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Wheeling and dealing goes country

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, VA.—I was desperately seeking a column idea before dawn on Tuesday morning when fortune smiled: My back wheel fell off.

I'd gotten up at five, did some office work and was on my way to the gym by 6: 15. I'd done the treadmill on Monday, so I planned to lift for an hour while listening to NPR's morning earnestness, where they do the lifting for you.

I was driving Hank, my daughter's 1984, four-door, Subaru sedan with 180,000 miles. Molly stopped driving him six years ago. I've been trying to kill him ever since.

Age never improved Hank's original blahness. Everything below his waist has become a textbook example of automotive corrosion, because the Japanese built his body out of rusty pea cans. My wife's horse, Spirit, gnawed paint off Hank's hood. Melissa said I should learn to appreciate abstract vehicular art.

Hank carries bumper stickers from Molly's high-school days: "Proud parents of an honor roll 'stoodent." Molly changed the "u" to "oo," which passed for wittiness back in her day. The other is: "You bang the drum, I'll shake my booty."

These messages may have worked for 16-year-old Molly, but when a 63-year-old bald guy sputters along in the Hankmobile, eyebrows raise. No bystander has ever banged a drum to see my booty shake. I remain hopeful, of course. Yet honest journalism compels me to say that I, too, share the public's lack of interest in a display of this sort.

Melissa, who is one of two lawyers in our county as well as our elected prosecutor, thinks Hank is beneath her station. She refuses to help me drive him into a well-deserved grave, or anywhere else.

Even though Hank looks like canine upchuck, he's been, unfortunately, mechanically perfect. So I've driven him to and from the gym, because he runs mainly on air, which frees America from imported oil, and because I can't throw out anything that's still functioning, and because...I am real cheap.

Hank had been making noises for a couple of days. An out-of-round whirl started in the front right wheel. I figured it would either get worse or go away. I was rooting for a bearing or better still, an axle job that would free me to

send him to the scrap yard. (From there, Hank would return to Japan and reappear here as a 2010 Outback.)

And so in the blackness before dawn on Tuesday, stoopid Hank threw a shoe. Not his front right, but his back left. All four lug nuts came off, and the wheel too. This affected his performance.

We stopped in the driveway of the local trout farm, about six miles from home. I carried no cell phone, because we have no reception in this land of fine people and clear waters. Another reason is that I hate cell phones. They have destroyed the “silence of the commons,” which has given western civilization Jefferson, Einstein and Billy Mays for OxyClean. The mainstream media ignores this story.

It was dark and cold. I was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt. If I walked fast, chances were I wouldn’t freeze my booty off. This would leave something to shake, just in case.

Then I thought: I can rob one lug nut from each good wheel and nurse Hank home with three nuts on each wheel, instead of four.

I operate three cars and three trucks. Each one carries a working jack, lug wrench, air compressor and tool kit—with a single exception.

A perfectly sensible explanation exists for not having a jack and a wrench in the one vehicle most likely to come up three-legged lame. This explanation can be fairly summed up in five words: “I AM A TOTAL IDIOT.”

Even so, I had other options. I could have waited for Melissa on her way to work; she might have stopped. I could have knocked on a friendly door and phoned for help. Sooner or later, a sheriff’s deputy would have driven by. They know that Hank is legally related to the Commonwealth’s Attorney, notwithstanding her denials.

None of these “outs” felt right. I bore responsibility for not looking at Hank’s back left wheel when his front right was the one squeaking complaints. I should pay for poorly managing risk. I needed to solve my own problem.

I tried pulling myself up by my own bootstraps. I yanked on the laces of my sneakers, the closest thing to bootstraps that I had handy. Hank’s back wheel remained where it was despite the moral uplift I was providing.

Whereupon, I decided to walk home. As I trudged along the roadside tundra, several dozen cars passed. I knew most of them. Everyone waved, figuring I was out for exercise rather than penance. Most must have wondered why I didn’t have enough sense to dress for the conditions. I felt very Republican as

I waved off one helping hand after another.

The thing about rural communities is this: No matter how much you dislike someone, or how much you are disliked, you will help that person and he or she will help you when you've lost a wheel. Deals, however, are another matter.

This truth, among others, does not show up in FarmVille, an Internet game that is Facebook's most popular application. Twenty-two million log on at least once a day. That's 11 times the number of American farmers.

FarmVille lets you farm fantasies without labor or consequence. You can buy land, plant and harvest crops and fool with animals. It's the cyber version of playing dolls and trucks as five-year-olds.

The site appears to have been borrowed from a How-to Goofy movie, with colors appropriate to communal daycare. The pitch girl is one of those brainless 20-somethings whose every "OhMyGod" is sandwiched between two "likes." I'm sure she loves cell phones.

Players say FarmVille is addictive. This makes sense inasmuch as it is brought to us by 27-year-old Mark Pincus, founder of Zynga in San Francisco, a company that specializes, according to a recent New York Times piece, "...in games that are easy to learn but hard to walk away from."

People who make addicts of others are called....

"I Hate FarmVille" is the Facebook affinity group that's disgusted with Mr. Pincus's chicken-fried Yankee "y'all's" and the phony disciplines of cartoon farming.

And here's the truth about farm communities. Anyone out here would stop to help Mr. Pincus, standing next to his disabled Mercedes. Even me.

Pat, the mechanic down at Carl's garage, called Wednesday morning with good news about Hank: "HIS FRONT AXLE. IT'S SHOT!"

I am delivered.

Except.... Shouldn't a writer think twice about dumping a source of column ideas that has come through in time of need?

Well.

I'm in the market for an '84 axle. It must run good and be cheap.

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