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Deadheading to Firecracker

Joshua Matthews

Dedicated to Interstate 80, all the way across

When we left Denver, everyone was alive, but by the time we reached Joliet, all we had left were carcasses.

That was in the day when you still saw enough drivers on the road to worry about your life. Around Chicago, I mean. And Des Moines. And Omaha. I-80 is a dead zone now, but back then you had a few mega Flying Js and the occasional commercial exit. There were also plenty of empty buildings, abandoned gas stations and restaurants. Those started to pop up once shipping companies used dependable driverless rigs. But when we deadheaders ruled the road, I saw the big signs for hotels and casinos and the birthplaces of famous people, which just aren't up around the big road anymore. You saw crazy things too, giant signs for bizarre tourist stops, like the ads for the shrine of our Lord's death. That was the lifesize mockup of three gigantic crosses on three hills. Exit 145, right outside Joliet. They had huge fake dead bodies on those crosses. They don't have those there anymore.

The shrine was right next to Firecracker, the world's largest adult superstore.

We were headed there with a load of birds. I deadheaded; the truck drove. Our load was the most precious cargo I'd ever guarded: hundreds of exotic birds that the Denver zoo offloaded. They were sold to Firecracker for its new indoor petting zoo. The reason was that something had to entertain the kids while the parents shopped. You couldn't have a bunch of crying kids in Firecracker; that would ruin the mood and the dancing. ("Guns, Girls, Groceries" was its motto. You name it, Firecracker sold it in bulk. On the road, you could see the Firecracker sign with that chick holding a cucumber in one hand and an AK in the other for miles.)

In Denver, I hopped into the rig and dialed in to the home office.

"Hey Sanchez," I said.

"Buddy! Como esta hermano? You like the new truck?"

"I don't know. Why just 36 cylinders this time?" I asked.

"Ah, yeah, we had to cut corners somewhere. But hey man, you got the rig with the new app. Check it out."

I looked around. Didn't seem like anything but the same old interface.

"Did you turn it on? Because it's caliente. You got the Rider's Friend, man. No more boring rides. It'll talk to you, make jokes, drives just like you want it to."

Nice try, I thought. Management had been attempting to prevent riders from "absconding," as they said, with the load. My guess was that this talking computer was really another form of surveillance.

"So what?" I replied.

"This ain't just any talking machine, man. It reads your brainwaves or something. Knows what you're thinking, then drives just like you, talks to you like you want it to. All my deadheads love it. Try it, hombre. It'll make the ride go nice and smooth. Anyway, Firecracker wants that load of birds by 5:00 p.m. today. Don't be late. Compende?"

"I won't."

I was happy with one fact: we could make it to Joliet in six hours, so five o'clock meant a two-hour stop at the mega Flying J in Grand Island. A big long break there made the ride, especially with time to play the slots. Deadheading always felt like such a waste. You were no more than a truck bodyguard, and the truck itself packed enough nitro and electric charge to make the most skilled of loadthieves think twice about stealing anything. No, we deadheads just sat there and stared ahead. That's it. That was our only choice after the feds banned screens in all vehicles. Some guys got around that, obviously, but I obeyed. It beat going back to the rehabilitation camps.

But a talking computer that simulated me?

There was nothing else that I could do. I swiped the screen and powered on the truck. A message appeared on the display: "To turn on Rider's Friend, touch the app." Without thinking, I did.

The engine revved and the cabin lights flashed on. Then they flashed off and on. The engine revved repeatedly. Something seemed wrong. I started to call Sanchez. Then a voice roared in the truck's cabin.

"Somebody stop me!" It sounded like a drunk comedian.

Bewildered, I asked "Stop what?"

The engine revved again, the lights flashed, then the truck horn blared. I heard La-cuckaracha playing outside the truck. "It's party time. P.A.R.T.Y. Because I GOTTA!"

"You are the Rider's Friend?"

"Friend and lover! I'll do whatever you want me to. Just want something and I'll do it."

"Computer, can you get us to Joliet by 5:00?"

"Roger, wilco, and foxtrot tango. Hold onto your seats, buckaroo. It's gonna be a bumpy ride!"

The drivetrain kicked in and the truck took off.

We started down the road going at what I thought was the max—they of course had governors on these rigs. The traffic on I-35 was lighter than it used to be, but 120 mph in a 20-ton rig always seemed excessive. Plus, I had to remember that the cargo had to arrive intact and alive, or else. I was beginning to wonder at what speed flamingoes passed out and died.

"Hey computer, slow down. We've got to make it there alive."

"Don't like the party, bucko?"

"Well, no."

"You forget, Whizkid. This cab is one yuuuge EKG, MRI, PET, and CT scanner. I read your brain and then do likewise. You want to go FAST?"

"But you aren't doing what I want. I told you to slow down."

"HAHAHA! We'll see about that! OMG! Laughing emojis! Check it out!"

I looked ahead and noticed a problem for my plans. Road construction and backed-up traffic. It was the usual case: a closed lane of traffic, one lane instead of two, and one lane that had nothing but orange barrels in it. No visible construction, no workers or machines. Just barrels. You never knew why the lane was closed, but everyone felt compelled to comply. All the cars ahead of us slowed

down and pulled over into the right lane.

But we just kept going, in the left lane. At 120.

"Somebody stop me!" the computer shouted. Narrowly avoiding the line of cars in the right lane, the truck swerved violently into the left. I winced. "The thrill of a lifetime! Next stop, Flying J!" I heard.

We began plowing over orange barrels. Boom, boom, BOOM, boom, BOOM. The truck pulverized every barrel. Most of them, on impact, shredded into plastic chunks that sprayed left and right.

I looked in the side-view mirror down at the right lane. Plastic barrels pelted windshields, tires, doors. Thank god most of the cars appeared empty. I couldn't see any drivers, but I knew people were there in those cars, maybe in the backseats. I couldn't see the impact of the barrels on those cars. I was glad.

"Stop! The cops are gonna get us."

"Oh, so you would rather go back to the camps rather than ride in me?" the computer asked.

"I don't know. But we're going to kill somebody!" I screamed.

We kept going and going. Finally, we exited the construction zone and sailed down the left lane. By that time, every barrel behind us was pulverized.

I was tense. I didn't know what I wanted. Stuck in a dead-end job like this for years. Riding silently in a rig, and now caught in this death-trap with a crazy machine that said it was me. We couldn't pull over, we couldn't stop. I couldn't do anything. He, or it, went on like this through Colorado and through Nebraska. I just had to sit there and listen. As every rider knows, Nebraska never ends.

We pulled into the Grand Island Flying J at 11, time enough to check out the pawn shop and grab some Chernobyl Chicken (extra hot) and a Turbo-Charged Strawberry Coffee. I needed that coffee. The computer hadn't shut up since Denver. It decided to read a book to me, ironically titled *Crash* by this guy named Ballard. It used a faux-Shakespearean accent.

I left the truck and stretched out. First came duties. I opened the back door to the truck. A waft of the zoo hit me. Bird down and bird shit. Everything seemed to be intact. The penguin cage still registered a cool 20 degrees, and the toucans squawked as I went by them. The ostriches were most impressive; they looked like mean mothers that would tear your eyes out if you crossed them. I

fed all of them, which took 45 minutes, then went to get my strawberry coffee.

I passed by the refueling bay. It was still odd then to look at those cars and see no one there; just a station attendant to put the fuel nozzle into the gas tank. Eventually they'd build cars that could do that themselves, and then that poor schmuck, the attendant, would either have to find another job or hit the welfare lines. I knew that this meant progress—machines that replace humans free us up to work other jobs, improving productivity and making us richer, so the textbooks say—but it's always hard to wrap your mind around that. Soon one day I wouldn't have a job as a Rider. Maybe tomorrow. Robo-guards or laser turrets would replace me. They'd be impossible to destroy, made of titanium and armed with enough firepower to fight a small war. And then what would I do? Go back to seminary and preach to computers?

As I passed by the refueling cars, I started thinking to myself—a bad habit, I know, but who doesn't do it? “These cars just keep getting uglier and uglier. Hideous, disgusting.” I was looking right at two Dodges, with blocky back-ends and box-like frames. They were the American dream.

Suddenly I heard a voice. “Hey asshole, you wanna say that louder?”

I turned, but there was no one around. Then, “hey you, yeah, I'm talking to you, fuzznuts.”

Either I was going schizo, or the voice was coming from a red Dodge Challenger.

“Excuse me?” I said.

“Take your pathetic self and scam before I get other ideas.” It was the Challenger.

That was the first time that a car talked to me when I was outside it. Would it have acted on its threat? I decided not to find out.

I grabbed food and drink and returned to the rig. As I had discovered earlier, the Rider's Friend never shuts off. It was listening to the alt-country station and singing along.

“Hey computer, explain when and how Dodges can read minds.”

“Since they developed ESP. Those cars are pricks.”

He was in a squirrely mood, too. I initiated the startup sequence, and the engine roared. At that moment, three cars drove up and parked in front of the truck. One was the Dodge that tried to pick a fight with me.

“What the ... ?” I exclaimed.

“Time to kick ass!” the computer yelled with glee.

“Wait, no, stop. Reverse.” Despite my command, the engine revved to what sounded like its max.

“Mac, let's have some fun!” the Rider's friend was shouting with glee.

“Hey, wait,” I said.

“Bucko, I flipped off every Dodge within 50 miles. Well deserved! You want a piece of me?” The loudspeaker outside seemed loud to me, inside.

The cars blocking us honked and flashed their lights. I wondered how a computer flips another computer off. Is there a number, some combinations of 1s and 0s, that is offensive in computer culture?

“And I will flip off all Dodges everywhere I see. You want to fight, jackass?” the computer roared at the Dodges. The entire Flying J could hear this taunt.

Then, chaos. The computer injected nitro (illegally) into the engine, and the truck punched forward. We smashed into two of the Challengers parked in front of us.. Shreds of metal flew into the air. We pummeled those cars and blasted off down the exit road. I had no idea if anyone was in those vehicles.

“HAHAHAHA!” The Rider's Friend wouldn't stop laughing. I was terrified and annoyed and sick and thrilled.

We got back onto I-80 doing 120. Stunned, I looked in the rearview mirror. Now there was a shocking sight. Behind us, an armada. At least ten Challengers were in two long lines, filling both lanes and coming right for us.

I've always thought I was a nice guy. I even went to the Maharashi School of Advanced Meditation before I wised up, and that was between divorces. This deadhead job had attractions, including a long break away from people and plenty of a time to ponder. But that lasted all of one ride. Boredom, the worst kind, set in during the second ride.

Now going down the road, pursued by maniacal cars, in an even more maniacal truck, do I appreciate the old silence and isolation, or do I rejoice in something new?

We were doing the max, and so were they, for hundreds of miles. Road construction never

slowed us down; we went right on through it. The computer kept yelling taunts and insults, which I assumed it was sending digitally to the Challengers behind us. Those taunts were on the loudspeaker outside the truck. I sure could hear them on the inside. This went on for hundreds of miles. I didn't know when it would end.

Nobody could catch us, but neither could we get away, thanks to the governors and the speed laws. (The cops? They had other problems to tend to. The road takes care of itself.)

Then I saw the sign with the girl with the gun and the cucumber. Curiously—it was always so green and huge in its cute bombastic boasts—that sign was next to the other sign of the dead-looking guys on the wood beams. The middle one had thorns on his head and blood gushing out of every orifice. I couldn't tell which sign was more representative of our situation.

Joliet ahead, exit 145.

It was a dead chase, and there was no way for us to stop. Those Challengers were hell-bent on destruction. Cars that look like that are only out for two things: speed and revenge.

We took the exit. Firecracker dead ahead.

I could see from a distance, maybe a good half-mile, that the place was near full. The parking lot was packed, as it normally is. There were the usual long lines out front, the herded queue waiting to get in.

We took the exit, and the truck swerved, slowing to take the curve, then speeding back up on the straightaway. We were going to plow into the herd. So were the Challengers. They would only slow down, bodies flying all over like the construction cones on the highway.

"Somebody stop me!" the truck screamed in delight. Or was it fear? He was getting harder to understand.

What came over me I don't know. Maybe it was all that sympathetic mush I learned in school, the yin and the yang stuff, in this case man versus machine or my insanity against his sanity. Or maybe it was just my desire to avoid trouble.

I took the wheel and slammed on the brakes. It didn't make sense—I reacted without thinking, even though I was trying to want to avoid running over the crowds. Pulling hard and yanking right, I forced the wheel over. At first nothing happened. I yanked harder.

I don't know if it was in that instant or seconds later. I don't know whether closing my eyes and trying to meditate, in moments of madness, did it. But the truck swerved right, missing the parked cars in the lot and the screaming masses who had seen the battery of vehicles bearing down on them and were running in every direction.

But the truck didn't stop. The brakes weren't responding, nothing. Instead we sped up, continued right, and then in front of us was that giant hill. I saw two signs in front of me, both somehow talking to each other in my mind. Out of the window, the dead man hanging on the huge wood beams atop the hill. And in front of me, on the screen, were what looked like a hundred faces staring up at me. The computer had stopped talking to me. He just looked at me this way:



In that last second, there was a moment of bliss and perfect peace. Then steel, crunching, ripping, and the impact of those beams on us. I seemed to see feathers of every color, pink and white and gold, and the green and purple haze of peacock tails floating outside the cracking glass and sparks of fire, ascending up that hill of death, the place we plowed into either by accident or because somebody wanted to. Off in the distance, the parrots flew upwards.

I awoke in the hospital.

"Welcome, sir. It is so good to meet you."

I looked around. No one but an IV and an EKG screen. How was I alive? "What's happening?" I asked.

"I am the Patient's Friend, here to serve as you please. I am happy to do whatever you wish, within the boundaries of my calling. Please swipe the screen to begin service. I will take care of you in whatever way that you wish. Your will is my only and everlasting command."

What can I say? It would have been boring otherwise. I swiped the screen and turned on the machine that said it was me.