-Timey Liquid Marmalade he had a bit of an accident. Tak forgot not only to announce he intended to prematurely clean the Oswald Prank Memorial Skating Rink, but that he also intended to do so in the grand and glorious fashion of a racecar champion. Up until the moment of his accident, Tak was landing some real crackerjack Zamboni maneuvers, maneuvers which no one at the Oswald Prank Memorial Skating Rink had ever seen, nor will they likely see ever again. Tak then lost control and plowed his Zamboni into the Frankfurt-Deli Peewee League Hockey All-Star Team with the zeal of a racecar champion, sending a half dozen youngsters to the Frankfurt-Deli Medical Treatment Facility with scrapes, bruises, and missing fingers. Quite a mess. Tak lost his job at the Oswald Prank Memorial Skating Rink and was sentenced to ninety days of community service. Tak was also forced to enroll himself in a substance abuse treatment program. Nobody would believe that Tak was not, in fact, a full-blown alcoholic.

Tak found another job. He was employed at a used bookstore called Second for None Books. Tak hated the notion of a job so unrelated to his passion for racecar driving but it was all he could find, and Tak desperately needed the money for his rent and to help pay the medical bills of the Frankfurt-Deli Peewee League Hockey All-Star Team. Tak's boss at Second for None Books was a tall sandpaper-skinned man named Tan Faulkner. Tan was a very encouraging and understanding individual and had hired Tak Tuckerby knowing full well of his unfortunate Zamboni incident. Tak swore that he would kick Paddy Sue's Old-Timey Liquid Marmalade. Tan believed him. Tak held true to his word. Tak was that kind of a guy.

After working together for about six months, Tak and Tan grew very close. Father and son close. Tan allowed Tak to devote a tiny corner of the store to racecar-related books. He also bought Tak six

packs of soda to sip at work in order to help him kick the marmalade. Tan allowed Tak to leave early when he had stuff to do, gave him nice days off, and let him have a key to the store so he could close and open up shop. Tan even paid for lunch sometimes. Well, not paid exactly. Tan sent Tak to pick up lunch from the restaurant next door, which was operated by Tan's wife Lisa. Lisa was a short blonde woman who was just as friendly and understanding as Tan. Lisa and Tak soon got along just as well as Tan and Tak had, which unfortunately led to a brief and unfulfilling affair. Tak was not particularly good at sexually pleasing Lisa because Tak fucked Lisa with the speed of a racecar champion in the thick of a drag race. Eventually Lisa got sick of Tak's pitiful excuse for sex and announced the affair to Tan who was prompt in removing Tak from his services. Tan also spit in Tak's face. He was really pissed off. Tak was deeply ashamed. Tan kept Tak's corner of the bookstore devoted to racecar-related books however. As it would turn out, Tak's corner of racecar books would be responsible for a majority of the store's book sales over the next ten years. Imagine that!

The night he was fired, Tak sat at home guzzling jar after jar of Paddy Sue's Old-Timey Liquid Marmalade. Everything had fallen apart. And so quickly! How was he going to dig himself out of this? The phone rang. Tak, in his marmalade haze, did not answer it. "Who cares?" he thought, sniffing and wiping his nose on the sleeve of his shirt. "What could anyone possibly want with a wretch like me?" The phone rang three more times. And two more times after that. Slowly, Tak untucked himself from a comfortable nook towards the bottom of an amiable pit of despair. He then crawled on his hands and knees to where his black plastic telephone was situated in the corner of his apartment and unhooked the receiver. He coiled the phone cord around his despairing finger, trembled, and slowly brought the receiver to his face. It was cool and had a strong plastic scent.

"Hello?" said Tak, his voice both thick and soft.

"Tak Tuckerby?" chirped a response.

It was a woman on the other end of the line. Tak found the sound of a human voice enchanting, and a grin broke across his face. She had asked for Tak both by his first and last name. No one ever asked for Tak by both his first and last name. Not even in his racecar driving days.

"Yes?" Tak's voice squeaked as he made the "e" sound in yes. He was giddy. The world was a better place. His dank apartment no longer smelled like stale socks and spoiled meat, but of fresh flowers and expensive exotic soap. He waited for the next utterance from the voice on the other end of the line. His mouth began to water in anticipation.

"Well, Mr. Tuckerby. I'm calling on behalf of the Frankfurt-Deli Citizens Collective and I was wondering whether you would be interested in donating money to the campaign for a new fire hydrant on the corner of Lancaster and Delaware? We would be th —" Tak hung up the phone. It took all the will power he had to keep from vomiting. He'd had enough. The world was puke again. Tak wanted to leave. To go somewhere. Tak didn't know where to go so he went outside and walked down the street to a stand where they sold cheap burritos twenty-four hours a day. The burrito stand was located on a plot of land that used to be a gas station. The evening was still young and the stand's green neon sign had yet to be lit. Brown wooden picnic tables were scattered out front where the gas pumps once were. A fat, balding, pink-skinned man in stained blue sweatpants sat at a picnic table looking swollen and drinking his fourteenth beer as Tak arrived. He was remarkably sober for fourteen beers.

"You open?" Tak groaned.

"Sure, sure. Just on my break. I'm the nightshift guy. You look like shit, fella. You want one?" Using his foot, the cook motioned to a small dirty cooler by his feet.

"No thanks." Tak planted himself on the picnic table a healthy masculine distance from the cook and rubbed his hands together to ward the cold night air off.

"Eh? You want a burrito?" the cook asked without turning towards Tak and then continued, "What kinda burrito you in the mood for? You sure you want one? They're no good really. No good. But if you want one, you want one. A burrito, I mean. So whatcha havin'? What you want?"

Tak looked at the burrito chef with a puzzled expression on his face. He sniffled and rubbed his nose with his sleeve. "Not sure what I want. Out for a walk, figured I'd get a burrito. What do you recommend?"

The cook turned his head and cracked his neck as he thought. Then he belched, leaned back deeply, and rifled an empty beer can into the distance. "Hell," he said, "I recommend you have a burger. I'm kinda sauced and could never cook burritos worth a shit to begin with. In fact, why don't you go get us a couple of burgers? Here." The cook fished for a minute in the pocket of his stained blue sweatpants and pulled out a set of keys, separating one slightly larger key from the rest. "You can take my truck. You look like a good kid. And besides, you'd have to be a fucking moron to steal my shitty fucking truck!" The cook motioned towards his truck using a fresh beer. He wasn't lying. The cook's truck really was a giant pile of shit. Rust had eaten a huge hole inside the bed and there was a dent in the hood that made the truck look like a frowning monster. Tak was, however, strangely inclined to go on this midnight burger run in the nightshift burrito cook's shitty fucking truck.

Tak accepted the cook's keys and jumped to his feet. This new mission had reinvigorated him. "Alright," Tak said. "What am I gettin' ya?"

"Uuuuh. Hmmm." The cook thought for a minute with a pained look on his face. He started sweating. He continued thinking until in a fit of agitation he flailed his arms and shouted, "Just get me three — no four, four of whatever you're having. Okay?" The cook fished through the pocket of his stained blue sweatpants and pulled out a crumpled up ten with some pennies and nickels wrapped inside. "Keep the change," he laughed, handing it to Tak. He then tapped on the cooler by his feet and said, "Want one for the road?"

The cook's truck drove not much better than it looked. It took awhile for Tak to acclimate to the controls, but once he did, Tak drove that piece of shit with the spirit of a racecar champion. Tak gulped on the beer the cook had given him while the truck's engine rumbled, idling at a red light by Jefferson Boulevard and Main. "Beer. What an excellent idea," thought Tak. It both tasted and felt better than he thought it would. Tak finished the beer while idling at the traffic light. It turned green, yellow, red, green again. Tak would go when he felt like it. There were no other cars on the road and the land around him was barren. Cool air formed fog on the truck's windshield. Tak wiped it away with the shirtsleeve he'd been wiping his nose on all evening, which only compounded the filth. He fumbled on the dashboard to find a defroster but found nothing. The windshield's haze was thick and could not be seen through.

Tak had no idea what color the traffic light was. He couldn't even see it. But the instant Tak wanted to, he took off without hesitation, instinctively, and Tak drove that truck with more skill and control than anyone had ever driven it up to that point in time.

An hour later, Tak arrived at the burrito stand parking lot. Its green neon sign was lit declaring the stand to be open "24 hrs." The light from the sign hit the filthy windshield of the truck as Tak pulled in, causing the whole cab to light up in a brilliant glowing green.

As Tak approached the burrito stand with a greasy paper sack full of burgers, the nightshift burrito cook was sleeping pleasantly on a picnic table along with several empty beer cans. Tak quietly stacked the cook's burgers beside his unconscious body and sat down to eat his own. Then Tak stopped, burger before his mouth. "Why not?" he thought.

Tak brought his burgers into the burrito stand and added a bit of bar-b-q sauce. Then he added garlic powder. Then onions. And on it went, until the noise Tak was making in the stand woke up the unconscious burrito cook.

The cook was in a daze. He wiped the drool from his face and slowly came to grips with reality. He then realized something was

going on inside his stand. "Yo!" the cook yelled, lifting his head from the picnic table. "What the FUCK is going on in there?"

Tak Tuckerby popped up from behind the counter. "Making burgers," he said. "You want one?"

"I thought you were fuckin' BUYING burgers. And what th... what's this MAKING shit?" The cook tried to get on his feet, and while doing so he knocked over the tower of wrapped burgers which Tak had carefully stacked on his picnic table. "MMMMmmmm..." moaned the cook as he picked up a burger. He sniffed it. Dusted it off. Unwrapped it gently like an archeologist excavating the ruins of a legendary temple. The cook then attacked that burger like it'd insulted his mother. Meanwhile, Tak wandered out from behind the burrito stand with a couple of his burgers and sat down on the picnic table a healthy masculine distance from the cook.

"I bought the burgers. I just added some stuff you had behind the stand." Tak held up a burger. The burrito cook eyed Tak suspiciously. Then the burger. Then Tak again. Then he thought for awhile. While he thought, pieces of his first burger slowly lost their grip on his face and chin and slid off. Tak winced and then said, "Seriously. Try one of mine. They're alright." Tak pulled a beer from the cook's cooler, cracked it open, and gulped it loudly.

So the burrito cook tried one of Tak's burgers. Skeptically at first. The same way an eight year old tests the water in a swimming pool. The burrito cook nibbled at Tak's burger and scowled as if something about the burger left him confused. And then, rather suddenly, the cook devoured the rest of the burger with a ferocity that made the way he ate his first burger seem civilized by comparison. "Holy FUCK!" exclaimed the cook, adding in the most frank manner he was capable of, "This is the best fucking burger I've ever eaten! This shit is incredible! Thank you! How'd you do that?"

Tak Tuckerby blinked.

"Really," said the cook. "No fucking around. How? Christ. Can I have another? You shoulda told me. I mean, we had burgers here in the stand. You coulda just made 'em yourself."

Tak Tuckerby blinked twice more and said, "You can have the rest. Knock yourself out."

The cook's eyes lit up. "No shit?" Then Tak saw a burger vanish almost instantly, followed by some coughing and gagging. The cook then stood up, coughed up a hunk of burger, and gasping for air, said, "Man, almost killed myself with that one. Listen, man. You need a job? You should try opening a burger stand. In fact, why don't you work at mine?" The cook grabbed a beer from the cooler, cracked it, and drank hard from it. "Hell, I won this shitty burrito stand in a fucking bet on a softball game. I don't know shit about burritos! With your burgers, we could kick ass!"

When Tak heard this he felt his heart jump slightly into his throat. Tak hadn't made those burgers with the spirit of a racecar champion. And while the sweaty nightshift burrito cook stuffed Tak Tuckerby's bar-b-q burgers, one after another, into his face, Tak sat drinking beer and watching happily. Tak Tuckerby was a much better burger cook than he ever was a racecar driver.

