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TUE NOV 12, 2013

PEOPLE

Tow-truck confidential

Great tales of Toronto-motorist ineptitude, as told by the guys who see it on the roads every single day on the job.

BY: KIM HUGHES

It's no exaggeration to say that driving in Toronto can be a harebrained experience filled with bizarre sights and heart-stopping moments. But if you think you've seen some stupid moves on the road, consider the view of the tow-truck driver—that guy (and it's almost always a guy) called in to haul away the crashes, disentangle the smooching bumpers, extract the spontaneous drive-throughs, and generally tidy up our increasingly messy roadways. Like plumbers and roofers, tow-truck drivers are professionals you never really think about until you need them, and by then you almost always need them *badly*.

As I watched a middle-aged woman inexplicably plow her late-model Toyota driven into the side of a parked Mercedes SUV on my quiet street on a bone-dry Sunday night in October, I thought: there must be some real thigh-slappers/head-scratchers out there in the land of towing and recovery. And indeed, according to Abrams Towing Services Ltd., some 3,000 vehicles are towed somewhere every day in the GTA. Crazy, right? Setting aside the horror stories comprising the most unwelcome part of the tow-truck drivers' job, what are some of the weirdest wrecks these winching warriors have witnessed? We asked a few.

Robert Chowns, manager/driver with Abrams Towing Services Ltd.: "I see so much crazy stuff—so many silly, silly wrecks—that it seems normal to me now. I got a call from a guy in Rosedale once, maybe five or six years ago. He had parked his car on the street and his 15-year-old daughter had begged him to please let her pull it into the driveway, which was a single-car driveway. At the end of the driveway was a little grass hill separating that house and the neighbouring house. So she pulls up into the driveway, goes to hit the brake, [but] hits the gas [instead], launches the car onto this grass hill and somehow wedges the car two feet off the ground between the two houses. It's a brand-new Jeep Cherokee and dad is saying there is something wrong with the brakes. I could pretty much guarantee there was *nothing* wrong with the brakes. On top of all that, the Jeep had hit the gas meter on the neighbours' house, so Enbridge and the fire department had to be on scene. The girl couldn't even get out of the car because it was wedged

between the two houses. She got out through the back window.”

Norbert Toste, driver with JP Towing Service & Storage Ltd.: A few months ago, we had a guy who wanted to go to the drive-through car wash but he went in the wrong way and ended up getting stuck right in the middle. He thought he was going in the right way, but he went in the wrong way. As soon as the water started coming down, his car wouldn’t move so we ended up getting a little bit of a shower trying to get him winched out. It took us about half an hour to get that car out. So that was unusual.

David Quigley, owner of Keele Street Collision: The thing is, all our stories are kind of silly because these are accidents, right? It’s insane to think somebody can ricochet off someone’s car and end up in a swimming pool but those are pretty standard. I mean, I personally have never recovered a car from a pool but lots of drivers have...

Robert Chowns, Abrams Towing: There was an elderly gentleman who had been vacationing in his home country of Italy for several weeks and so he hadn’t driven. He came back, landed in Toronto, he got in his car and drove home. When he got to his house, he popped the garage, started driving into the garage and his wife somehow distracted him. He went to press the brake, instead hit the gas and he launched the car right through the garage, out the back wall and into the back yard where the front wheels went into the swimming pool before the car stopped.

Norbert Toste, JP Towing: Two weeks ago, I had a gentleman who wanted to do some work on a house and decided to go through the back laneway, but it was under construction and it was all muddy because it had rained the night before. This guy was driving his van, saw some dry spots and thought he could make it, so he drove in and dug himself into a huge puddle of mud. I had to use 150 feet of my winch cable to pull him out. The guy thought he was driving a four-by-four. But unfortunately Dodge Caravans don’t come in four-by-fours, ha ha. He was really stuck in that mud. I had to give myself and my truck a good rinse after that... and I lost my shoes in the mud. Customers are usually pretty good about settling the bills. They realize they are paying for their own stupidity. That guy was like, ‘I should have just walked across instead of driving.’ We try to be reasonable—these things cost anywhere from about \$60 to about \$100 or \$150 at most.


David Quigley, Keele Street Collision: People’s cars will break down on the highway and instead of trying to roll off onto the shoulder, they will stop in the middle. I’ve seen people get out and look under the hood of their car in lane two of a five-lane roadway with no regard for the danger they are in. I zoomed right by a guy in that very spot. I tried to position my truck in the lane that car was in and then quickly reversed with my lights on because he was in a very dangerous spot. But I lined up the wrong car in my rear-view and slammed right into him. I totalled his car because I didn’t see him. Most people think these things aren’t their fault even when they blatantly are, which is pretty comical. Sometimes, we get people trying to push false claims through to their insurance companies via our repair facility, which are so obvious. We had one just last Friday where the guy said his car was parked and it was hit. Anybody in the industry knows an airbag won’t deploy unless the car is driving. All this guy’s airbags were deployed.

Robert Chowns, Abrams Towing: Very young drivers and the elderly tend to mistake the brake for the gas. Just recently, I was at 404 and Sheppard where an elderly gentleman, about 85, was in a big old rear-wheel-drive Lincoln. He was backing out of his parking spot, went for the brake, hit the gas and plowed his car into another elderly gentleman’s Buick—which was mint, by the way. The man told the cops he couldn’t understand why he was still pushing into the car when he was slamming down on the brake. Which was actually the gas pedal. Instead of putting the car in neutral, he then put the car in drive, foot still on the gas, and took out another eight cars in this small parking lot. The carnage was all around him and he’s standing there shaking his head and saying, ‘I don’t understand what happened.’ And he’d totalled nine cars! But I have to say I like silly wrecks because it’s more challenging trying to get someone out of a weird spot.

Have you seen any really stupid accidents on the streets of Toronto? Share your stories in the comments section below.

TAGS *Abrams Towing Services Ltd., Commuting, David Quigley, JP Towing Service & Storage Ltd., Keele Street Collision, Norbert Toste, Robert Chowms, Tow trucks*

post a comment 

Latest 

Bob

I was driving my old motorhome north of Napanee Ontario on the way to a cottage when the transmission blew in the middle of nowhere (thanks to some flat tires from road construction debris that I had not seen). We are about 4 hours from Toronto on a Saturday afternoon of a long weekend, yet CAA sent a tow truck from Cobourg to rescue us. When the truck arrived 3 hours later, he went to hook up to us and found that his hydraulics were blown and he could not do anything. Where we had broken down, there was no cell service, however a very nice lady who lived there allowed us to use her phone. The tow truck driver called a friend to come and get us, which he did, about 5 hours later with another truck and we finally made it to our destination about 1:00 in the morning. Talk about a long trip!

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2:19 pm on November 18, 2013

 Reply  Report

Anonymous

Here's a note for David Quigley, Keele Street Collision. The air bag is designed to work even when you're not driving. If you're at a traffic light with the engine running, the air bag is absolutely powered and ready to deploy if necessary. It's ready any time the engine is on or your ignition key is on (even if the engine is not running). In a situation where the engine is turned off — even if the key is removed — the air bag will still have enough stored battery power to deploy for at least a few minutes. The number of minutes of reserve power varies from car to car, so there's no way to know exactly how many minutes a particular car's air bag will remain ready after you turn it off. But it's probably closer to five or 10 minutes than to 60 or 90 minutes.

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9:18 am on November 16, 2013

 Reply  Report

Vote NDP in the next federal/provincial election

Maybe the Grid should do a story on tow truck drivers who behave badly. Its not uncommon for tow truck drivers to make unsafe manoeuvres just to reach an accident scene.

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11:14 pm on November 14, 2013

 Reply  Report

K-Man

Ironically enough, I'm sure if you did a "ask the drivers" what the stupidest thing you've ever seen a Tow Truck driver do on the roads when he's rushing to be the first on-scene at an accident, you'll probably get even more of a response.

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12:18 pm on November 14, 2013

 Reply  Report

doubtful

I highly doubt it costs \$60 to about \$150 to pull a car out of mud. 3 years ago, I was involved in a 3 car accident (not my fault) where I was hit from behind. Sat in the car and waited 3 hours in the cold before it cleared. In the end, my car couldn't start up again. I was charged \$100 for the tow truck to boost my car to start – and that was 3 years ago, in the City of Toronto

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8:41 am on November 14, 2013

 Reply  Report

MasteryOfMystery

Some years ago I saw a Miata that T-boned a bridge on a perfect summer day. That kind of ineptitude takes real skill.

Today a woman in a van drifted into my lane just in front of me. I watched her in her side mirror, she was utterly oblivious to the fact there was less than 1/2m between our bumpers. On the way home I saw two cars change into the same lane. Both were signaling, but they each straddled the lane for several seconds before one of them gave the way.

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11:26 pm on November 13, 2013

 Reply  Report

JW

Typo (that sounds kind of racist, actually) in the query for comments: "Have you seen any really stupid ACCENTS on the streets of Toronto?" Please change! Cheers.

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11:34 pm on November 12, 2013

 Reply  Report

The Grid

Yikes! That was indeed a very, very unfortunate typo. Thanks for the catch. We have found our ID.

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11:39 pm on November 12, 2013

 Report

in reality

“Very young drivers and the elderly tend to mistake the brake for the gas”

I used to work in claims dept for an insurance company

100% of accidents i've dealt with where gas was pressed instead of a break involved a female driver and in a 100% of these situations they claimed they were pressing the break and that breaklines are faulty. Each time inspection proved that breaks were functioning properly. One client went through a Tim Hortons washroom wall in their SUV while attempting to park. No one ever admits they pressed the wrong pedal and froze up.

Having said that, truck drivers are bastards. God forbid you break down during a long weekend outside the city. These guys rob you blind.

Plus when the day isn't going so well, you can count on tow truck drivers to snitch on random cars for suspected drunk driving, racing, erratic driving or whatever, just so they get a chance at towing you to the impound. Commonly they'll pick sportscars for this type of thing because there is some prejudice against this vehicle when it comes to dealing with cops.

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2:27 pm on November 12, 2013

 Reply  Report

 **JV**

I call BS on the guy *only* getting charged \$150 bucks to get his Dodge van pulled out of the mud beside his house. The non accident rate in the GTA is way above that – in fact I'm willing to bet that was a \$300 bill. He's trying to make himself and his industry look really good low balling his charge here when meanwhile – talk to any Metro cop about how many of these guy's have criminal records and quite a few are either non-patch members of bike gangs or real friendly with these people. Get CCA membership – at least you have leverage if your treated badly.

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8:24 pm on November 12, 2013

 Report

 **JM**

A family member, 85 did the same. She came out of her underground parking and the “car went crazy” when she “stopped” before pulling into the street. Instead she likely pressed hard on the gas instead of the brake and crossed the street into a concrete utility pole. The car was less then a year old. It was a write-off.

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8:07 am on November 14, 2013

 Report

but i'm always right

If I feel so virtuous and right how could bad things happen to me. it must be someone else's fault

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1:28 pm on November 12, 2013

 Reply  Report