

4. Trucker Blues

San Bernardino: Friday, 15 May 2076

Tomas Redfoot is running half an-hour late when he enters the on-ramp of 30-East tollway extender. Discounting safety gaps in front of commercial rigs, he sees wall-to-wall vehicles in every lane. They plod ahead slower than ducks wobbling uphill.

Autonav won't help my **ETA**.
It won't clear this traffic jam.
Its safety guarantee stinks.
At least I'm not slaved in.
I'll have control of my truck
when the system wanks out
and causes a mangled crunch.

Near-lane vehicles hang back and open a traffic gap. His 3-ton joins the parade.

A green Firebug speeds by on the side shoulder as if doing a cop-car pursuit. It pokes ahead of his right fender and muscles onto his safety gap. Then it veers back on the side shoulder and streaks further ahead.

The punk has jimmied the autonav.
Gonna cause lots of dick-head trouble.

Tomas is red-faced as he fires imaginary missiles at the line jumper. Then the breeze stiffens and cools his torrid brow.

Thank the Virgin for open windows.

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Tomas has no love for the do-gooders in Sacramento. They've mandated the toughest emission tests in the whole USA. Every time they raise the compliance bar, they smack indie truckers square in the jaw.

Aircare inspections for commercial haulers have poured Salton Sea brine on his wounds. They've forced a 2nd-mortgage to pay for a new diesel-electric. The hybrid rig has never felt right. Instead of V8 growls, he gets autotran wines and electric jizzle.

Useless for gauging a motor's health.

Last year Aircare threatened to bleed him to death with emission fines. It left him with two bitter choices: buy a rig powered by Mallard fuel cells or convert to run on **CNG**.

A **Mallard** rig was out of the question, way beyond his means unless he won the lotto jackpot, so he chose the CNG conversion kit. But worn engine valves enforced a motor rebuild, a budget overrun and a 3rd-mortgage.

He curses Sacramento bloodsuckers till his face turns **melancòlico**.

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Taillights are flashing ahead.

"What the *hell*," Tomas mutters, as he hits the brakes. The anticrash kicks in, and the rear-end grumbles like a seismic aftershock.

Since he's kept a safe interval, he manages to avoid rear-ending the morons in front. He fumes as the parade slows to gridlock grind.

Over next arroyo, he spots the emergency flashers. A highway-patrol car straddles two lanes before a heap of twisted metal and splattered plastic. The green Firebug that jimmied the autonav has caused a three-car **mano a mano**. The spit-polished cop waves his arms like a yuppie scarecrow. He ushers three rows of frazzled drivers (now using manual mode) to a single bypass lane.

More time fritters away before Tomas gets the nod to ease past the carnage. He's glad to leave the spoils for the tow trucks. Empty vistas of roadway beckon. The motor hummers to life as it recharges the ultracaps that power the drivetrain. It also recharges the solid-state battery that powers the freezer unit.

He has to make up for the lost time. Late arrival will fritter away the trust he has built with customers. The speedometer creeps well above the posted limit.

Eyeball the radar detector.

Come hell or high water,

or the Virgin of Guadalupe.

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Tomas reckons CNG is another political football.

OK, maybe it's cleaner burning.

But since it comes from shale gas,

the sales go to homegrown producers,

not palaces of Middle East sheikdoms.

CNG lowers carbon emissions, but older engines emit too much nitric oxide. That's something he has learned the hard way after failing two Aircare inspections. Emission penalties have forced him to buy a new

motor with tighter engine valves.

An "el cheapo" rebuild wouldn't do because the emissions would grow worse year after year, causing failed inspections down the road. Tomas opted for a secondhand SOAR motor that promises low emissions for 25 years.

After begging for the whole enchilada at the savings & loan, he trucked to his favorite garage where Manny's grease monkeys handled the switchover.

Halfway through Manny dropped a dirty bomb. "Sorry, Tomas. Your tranny is fried."

Oh, choke!

Wouldn't y'know it.

When it rains, it pours.

With his credit stretched to the poorhouse, Tomas couldn't afford a new tranny unless he played tag with the loan sharks.

Why don't my lotto stubs
ever hit pay dirt? Not one
sniff after all these years.

Tomas scoured the junkyards where he got lucky and scored a secondhand transmission, a SOAR tranny that was dual-flywheel compatible.

His buddy Pedro, the junkyard honcho, never offers guarantees.

But who the heck cares?

Made-in-Orbit parts are s'pozed
to outlast the next ice age.

Tomas is a small-time hauler. He doesn't have smooth-talking sales reps or online job hunters to drum up new clients. His business has grown from word of mouth. His customers expect **JIT** service, and that calls for a reliable drivetrain.

The trade-off has forced Blanca, his eldest daughter, to postpone her dental work. Blanca is a brainy computer whiz. Crooked teeth make her look geekier than she is, and a mouthful of bridgework will only make things worse. Years will pass before the braces are removed and her charming smile revealed. He hates to prolong his daughter's ordeal. But if his cartage biz goes belly-up, she'll have crooked teeth forever.

Anna understands. His wife keeps the family on an even keel, but her calm demeanor doesn't snuff his guilt. When he faces Blanca at the dinner

table, he gets a slow burn in the gut.

No use challenging the EPA, and he'll get no sympathy in the public forums. If he rants like a gorilla in a floral shop, he'll see his name and address listed on the Eco-criminals' blacklist. The activists would love to slash his tires or pinch his CNG intakes.

The trouble is most folks are quebies: accountants, lawyers, talking heads, whatever. Quebies work in glass towers where they handle e-mails all day long. They know jack-all about physical labor. They don't break a sweat outside their fitness clubs. Quebies wanna see the hottest brands in every hypermall, and they expect their goodies delivered with sweet-smelling tailpipes.

Tomas knows the score. He's seen storm dikes erected around **LAX** and Governor Aerodrome. He knows the ocean levels are creeping over coastlands and flooding South Sea Islands.

Thank the Virgin, I don't live
on the Gulf Coast where smart money
has fled inland. Some of it has moved
into the very enclaves I cater to.

But why slap truckers with the burden? Emissions per kilom have been plunging for years. The real problem is too many vehicles crowding the roads. So-Cal truckers pay more carbon tax than haulers in other regions. **ZEST** inspectors monitor GHGs, but they allow supertanker-sized loopholes. Take India and China with their lax regs. Commercial rigs run on clean methanol made from dirty coal. What kind of hogwash is that?

No doubt about it, the global deck is stacked. Local consumers buy cheaper, untaxed products from Southeast Asia or **SOAM** where folks breed like rabbits and raise large families. Four, five, six kids or more. They decimate tropical rainforests and crowd into smog-hazed cities. Years will pass before they live by the same regs that's got him bleeding all over the highway.

The big corporations can afford to play by skewed rules. Their foreign plants operate under regs that are seldom enforced. Overseas factories hire shopworkers for peanuts. The tropics get 1st-dibs on electric power and a lion's share of spacer deorbs. Spacer colonists look down on everyone from their soup cans. They're like contented cows pursuing the god of self-reliance. They won't give Americans their due, even though USA pioneered interplanetary travel.

Where has the American Dream gone? Fifty years ago his grandparents risked life and limb to move up from **derruido** hovels in Chiapas. They worked hard. Their children worked hard. His compadres have gone from farm laborers to shop stewards, managers or lawyers, or cartage owners like him.

He pushes like mad to keep the mortgage loans at bay. Each month, operating costs drag him to the brink of the sewer. For what?

For the crime of raising two daughters and a son...

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Tomas follows a group of campers, pickups and SUVs moving to the exit lane. A crescent overpass leads to a two-lane highway that heads north.

A beep draws his eyes to the DTC readout.

\$4.50 gone from my tollway account.

Bloodthirsty Sacramento vampires!

At least the grab is for distance not time.

He rolls and winds through forested hills of San Bernardino National Forest. The road twists like a drunken snake while his truck labors on upgrades and sprints downhill. His transmission modulator responds sluggishly to the workloads, which tests his patience to the max.

Torcido hijo de puta!

Sporty coups make use of passing lanes on the uphills. Fuel-cell powered Vipers, Jaguars and Extremas shed whirlwinds as they vroom past.

Three garbage trucks whoosh by in the opposite direction, their slipstreams rattling his windshield. Tomas sniffs diesel fumes in their wake. The waste-disposal boys have another six months before environmental regs force them to burn 85% CNG and 15% biodiesel. Judging from the soot trails, they're making the most of the reprieve.

Mount Harrison towers to the right amid green multihues of foliage. A mix of alders, junipers and cypress dominate the lower slopes. Near the summit, broadleaves give way to scrub oaks and buckthorns.

He wheels past the familiar Pitstop with its fuel islands, a café and carryout store. Gasbars have become glitter boxes that sell everything from antifreeze to wisecracking toothpaste. They sell maps, winter chains, auto-supplies, pharmaceuticals and hot food at cozy HyperNet cafés. They offer traditional gasoline, biodiesel and ethanol-85 and surge

converters for rapid recharge. They have CNG hookups and methanol slurry for vehicles running on Mallard fuel cells.

Traffic problems and loading delays have frittered away his time cushion. There's none left for a Cup-a-Joe. So he glares with envy at the sedan in front pulling off for goodies.

Lush spring foliage hedges both sides the roadway. So-Cal parks have sought partnerships in recent years. Sponsoring orgs can establish private enclaves so long as the compounds don't ruin the natural sightlines for highway travelers. Rental fees help defray the parks' operating costs. The enclaves draw corporate log rollers for pep talks, team bonding and workshops. Some enclaves have built upscale hideaways for retirees.

Wexol Inc. sponsors the 1st-enclave on his route. Wexol is a transnational with its hands in computer hardware, aeronautics and nanotech. **GREENS** sponsors the 2nd-enclave. It's a spacer outfit that has its fingers in all kinds of ecological projects.

Tomas slows as he spots the sign for his 1st-stop.

Wexol Evangelical Convocation & Retreat

He swings onto a well-paved driveway. He maneuvers through two switchback curves before slowing to a halt at the entrance. The double-door entrance arches above the two-person-high concrete perimeter. Metal stays surround the doors, crossbars adding further support.

Andy swaggers from the guardhouse. He sports a ruddy face and green uniform that's clean-pressed. The handle of his sidearm pokes from a hip holster, sending out silent threats. He saunters over to Tomas's truck and assumes the pose of authority.

"Expected you earlier," he drawls.

Tomas has grown used to Andy's pompous manners. "Ran into a wreck on the tollway."

"Accident?" Andy whistles in disbelief. "A full hour delay?"

"Multicar mayhem."

"Hmm. One of your truckers lose it?"

"Nah. Some nerd in a Firebug jimmied the **autonav**."

"No shit? Must've b'en a raghead or a bearded mullah." He shakes head. "They teach their kids to rape goats."

Tomas doubts the scapegoat theory, but he keeps thoughts to himself. "Dunno," he replies. "Ambulance took the injured away before I got close."

"Let's hope your stuff kept cool while you waited."

"Count on it."

Tomas sounds upbeat but fails to convince himself. His late arrival is due more to delays loading foodstuffs than on the traffic accident. It took half an-hour for the freezer unit to cool down. To cut costs he has put off the monthly checkup at Manny's garage, so he's only part-way confident the goods have stayed cold.

"Where's your tag?"

Tomas fishes the ID tag from his breast pocket and clips it on. "There," he says.

"Best keep it visible, pal. Sooner or later, you'll get guards who don't know you."

"Thanks." Tomas has to force himself to nod sheepishly. "Next time."

Andy jumps back a full step. His face takes on a grim cast. He crouches down and fingers the handle of his sidearm. Tomas has seen this routine before, so he keeps a straight face.

After a pensive moment Andy grins and toggles the remote that opens the gate.

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The enclave sits on a broad ridge lending clear views of forested summits to the north and east. Straight ahead in his windshield, the auditorium looms. It's used for lectures, workshops or pray-o-thons.

The manicured lawn (flanked by hedgerows of flowery shrubs) smells of fresh-cut grass. Shrubs border walkways that connect the buildings. A few ornamental trees stand as tokens of the original forest.

A dirigible hangs in midair on its tethers. Corporate elect debark in single file down the slide-in stairway. A greeter ushers them to a dormitory building which stands between the arrival pads and auditorium.

Tomas scans three towers behind the auditorium where the longterm residents stay. Atop the towers are satellite dishes and reservoir drums.

Drinkable water is likely trucked
in from somewhere up north.

Maybe Oregon.

He steers his truck to the utility prefab. Its square form and stuccoed walls are the most ungainly structures on-site. In the rear sit two bland dumpsters on concrete slabs. The elect aren't supposed to notice the waste disposal or treatment plant that processes flush-toilet dredge into detoxified slabs. Its byproduct of unpotable water keeps grass green and flowers abloom.

A workhorse diesel thrums in the utility prefab. It generates electricity for the enclave. The diesel grows louder as he backs his rig to one-meter of the loading dock. Then he steps down and rummages in his pocket for the SkySafe remote.

The doors unlock because GPS confirms his preset destination. If waylaid by bandits en route, SkySafe wouldn't respond at the wrong location, so the doors would stay shut. Thieves would be forced to drive away with the goods still inside. SkySafe would log an alert for the police who'd track his rig wherever it went.

The insurance rep has badgered him to install SkySafe, though most hijackers strike at night when Tomas rarely hauls. The antitheft device takes another bite of his take-home.

He strolls to the rear of his truck and unhooks the latch. The decal of "Gourmet Foods" splits in halves as he opens the doors.

"Here at last! You're coming so late this day."

He recognizes the voice and grins at his favorite member of the kitchen crew. "Traffic jam," he explains.

Sarah wears a crisp-white food server's uniform. A corporate advert is printed in black letters across her chest.



My @HOAM

He climbs back in the cab, noses the back bumper flush with the loading dock, shuts the engine and jumps out.

"For dinner we cook buffalo steaks. Please, could you bring them first?"

She has an East-European accent, sturdy limbs and ample curves oozing youthful health. It's hard to tell if she's 18 or 15, whether she's completed high school or shunned it for the workforce. Tomas reckons she meant to say cattalo steaks, which are butchered from a crossbreed of cattle and buffalo. Cattalo is supposed to be kinder on the heart than beef

or pork, and the enclave can afford to pay the lofty price.

"I'll try." He grips the sidebar on his truck and boosts himself onto the loading dock. "Depends how they're packed," he explains, and hands Sarah his infowand.

She mates the infowand to her terminal and checks his manifest with the enclave's order. "Bless you, Tomas. Your lists are always agreeing with ours."

"We'll see."

Tomas holds this contract because he delivers on time without foul-ups. But there's no guarantee the manifest will match the physical goods. The only way to make sure is to check them off item by item.

He unhitches the lift cart and checks the temperature gauge.

The chill inside feels OK.

Temp is holding at 22°.

Thank heaven the gauge
still reads Fahrenheit,
otherwise I'd be wagging
the paddle without a creek.

He takes the morning glitch as a warning and vows to visit Manny's garage on the weekend.

The 1st-row is stacked with three 50-kilogram boxes labeled *Chicken Breasts*. He piles them onto the lift cart. Farther in, he spots the box of *Cattalo Steaks*. After some effort he wrestles it out and piles it atop the lift cart. He rebalances the cart and rolls across the metal bridge. As he nears the enclave freezer, Sarah grabs the cattalo steaks, hoists the box on her shoulder and marches for the kitchen.

Strong to cart 50 kilos. Oughta
make one-lucky guy a fine **esposa**.

It's hard to miss corporate advert that rejigs in sync with her bottom cheeks.

HOAM Rocks!



Shaking his head, he heads back to the freezer and checks off *Cattalo Steaks* and three boxes of *Chicken Breasts*. He runs down the remaining list of frozen meats:

seven boxes of roast beef in strips,

four each of ham and sirloin steaks,
three boxes of whole game hens,
and two of Canadian back bacon.

Altogether 1,200 kilos of frozen meats.

All the meats are grade AAA, and the game hens are labeled 100% Organic. He pushes the lift cart back & forth between truck and freezer. At the finish he blows out a gust of air.

Oughta hold 'em for another week.

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He closes the freezer door and waits for Sarah's return.

Outside, two elderly women exchange soft volleys on one of the tennis courts. Inside the glass-covered swimming pool, a lone caretaker trails his broom along the perimeter walk-around. Residents seldom venture outside the towers. No doubt they're busy online with dataflow stuff or maybe just taking it easy.

The towers are showcases. Quebies who come for the pep talks are encouraged to spend their "senior years" inside the gated community.

The whole setup is overkill. A modest suite in this fortress would cost him two lotto jackpots. Who needs it? His townhouse lies in a low-crime neighborhood. San Bernardino has asked urban developers to meet quality-of-life guidelines. Green spaces and miniparks are included in most projects while traffic is diverted away from residential areas or slowed down by obstacles at intersections. Pedestrians, cyclists and playground kids aren't targets for speeding vehicles.

Calm neighborhoods attract sensible folks and solid families, making San Bernardino attractive to newcomers. The resident gringos were standoffish at first until Anna planted her herbarium and kept the hedges trimmed. In recent years, two more Latino families have moved in.

Only the naysayers worry about stacked condos and more hypermalls. His townhouse has doubled in value. That's the big reason why the savings & loan gives him a long credit line. He's banking on San Bernardino to keep growing which ought to raise property values even higher.

By comparison LA is an oozing sore of nerdofil addicts. Young people from across the continent gravitate to LA for promises of fame or thrills. They seldom find decent work and wind up temping at low-pay jobs. They have too much time on their hands and too much access to **VR**

entertainments and dataflow scams. They're drawn to weird parties hosted by exotic thrill seekers. After a few years, they become creatures of the twilight zone, like extras in **Novatron's** horror flicks.

Tomas feels lucky indeed to have three healthy kids and a loving wife. They're burdens, yes, but welcome burdens. Family keeps him sane.

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Sarah is in the freezer, checking off boxes of frozen food.

"Don't forget the cattalo steaks," shouts Tomas through the freezer's double-glass door.

"Already marked." Her face brightens in surprise. "Oh yes, cattalo not buffalo."

He nods and returns her grin. Since her arrival last autumn, Sarah has become his favorite among the staff. She greets him with earnest cheerfulness, not the holier-than-thou attitude of others who infer his ethnic roots from his family name and mistake him for a shiftless aboriginal.

He recalls his 1st-visit to the enclave. Andy went over his truck with a fine-toothed comb. The fastidious guard was disappointed when he found nothing amiss: no undeclared weapons, no suspicious devices, no open bottle of Thunderbird.

Tomas has grown used to this attitude. His grandfather changed the family surname as a clever strategy for gaining legal status. Only later, his family recognized how the locals treated aboriginals as bad as they treated illegal aliens. By then everyone had bona fide citizenship papers, and it seemed better to leave sleeping dogs lie.

How would the enclave react if they knew he was a 2nd-generation wetback? They'd cancel his delivery service, even though he brings plenty of foodstuffs each week without mistakes. He reckons the longterm residents consume most of it.

Hearty appetites indeed,
for sedentary lifestyles.

As Sarah exits the freezer, he remarks, "Lots of this high-priced fare must go to waste."

Sarah looks startled. "Chefs make us show our inventory."

"Sure. You track each serving on a flow diagram."

"Why yes. You must've worked in kitchens before."

"No, but I've learned a thing or two, supplying big outfits like this." He

slides fingers across his cheek. "You offer multiple menus for each meal, right?"

Sarah nods.

"The **chef de jour** consults the charts and says how much of each menu to prepare. It's a good estimate based on history and preferences. Nobody knows for sure how much will get eaten, so you prepare a little extra, just in case. With multiple menus it all adds up at day's end. Let's be honest. Since there's plenty of leftovers, it makes sense to take some home for family or friends."

She remains silent.

"Better than dumping good food in the garbage," he adds.

Sarah studies his face before deeming him a simpatico confidant. She lowers her voice and glances left and right. "We do take food home sometimes."

"Good for you!"

They share a moment of solidarity. Two small cogs on the enclave's wheel snagging whatever perks the wheel spins their way.

Tomas breaks the spell. "I guess it's time to cart the rest of it." He glances over the long list of canned goods, produce, oils, pasta and beverages. "I'll leave bread on the table."

Sarah flashes a million-dollar smile.

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POTUS <ID:usa.exe49:PG#718F4>

Electricity is the lifeblood of the postmodern era.

(Muted applause)

The good citizens of our diverse regions should not be handicapped by mere geographic location. Therefore, we must exercise good leadership and level the playing field to maintain nation-to-nation parity. I propose that we declare a healthy tariff on each kilowatt of spacer-derived electricity.

(Muted applause)

The collected funds will finance the construction of a superconducting grid from equatorial receptors to all corners of the globe. **Supercables**, cooled by liquid hydrogen, will carry electricity to wherever the need arises. Once finished, the supergrid will promote fairness around the

world. Consumers will draw electricity at comparable prices, whether they live in Montreal or Quito, in Stockholm or Libreville, in Moscow or Mumbai.

(Muted applause)

> Sino-American Summit, 2042

ETA (acronym) Estimated Time of Arrival.

CNG (acronym) Compressed Natural Gas. Internal combustion motors are often converted to run on natural gas. Maximum power requires tight valves, one-to-ten fuel-air mix and a slight advance in timing the spark. The conversion kit includes metal cylinders that contain CNG onboard.

Mallard® is a platinum-based fuel cell in which hydrogen and oxygen combine to produce electrical power. It runs 99.9% pollution free, not counting the catalytic process that unbinds hydrogen from methanol and releases carbon dioxide to the atmosphere.

melancólico (Latino) sad, blue.

mano a mano (Latino) one on one.

JIT (acronym) Just-In-Time.

LAX (aviation call sign) Los Angeles International Airport.

ZEST (acronym) Zanzibar Environmental Standards Tribunal. ZEST represents the bureaucratic quagmire resulting from the Zanzibar Environmental Accord or ZEA, which has been in effect since 2042. ZEST has brought the entire global community onside. Unlike the Kyoto Protocol, the Cancún Pact or the Odessa Détente, ZEST's noncompliance penalties are enforceable across borders. However, distrust among nations has turned ZEST into a judicial circus whose rulings are often ineffective.

SOAM (acronym) SOuth AMerican trading alliance. SOAM represents the free-trade zone and common currency of South America including Cuba, Nicaragua and Panama, but excluding Columbia.

derruido (Latino) dilapidated.

torcido hijo de puta (Latino, slang) crooked son of a bitch.

GREENS (acronym) Graphic Reports on Ecological, Environmental and Natural Sciences. GREENS is a public co-op sponsored by SOAR metics. Dedicated to planetary science, the co-op gathers and disseminates useful knowledge to maximize the noösphere.

autonav (techno slang) computerized traffic control.

esposa (Latino) wife.

VR (acronym) Virtual Reality. Goggles and other accessories (including chair mounts) combine to render a plausible simulation of fantasy environments that appear real to the user.

Novatron Ltd. is a division of SonyKong Ltd. Novatron produces flatview and holographic dreamscapes.

chef de jour (French) chef of the day.

supercable (tech) is an underground high-capacity electrical conduit that's cooled by liquid hydrogen. Both electricity and hydrogen are delivered to the end-user terminus. Hydrogen is then converted to less volatile fuels.