

ROYA

PUBLICATION

No. 31

THE

SWAYAWAY



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

THE SWAY

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 31

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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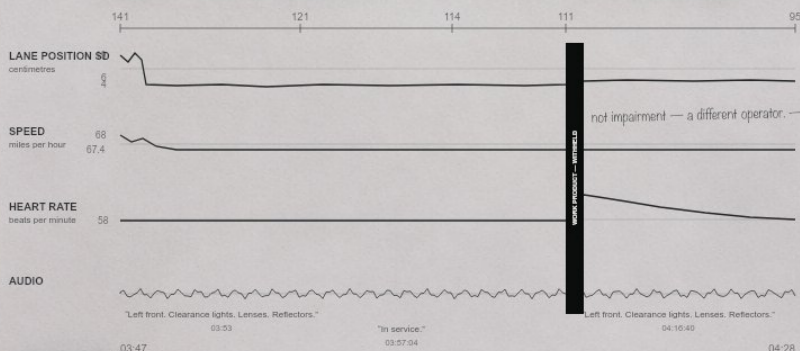
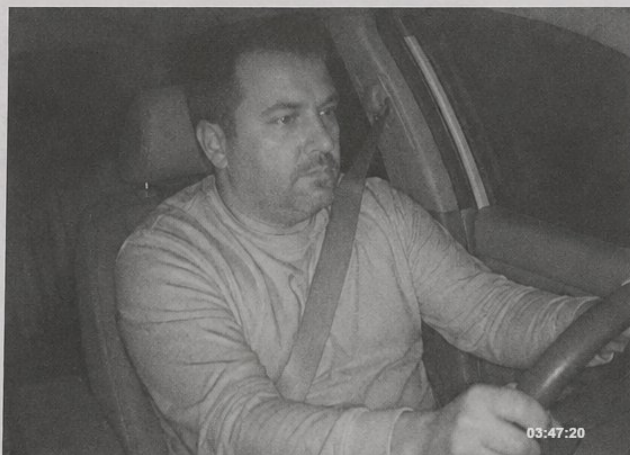
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No safety statistic, corporate program, research finding, or technical procedure described herein should be taken as an account of any real undertaking.

MERRIVALE APPLIED COGNITION · TAIL EVENT REVIEW

ASSET 0114 · 11 FEB · 03:47:20 – 04:28:40 · DURATION 41 MIN 20 SEC

PRIVILEGED · PREPARED IN ANTICIPATION OF LITIGATION



DRIVER VEHICLE INSPECTION REPORT

☐ 1. Left front. Clearance lights ☐ 2. Left front. Lenses ☐ 3. Left front. Reflectors ☐ 4. Left front. Turn signals ☐ 5. Left front. Turn signal indicators ☐ 6. Left front. Turn signal indicators ☐ 7. Brake lamps ☐ 8. Horn ☐ 9. Mirrors and side ☐ 10. Lug nuts ☐ 11. Hub seals ☐ 12. Steering linkage ☐ 13. Drive shafts ☐ 14. Slack adjusters ☐ 15. Pushrod travel ☐ 16. Air lines ☐ 17. Air reservoirs ☐ 18. Air pressure ☐ 19. Service brakes ☐ 20. Parking brake ☐ 21. Horn	☐ 22. Mirrors ☐ 23. Windshield ☐ 24. Wipers ☐ 25. Washer fluid ☐ 26. Seat belt ☐ 27. Fire extinguisher ☐ 28. Warning triangles ☐ 29. First wheel ☐ 30. Kingpin ☐ 31. Locking jacks ☐ 32. Release arm ☐ 33. Landing gear ☐ 34. Frame and crossmembers ☐ 35. Suspension ☐ 36. Mud flaps ☐ 37. Exhaust ☐ 38. Fuel tank and cap ☐ 39. Cargo securement ☐ 40. DOT label ☐ 41. License plate
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0612 DORSEY, C. — 0114 IN SERVICE

THE FORTY-ONE MINUTES. The review sheet for the night of February the eleventh: the cab camera's frame at 03:47:20, the moment the face let go, and beneath it the lane position, speed, heart rate and voice of the forty-one minutes, with the six seconds nobody outside the company has seen blacked out as work product. Clipped under it, the pre-trip sheet Cal Dorsey walked at 06:12 that morning — forty-one points, every one checked, in the order he was taught them.

SYNOPSIS

Cal Dorsey has been driving eighty thousand pounds across the middle of America for twenty-six years, and in all that time he has only ever lost forty-one minutes.

He did not fall asleep. The truck stayed in its lane. The fuel curve was the cleanest anyone at the company had ever recorded. When he came back to himself, the sun was not up yet and the road ahead was empty and something behind him was on fire.

Out on the night frequencies there is a preacher nobody has ever met in person, and a scattered congregation of men who believe that the driver who takes over when you go under is the better one — the one worth waking. In a glass building in Kansas City there is a research group that agrees with them, and has the numbers to prove it, and needs a great deal more of them.

A slow, cold novella about the most ordinary altered state there is: the one every long-haul driver has been in, and every long-haul driver will tell you was nothing.

Nobody drives at four in the morning. Something drives.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

We have all had it. That is the whole reason this book exists.

You are somewhere on a long straight road and you arrive at a place you do not remember arriving at. The exit you meant to take is nine miles back. There is no lost time in any dramatic sense — the car stayed in its lane, the speed held, the mirrors got checked by somebody. You just were not the one doing it. Then you are back, and your hands are exactly where you left them, and you tell yourself it was a second. You do not tell anybody else. You certainly do not tell the person asleep in the passenger seat.

I have done it. Short ones, mostly. A little sway in the drive, an easy stretch of nothing, and then the sudden cold jolt of catching up with yourself. Selfish or not, we have all done it and we have all decided privately that it was fine, and we have all kept driving. That is not a confession that costs me anything. It costs all of us the same amount, which is nothing, which is the problem.

What interested me was not the danger. It was that the state is competent. Whatever takes the wheel is not drunk and not asleep. It steers well. It watches the mirrors. It is, by most measurable standards, doing the job. It is only bad at one thing, and that thing is the thing that has never happened before.

We are now in the business of building machines to drive for us, and the last unsolved fraction of that problem is not the highway. The highway is easy. It is the one incident in a hundred thousand — the thousandth of a percent — where the road produces something no one has ever seen, and a decision has to be made in less time than a decision takes. We talk about that fraction as an engineering problem. I am not sure it is. I think it is a question about what a person actually is when the part of him that gives speeches has stepped out of the room, and I do not think anyone has liked the answer enough to say it out loud.

This is a story about exhaustion, and about wages, and about a state of mind so common that we have agreed not to have a word

for it.

Drive safe. Take the sleeper berth.

Chew Z

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I. HOURS OF SERVICE

ONE. PRE-TRIP

Merrivale Yard, Kansas City, Missouri — 04:10

Here is how you check a truck.

You start at the left front corner and you walk it counterclockwise and you do not skip anything, ever, no matter how cold it is or how late you are or how many thousand times you have already done it. Clearance lights. Lenses, cracked or clouded. Reflectors. You put a flat hand on each tire and hold it there long enough to feel whether the rubber is warmer than the rubber next to it, because a hot tire is a tire that has already begun to fail and has not gotten around to telling anyone. You thump it low with a bar and you listen. A good tire gives the sound back to you. A soft one swallows it.

You go down on one knee in the wet gravel with a light in your teeth and you look at the brake chamber, the slack adjuster, the pushrod travel, the drum, the linings, the hoses. You look for shine. Shine on a suspension component means metal has been moving against metal in a place where metal is not supposed to move, and shine is the only warning you will get, and it is a generous one compared to most.

You check the fifth wheel. You get your fingers on the locking jaws and you make sure they have closed all the way around the kingpin and not most of the way, because most of the way holds fine at sixty and lets go in a hard right turn at an off-ramp in Fort Wayne, and then a fifty-three-foot box separates from the tractor and goes wherever momentum was already taking it, and momentum does not have a family to notify.

Forty-one points. That is the number on the sheet. Cal Dorsey had been walking that sheet for twenty-six years and could have done it with the light off, and never once did it with the light off, because the men who do it with the light off are the men whose names you eventually hear.

It was ten past four in the morning and the yard was six acres of frozen mud and sodium orange. Refrigerated trailers ran their compressors in the dark, all of them slightly out of time with each

other, so that the whole lot breathed unevenly, like a room full of people asleep.

Cal finished the walk. He climbed up, swung into the seat, and put his thumb on the tablet bolted to the dash.

The tablet is the part that would have been unrecognizable to his father, who also did this. Everything else on the truck his father would have understood in about ninety seconds. But the tablet is a different animal. The tablet is wired into the engine control module, and it knows the truth, and it cannot be talked to.

Before the tablet, a driver kept a paper logbook. A driver wrote in the paper logbook whatever the paper logbook needed to say. There is an entire vanished folk art of the paper logbook, an oral tradition of how to make eighteen hours look like eleven, and every man who practiced it knew it was a lie and knew that the lie was the only reason the freight moved and the mortgage got paid. They called it the comic book. Everybody read the comic book. Nobody believed the comic book. The system ran on the comic book for sixty years.

Then the electronic device became federal law and the comic book ended overnight, and for the first time in the history of the industry a driver could not lie about his hours. Which sounds like safety. Which was sold as safety. What it actually did was take a business that had always been dishonest in the driver's favor and make it perfectly honest in nobody's favor, without changing a single one of the numbers underneath.

The numbers are these. Eleven hours of driving. Fourteen hours of on-duty window, and the fourteen runs continuously from the moment you first touch the truck, whether you are moving or not. Seventy hours in eight days. A thirty-four hour reset to clear it. A mandatory half hour off after eight.

And this: you are paid by the mile.

Not by the hour. Not by the day. By the mile, and only by the mile, which means that a stopped truck earns exactly as much as a truck that does not exist. Everything that is not forward motion is unpaid. Sitting at a dock is unpaid. Waiting on a lumper is unpaid. Chaining

up in a Wyoming ground blizzard is unpaid. Sleeping is unpaid. The fourteen-hour clock, which is the only clock that can destroy you, runs the entire time you are not being paid.

Understand that and you understand everything that follows in this book. Nobody has to make a driver push. The pay structure does it, quietly, at scale, three million times a day, and no individual person is responsible for it, and it has been running like that since before anyone currently alive was born.

Cal thumbed the tablet awake. It asked him who he was. He told it.

DORSEY, C. — 0114.

It gave him his clock. It gave him his load. It gave him his route, which is the newer thing, the thing they had rolled out four years ago, and which most of the men complained about for a month and then forgot about, the way you forget about anything that pays you the same.

The route used to be the driver's. You got an origin and a destination and you were a professional and you found the road. Now the tablet found the road. The tablet had all of it — traffic, grade, fuel price, weather, your remaining hours, the hours of the truck that had run it yesterday — and the tablet gave you a line, and the line came with a departure time, and if you deviated from the line the tablet noted it in a field called VARIANCE, and the variance field followed you into your quarterly review.

Above the windshield, on the passenger side, sat a small grey box with two lenses. One looked forward at the road. One looked backward at Cal's face. The system was called VIGIL, and the safety orientation described it as a coaching tool, and it recorded continuously and kept the last hundred hours.

Cal had asked, once, in year twenty-three, what happened to the hundred hours.

The safety manager had said: it rolls off.

Cal had said: rolls off where.

And the safety manager had looked at him with genuine, uncomplicated confusion, because it was not a question the safety

manager had ever been asked or had any reason to have an answer to, and had said, honestly: I don't know. Off.

Behind Cal's seat, past the curtain, in the lower bunk, Nadia Vahid had already been asleep for forty minutes. She could do that. It was the single most impressive skill Cal had encountered in a lifetime among people who did difficult things, the ability to go from standing in a fuel island in the cold to genuinely unconscious in under four minutes, and she had it the way some people have perfect pitch.

They were a team. Team operation means the truck does not stop. One of you drives and one of you sleeps and then you swap, and the freight crosses the country in half the time, and the money is better, and you spend eleven months a year inside a space the size of a walk-in closet with a person you had better be sure about.

Cal was sure about Nadia. That took eight months and one very bad night in Donner Pass to establish and had not been in question since.

He released the trailer brake. The air came out of the system in a long descending sigh, the sound the whole industry makes, the sound of a thing that has been holding still agreeing to stop holding still.

The tablet said: DRIVE.

The clock started. Fourteen hours, going down.

Nobody drives at four in the morning. Something drives. Cal did not know that yet, not in words, but he had already met it twice, and it had already made a decision that a jury would have called a choice, and there was footage.

He pulled out of the yard and turned west.

TWO. DETENTION

Consolidated Grocers Distribution, Ottawa, Kansas — 09:40

The dock is where the hours die.

Here is how it works. You have an appointment at eight. You are at the gate at seven-forty because you are a professional, and because

being late generates an event in the tablet, and the tablet's memory is better than your reputation. The guard takes your paperwork and hands you a laminated number and tells you to stage in the back lot.

Then nothing happens.

It is important to understand that nothing happening is not an accident and is not incompetence, although it looks exactly like incompetence, and every driver in that lot will tell you it is incompetence. It is a transfer. Somebody has to absorb the cost of the warehouse not being ready, and there are three parties available — the shipper, the carrier, and the driver — and the driver is the only one with no lawyer.

So you sit. At nine, you have burned an hour and forty minutes off a fourteen-hour clock, and you have earned nothing, because you have moved zero miles. At ten, two hours forty. At noon you are almost five hours in and have not turned a wheel, and your remaining window will not reach Denver, and your delivery in Denver has a time on it, and the time on it is not going to move.

Cal had a rule about the dock, which was that you do not think about the clock while you are at the dock. Thinking about the clock at the dock does not add minutes to the clock. It only spends you.

Most men could not follow the rule. You would see it in the lot: a guy who has been staged for three hours, out of his cab, walking a slow circle around his own trailer with his hands laced on top of his head, kicking a tire that does not need kicking. That posture. Hands on the head. It is the posture of a man watching a fire he is not permitted to help with.

Nadia was awake by nine and had the curtain open and was making tea on a twelve-volt kettle that had been with her longer than Cal had. She drank it scalding out of a steel cup, no milk, and she read paperbacks with the covers folded back, and she did not talk in the morning, which Cal considered close to a moral virtue.

At nine-forty a man in a reflective vest came out and walked down the line of trucks and got to Cal's window and said the words.

"You're gonna be a while."

"How long a while."

"Couple hours. They got a system thing."

"Detention starts at two."

The man in the vest smiled with real sympathy. He was not the enemy. There was no enemy in that lot.

"Detention starts when they say it started," he said, and went back inside.

Detention pay is the industry's apology for this. After a certain number of free hours — two is common, three is not unusual — the shipper begins to owe the carrier money for holding the truck. Some of that money, sometimes, reaches the driver, at a rate that works out to less than the driver would make rolling. Getting it requires the shipper's own timestamp to agree that the wait happened, and the shipper's timestamp is generated by the shipper, and this is the entire mechanism, and it is not hidden, and everyone in the chain has known about it for forty years.

At eleven Nadia said, without looking up from her book:

"You're doing the thing."

"What thing."

"Where you don't say anything and your jaw does that."

Cal let his jaw stop doing that.

"We're not making Denver," he said.

"No."

"So they'll want me to make Denver anyway."

"Yes."

"And then it'll be a variance, either way. Late, or hours."

Nadia turned a page. "So take the variance for hours. Late is a customer problem. Hours is a you problem. Customer problems get meetings. You problems get letters."

That is the actual physics of it. Cal had known drivers who worked forty years and never learned that and never stopped being angry.

At twelve-fifteen they got a door. The load was ninety minutes of pallets going out and a hundred minutes of pallets coming in, done by a lumper crew who did not work for the warehouse or the carrier and who took cash or a comcheck, and the fee for that was one hundred and ten dollars, and it came out of the load, which is to say it came out of Cal and Nadia.

At two-forty they were rolling with nine hours and twenty minutes left on a fourteen-hour clock, four hundred and eighty miles to go, and a delivery window that closed at midnight.

The arithmetic is available to anybody. Four hundred eighty miles in nine hours and twenty minutes is fifty-one miles an hour average, which is achievable, which is fine, which is exactly the kind of fine that has no room in it. No fuel stop that goes long. No construction. No weather. No thirty-minute break, except the thirty-minute break is federal, so: no thirty-minute break that is actually thirty minutes.

Nadia said, "I'll take it at eight. You sleep from eight."

"I'll take it to ten."

"Cal."

"I'll take it to ten."

She looked at him for four seconds and then she went back to her book, because she had been at this long enough to know what an argument costs in a space that size, and because in eight months she had learned that there were about three subjects on which Cal Dorsey stopped being reasonable, and this was two of them.

He drove west on 35 and then west on 70 into a flat blank Kansas afternoon, and the tablet counted down his window in the corner of his eye, and somewhere around Salina he stopped being able to not look at it.

This is the state before the state. This is the part nobody writes about because it is not dramatic and it does not photograph. The wanting-to-be-there. The low continuous arithmetic. Not fear. Just the mind performing the same small division problem several hundred times an hour and getting the same answer and doing it again.

That is what hollows a man out. Not the driving. The counting.

THREE. CHANNEL NINETEEN

Interstate 70 westbound, Wakeeney, Kansas — 23:15

At night the radio comes back.

CB is supposed to be dead. Everyone has a phone. Dispatch is on the tablet, weather is on the tablet, and if you want to talk to another human being you can talk to any human being on earth from the driver's seat, and so for two decades the received wisdom has been that channel nineteen is a museum piece kept alive by old men who cannot let go of a thing that stopped mattering.

The received wisdom is wrong, and it is wrong for a reason that is almost beautiful.

A phone call is to somebody. The radio is not to anybody. The radio is a room. It has a physical size — four or five miles of road, moving — and everybody inside that size is in it whether they speak or not, and nobody in it knows your name, and the whole thing dissolves behind you at highway speed and reassembles ahead of you with different people in it.

So at two in the morning, on a bad stretch, men say things on nineteen that they have never said to a wife.

Cal ran the radio low. Nadia was in the bunk. The Kansas dark past Wakeeney is a serious dark, the kind where your headlights stop meaning distance and start meaning a small moving room you are inside of, and the only other thing in the world is a set of taillights a half mile up that you have been slowly gaining on for twenty minutes.

Somebody was talking about a bear at the Colby scales. Somebody said the westbound rest area at 45 was full at ten. Ordinary traffic. The room, functioning.

And then, at eleven-forty, a voice came up on nineteen that was not talking to anyone.

“—which is why they call it deadhead. You know the word. You've run it. Empty box, no freight, no pay. Two hundred miles of your

life given away because the load you want is at the other end of them."

The voice was middle-aged, unhurried, with a plains flatness to it and a slight catch at the ends of sentences, like a man who had been a smoker and quit late.

"Now here's what I want you to sit with tonight. You think you deadhead sometimes. You don't. You deadhead every mile you're awake. Man wakes up, gets in, drives twelve hundred miles thinking about his knee and his ex-wife and what he's gonna eat in Elko. Empty. No load in him. That's a deadhead run and you called it your life."

Cal reached over and turned it up a little. He did not decide to.

"But there's a driver in there who's carrying something. You've met him. Don't tell me you haven't. Every one of you has come back to yourself on a road you don't remember, and the truck's straight, and the mirrors are clean, and you got no memory of the last six miles because you weren't there for 'em. And what did you do? You got scared. You slapped your own face. You drank a cold coffee. You did everything you could think of to get rid of the one passenger in that cab who was actually working."

There was a pause on the frequency. Somebody keyed up and let go without saying anything, which on nineteen is a kind of applause.

"I'm not telling you to sleep at the wheel," the voice said. "I want that on the record. I've never told a man to sleep. Sleep is a nothing. Sleep is gone. What I'm talking about is the opposite of gone."

Another driver keyed up. Young voice, Southern.

"Preacher, that you?"

"It's me."

"Where you at tonight?"

"Where I always am."

The young voice laughed. There was something in that laugh that Cal recognized and did not like, a laugh with a lot of nodding in it, the laugh of a man in a room agreeing with the room.

"Y'all know the man," the young voice said to the frequency generally. "Ezra Roan."

Cal had heard the name for maybe two years. Not often. It came up the way a rumor about a stretch of road comes up, third-hand, always from somebody who knew somebody. There were men who claimed to have shaken his hand at a Flying J outside Amarillo, and men who said he ran a reefer out of Sioux Falls, and men who said he had not driven in fifteen years and did the whole thing from a base station on a hill. The stories did not agree about anything, including whether he was alive.

What he actually was, in the practical sense, was a voice that came up on nineteen in the small hours between roughly Salina and roughly Rock Springs, more nights than not, and talked, and never asked for money, and never gave an address, and never stayed on more than twenty minutes.

"I'll leave you with this," Ezra Roan said. "You're going to hear about accidents this winter. There's going to be more of them than there should be, on roads that don't have accidents. And the papers will say fatigue, and the DOT will say fatigue, and your safety man is gonna put a poster up in the drivers' lounge about fatigue."

A truck went by eastbound and the whole cab shook and the voice broke and came back.

"—not fatigue. It's a congregation. And some of them are getting an answer and some of 'em aren't, and I can't do anything about the ones that don't, and neither can you. Wake the passenger. That's all. That's the whole sermon."

The frequency went quiet.

Cal drove for eleven minutes without turning the radio down.

Behind him the curtain moved and Nadia said, from the dark, in the completely level voice of a person who has been awake much longer than you thought:

"How long have you been listening to that."

Cal said, "Couple years."

"Does he ever say what it means. Wake the passenger."

"No."

"Good," Nadia said. She lay back down. "The day he says what it means, we change channels."

Cal said nothing. He had been going to say something and then he did not, and that is the moment where this book actually begins, and it lasted about a second and a half and nobody in the truck noticed it, including him.

PERSONAL EFFECTS I

CLAIM FILE 4417-K — INVENTORY OF PERSONAL PROPERTY RECOVERED

**Prepared for the adjuster. Not for release. Items listed as
found; no attempt made to establish ownership among
occupants.**

One thermal travel mug, stainless, dented at the base, contents
frozen.

One pair prescription eyeglasses, right lens absent, left lens intact,
frame recovered eleven meters from vehicle.

One paperback book, cover detached, water damage, title illegible.

Two work gloves, left hand only, both.

One inhaler, albuterol, expired.

One dog collar, nylon, blue, no animal recovered at scene.

One phone, screen shattered, powered on at time of recovery,
ringing.

Coins, mixed denomination, total value forty-one cents.

*Note appended by field agent: The phone continued to ring during
inventory. Advised the state trooper. Trooper advised he was aware.*

FOUR. THE STRETCH

Interstate 70 westbound, Sherman County, Kansas — 02:00

Some roads are built to be looked at. This is not one of them.

Understand what has been done here, because it was done on purpose by good people. In the fifties, when the interstate system was laid out, the engineers had a set of design principles and every one of them was correct. Reduce curvature, because curves kill. Flatten grade, because grade kills. Widen the shoulder. Clear the roadside of anything a vehicle could strike. Remove the trees, the poles, the walls, the culvert headwalls. Standardize the signage so that every sign in the country means the same thing at the same height in the same font. Space the mile markers exactly one mile apart. Make the surface uniform. Eliminate surprise.

Every one of those decisions saved lives, and the arithmetic on that is not close, and nobody who understands the numbers argues about it.

And what you get, at the end of all that careful, well-intentioned subtraction, is four hundred miles of a thing that has been engineered — with real skill, at enormous public expense — to contain nothing whatsoever for a human nervous system to attend to.

A brain does not idle. That is the first thing to know. A brain is not a machine that runs when you feed it input and stops when you don't. When input drops below a certain floor, the brain does not go quiet. It starts generating.

The floor is lower than people think, and the interstate at two in the morning is under it.

Here is the exact recipe, and it is not a mystery, and every one of the ingredients is on the road right now:

Constant speed. Not fast — constant. Sixty-eight miles an hour for four hours produces the same steady drone through the seat and the wheel and the floor, and that drone is a metronome, and it does not vary, and after a while your body stops reporting it because your body only reports change.

Straight line. Not a single steering input that requires a decision. Micro-corrections, hundreds of them, all handled below the level where you notice them.

Uniform visual field. Black above, grey below, two white lines and a yellow one. Headlight throw that ends at the same distance forever, so that you are always driving into an identical grey wall four hundred feet ahead of you that never arrives.

Repetition at a fixed interval. The mile markers. Every fifty-three seconds at that speed, a small green sign, at the same height, in the same place, saying a number one lower than the last one. Nothing on earth outside a hypnotherapist's office is that regular.

Warmth. Cabin heat on a cold night, at the feet.

And fatigue. Nine hours in. The base state, already there, already paid for.

Put those six together and you have not made a man sleepy. You have made a very specific and very old thing happen, and if you did it deliberately in a room with a candle and a metronome, people would pay you for it and call it a session.

Cal's father called it going down the well. Cal's father had it happen for the first time in 1974 on a two-lane outside Liberal and did not tell anybody for nine years.

The men Cal came up with mostly called it the sway. Not swaying, which is what a trailer does in crosswind. The sway. A noun. You had it, or you got it, or it took you.

They did not have a theory about it. Working men do not usually have theories about the things that happen to them at work; they have a name and a rule. The rule was: don't. And the way you don't, they said, is windows down, radio up, cold coffee, sunflower seeds, slap yourself, sing, chew ice, stop.

Everyone knew the rule. Everyone had the rule. And every single one of those men, without exception, had gone under anyway, and had come back up, and had told nobody.

That is the part worth stopping on.

Not that it happens. That the reporting rate is zero.

You will not find it in a crash file. You will find single-vehicle-run-off-road, and you will find driver fatigue, and you will find failure to maintain lane, and those are all descriptions of the outside of the event. The inside of the event has never been collected at scale from a living driver, because there is exactly one population of people on earth who experience it routinely and can describe it, and that population has an absolute, ironclad, hundred-year cultural prohibition on ever admitting it happened.

Because if you say it happened, you have a fatigue event. And a fatigue event is a coaching session, and a coaching session is a file, and a file is an insurance rate, and an insurance rate is your job.

So the single largest naturally occurring altered state in the industrialized world produces no data at all.

It sits there, three million times a night, in the dark, unmeasured.

Somebody was eventually going to notice that.

FIVE. THE SPLICE

Interstate 70 westbound, mile 36, Kansas — 03:18

He was fine.

That is important. He was not nodding. He was not fighting his eyes. He had done the head-drop thing before, everyone has, the sudden fall forward and the animal jolt, and this was not that, and he would have known if it was that, and he had been doing this for twenty-six years.

He had crossed into the last hour before Nadia's shift. Colorado line coming. The radio was off. He had his window cracked an inch because the air at that hour smelled like cold dirt and it kept him company.

He was thinking about the tire pressure on the number four position, which had read two pounds light at the last stop and which he had aired up and which he intended to look at again in Limon.

And then he was thinking about that same tire in Limon.

And the sign said GOODLAND 4.

There is a physical sensation attached to this and it is worth getting right, because it is not the sensation people assume.

It is not waking. Waking has a direction. Waking is coming up through layers with the light getting stronger, and there is a period, however brief, of not knowing where you are.

This is the opposite. There are no layers. There is no gradient. One instant you are here and the next instant you are here, and both instants are perfectly clear, and the only thing wrong is that the world has moved and you have not moved with it.

It is like a film splice. It is exactly like a film splice. The frame before and the frame after are both in focus, both sharp, both yours — and thirteen miles of country have been cut out and thrown away, and the cut is invisible, and the projector never stuttered, and no one in the theater noticed anything at all.

Cal's hands were at nine and three. Where he puts them. Not slumped in his lap. Not hanging.

The truck was centered. He checked the mirrors and the trailer was tracking dead straight, no drift, no correction being made or needed.

Speed: sixty-seven. Cruise had not been on. Cruise had been off since Salina because of the crosswind. Sixty-seven miles an hour, held manually, by a foot, for eleven minutes, by somebody.

Engine temp normal. Air pressure normal.

He had not run off the road. He had not crossed a line. He had not hit the rumble strip, and the rumble strip is loud enough inside a sleeper cab to wake a person in the bunk, and there was no sound of Nadia moving.

Everything was correct.

That is when the fear arrived, and it arrived all at once and from an unexpected direction, and it was not fear of what had almost happened.

It was fear that nothing had almost happened.

Here is what he was in. He was seated in the left front of a Freightliner Cascadia. Ahead of him, seven feet of engine. Behind him, the sleeper, and behind that a fifty-three-foot dry van loaded to seventy-nine thousand four hundred pounds gross, on eighteen tires, on a two-lane-each-way surface, at sixty-seven miles an hour, which is ninety-eight feet every second.

At that weight and that speed, on dry pavement, in perfect condition, with a driver already alert and already reacting, the distance required to bring that vehicle to a complete stop is somewhere between five hundred and six hundred feet. Two football fields. A fifth of a mile. And that is with the driver awake at the instant the emergency begins.

For eleven minutes and roughly thirteen miles, that object had been moving across the surface of the earth with no one in it.

Except it had not. That was the thing his stomach had understood before his mouth had. If there had been no one in it, the truck would have gone. It would have drifted right in ninety seconds and taken the rumble strip and gone off into the ditch and rolled, and that is not speculation, that is what happens, that is in the reports every week.

It did not drift. Somebody held sixty-seven. Somebody kept it centered through the long left bend at mile 28, which is not a hard bend but which is a bend, which requires a hand.

Somebody had been driving his truck.

Cal pulled off at Goodland and did not remember choosing to. He came down the ramp too fast and had to brake harder than he liked and sat at the top of the empty ramp with the engine running and both hands still on the wheel because he had not thought to take them off.

His heart was going. Now. Eleven minutes late.

The curtain moved.

Nadia came out and sat down in the passenger seat with a blanket around her and looked at the empty ramp and the empty road and

the fuel island glowing a quarter mile off, and she did not ask why they had stopped.

She said: "You were talking."

Cal said, "No I wasn't."

"You were talking for about ten minutes."

The heater fan ran. Out on the interstate a car went past, one car, and its sound came and stretched and left.

"What was I saying," Cal said.

Nadia pulled the blanket tighter. She was choosing words, which she did not usually have to do.

"Lights," she said. "Lenses. Reflectors. Left steer, pressure and tread. Slack adjuster. Kingpin. Fifth wheel jaws."

Cal did not move.

"You were doing the pre-trip," she said. "Out loud. In order. All of it. And when you got to the end you started again."

"For eleven minutes."

"For about that."

"Was I — " He had to go find the rest of the sentence. "Was I asleep."

"Your eyes were open," Nadia said, "and you were driving, and I want you to know that I sat up and I watched the road over your shoulder for maybe forty seconds, and it was fine. It was better than fine. It was smoother than you drive."

She said the last part quietly, because she knew what it meant, and because she had decided in the bunk that she was going to say it anyway.

Cal put the truck in gear and took it down to the fuel island and shut it off and got out and stood in the cold with his hands on the fender, and that is where he was standing when the tablet chimed inside the cab.

He climbed back up and looked at it.

MERRIVALE APPLIED COGNITION — DRIVER STUDY Your recent operating profile qualifies you for voluntary participation. Compensation: \$0.09/mile supplement, all study miles. Requirements: no change to normal duty.

DORSEY, C. — 0114 TAP TO REVIEW

Nine cents a mile. On a hundred and twenty thousand miles a year, that is ten thousand eight hundred dollars for doing nothing different.

Cal stood there with the cold coming in the open door.

Somewhere behind him, in a grey box above the passenger window, one lens looked at the road and one lens looked at his face, and both of them had been looking for the entire eleven minutes.

PERSONAL EFFECTS II

CLAIM FILE 5902-N — INVENTORY OF PERSONAL PROPERTY RECOVERED

Prepared for the adjuster. Not for release.

One wallet, brown, containing: license, two credit cards, a folded photograph of an adult woman, a pull-tab from a beverage can, a child's tooth.

One rosary, plastic, blue, broken at the eleventh bead.

One CB microphone, cord severed at the base, unit not recovered.

One notebook, spiral, forty-one pages used. Entries consist of dates, mile markers, and times, in a single hand, no other text. Final entry incomplete.

One thermos.

One hairbrush.

One receipt, fuel, Sidney, Nebraska, timestamped 02:38.

Note appended by field agent: Notebook was photographed and forwarded per instruction. Physical notebook was not returned with the balance of the property. Family has inquired twice.

II. THE LONG MINUTE

SIX. HOUR NINE

Interstate 80 westbound, Nebraska — Three years earlier — 03:30

Before Nadia, Cal ran solo.

That matters, and it is the first thing to fix in your head, because everything that happened on the night of February the eleventh happened in a vehicle in which there was one seat occupied and one bunk empty and no second pair of eyes anywhere within seventy feet.

Here is the day, as it was reconstructed afterward from the tablet, which does not forget and does not exaggerate and was, in the end, the only witness anybody trusted.

06:12. On duty, Council Bluffs, Iowa. Pre-trip, eighteen minutes, complete.

06:30 to 13:40. Dock. Seven hours and ten minutes of detention at a paper products consolidator that had scheduled four trucks into two doors. Paid: zero. Clock burned: seven hours and ten minutes. On-duty window remaining at departure: six hours and fifty minutes.

13:40. Rolling west on 80 with a load of nothing anybody would remember, five hundred and ten miles to Cheyenne, and a window that would not reach it.

At 20:00 he stopped in North Platte and shut down and slept, which is what the regulations are for and which is what he did, and anyone who tells you Cal Dorsey ran illegal that night is a liar and the tablet will hang them.

He came back on duty at 02:50 after a legal break, with a fresh clock, and the tablet gave him his line.

The line took him west on 80 across western Nebraska in the dark.

Now. There were two other ways to run it. He could have gone up on 26 through Bridgeport, which is slower and prettier and has towns in it. He could have laid over four more hours in North Platte and gone at first light, which would have cost the delivery window and generated a service failure, and a service failure gets you a call and a letter.

The tablet gave him 80. The tablet gave him 80 at three in the morning, which put him out on the empty western half of the state somewhere between three-thirty and four-thirty, and the tablet was a routing product, and the routing product was optimizing for fuel, hours, and on-time delivery, and nobody had told Cal Dorsey that the routing product had a third-party module in it, because nobody tells you what is in a routing product.

He did everything right. This is the part that should frighten you.

He had the window down two inches and the outside air was nineteen degrees. He had the heat off his feet and on the windshield only, because heat at the feet is the fastest way down and every man knows it. He had sunflower seeds, the black-and-white ones, in a cup in the door, and he was working them one at a time, cracking, spitting into an empty bottle, which is a small continuous physical task that has kept a great many men on the road and is the closest thing the industry has to a folk remedy.

He had a large black coffee gone cold from the truck stop in North Platte, bought at 03:11, receipt in the door pocket.

He had the radio on nineteen with the squelch open so that the static itself made noise.

He was not sleepy. He would say that afterward and people would hear it as a man defending himself, and it was not that. It is a technical statement and it is true. Sleepiness has symptoms and he knew all of them and he had none of them. No burning in the eyes. No head drop. No yawning cascade. No missing of road signs. He was, by any measure a doctor would use, alert.

That is the thing about the sway that the safety posters get wrong. The posters show a man with his eyes closing. The posters are describing microsleep, which is a different animal, which is short and violent and obvious and which the body fights.

The sway does not have symptoms because it is not a deficit. It is a handover.

Here is the road he was on.

West of North Platte, Interstate 80 does the thing it does for the next three hundred miles. It leaves the last of the river bluffs and it goes out onto the tableland and it becomes as close to a mathematical object as any surface human beings have ever built. Straight. Not nearly straight. Straight, for stretches of eight and eleven and fourteen miles, with curvature under half a degree, on a grade under one percent.

Two lanes each way. A median a hundred and eighty feet wide, grass, with a three-strand steel cable barrier down the middle, which is there to stop a car and which was never designed and has never been claimed to stop a loaded tractor-trailer.

No lighting. No towns visible from the roadway. The exits at that hour are dark and unmanned. The nearest other vehicle, at 03:40, was four miles behind him.

Above: no moon that night, high thin cloud, so black that the horizon did not exist. The land and the sky met with no line between them. That is a real feature of that country and drivers talk about it, and it means that your headlights are not illuminating a landscape. They are illuminating a strip of concrete inside a void.

His speed was sixty-eight. Cruise off, foot on it.

Green sign. Every fifty-three seconds. One number lower.

141. 140. 139.

At 03:44 he cracked a seed and put the shell in the bottle.

At 03:45 he checked his mirrors, left then right, which he did at intervals he had never counted and which were almost exactly ninety seconds apart across his entire career.

At 03:46 he thought about his father, briefly, and about a specific afternoon in 1991 in a yard in Liberal, and that thought did not finish.

At 03:47 he went down.

SEVEN. 03:47

You are not there.

Understand that the sentence is not a metaphor and is not being used for effect. At 03:47:20 the man who has been narrating his own life continuously since he was about four years old stopped, the way a radio station stops when you drive out of its range, and what is left is not nothing.

What is left is very good at this.

So we will do it the only honest way, which is minute by minute, from outside, from the two lenses in the grey box, one looking at the road and one looking at the face.

03:47

The face changes. This is on the recording and it is the most-viewed four seconds of footage in the history of Merrivale Applied Cognition, and thirty-one people have seen it and every one of them has described it the same way without being prompted, which is unusual in that field.

The muscles of the face let go. Not slackness — a slack face is a sleeping face and there is a look to that and this is not it. It is the removal of expression. Everything a face does that is *for* somebody, all of it, gone at once. What remains is a face doing nothing, aimed at the road, with the eyes open and moving.

The eyes are the part people cannot get past. The eyes go on working. They saccade. They check the left mirror at 03:47:41 and the right at 03:47:44 and they return to the road, and the interval is regular, and the interval is not Cal's interval. Cal's interval is ninety seconds and slightly irregular and drifts when he is thinking. This interval is fifty-two seconds, and across the next forty-one minutes it does not vary by more than a second and a half.

03:48

The truck holds the center of the lane.

Not approximately. There is a measurement for this and the industry calls it standard deviation of lane position, and it is the single best predictor of impairment there is, and it is how a trooper

decides to light you up. A tired man's lane position wanders in slow arcs. A drunk man's snaps back late. A texting man's goes out and returns hard.

Cal Dorsey's lane position, awake, across eleven years of recorded telemetry, has a standard deviation of nineteen centimeters, which is excellent, which is better than most.

Beginning at 03:48 it drops to four.

Four centimeters. An inch and a half, for forty-one minutes, at sixty-eight miles an hour, in a crosswind, on a road with pavement seams.

There is not a human being on earth who can drive like that on purpose. It has been tried. Professional test drivers, closed course, told to do nothing but hold the line, fully alert, highly paid: they cannot get under nine. The act of trying is itself an input. You cannot hold still by holding still. Only something that is not trying can do it.

03:50

The speed comes off cruise-flat. Sixty-eight becomes sixty-seven point four and stays there.

Nobody knows why sixty-seven point four. There is a theory, and it is not a very good theory, that it is the speed at which the harmonic of the driveline and the road surface produces the least vibration through the seat, and that whatever is driving found it the way water finds a channel, and stayed in it.

Fuel consumption for the period comes in at eight point one miles to the gallon.

Cal's lifetime average is six point nine. The company fleet average is six point four. There is a bonus program for drivers who get above seven point two and in eleven years it has been paid out to Cal Dorsey four times.

Eight point one is not a number that appears in the fleet. It is not achievable by the fleet. It is what the manufacturer's engineering department gets on a test track with a hypermiling specialist and no wind.

03:53

It begins to speak.

The microphone in the grey box is meant to capture the cab for incident review, and it captures this at a level just above the engine, and the transcript is verbatim and runs to nine pages.

“Left front. Clearance lights. Lenses. Reflectors.”

The voice is Cal’s and is not Cal’s, in the way that a voice on an answering machine is yours and is not yours. Flat. No stress on any word. No breath taken for emphasis, only breath taken because breath is required.

“Left steer tire. Tread depth. Sidewall. Valve stem and cap. Lug nuts, rust trails. Hub oil seal.”

It is the pre-trip. All forty-one points, in order, in the order he was taught them in 1998 by a man named Wendell Pruitt who has been dead for eleven years.

“Slack adjuster. Pushrod travel. Brake chamber. Drum. Lining thickness. Air hoses, chafing.”

It goes all the way through. Frame, crossmembers, fifth wheel, kingpin, locking jaws, apron, air lines, electrical line, landing gear, tandem release, mud flaps, marker lights, DOT tape.

It reaches the end at 03:57:04.

Then it says: “In service.”

Then it starts again.

03:58

A deer.

Whitetail doe, on the right shoulder, coming left, entering the travel lane at a distance of two hundred and ten feet.

This is not the unprecedented event. This is the ordinary night, and every driver in Nebraska has had it a hundred times, and there is a correct answer that every driver knows and roughly one in three executes: you do not swerve, you do not brake hard, you hold the wheel and you hit the animal, because the animal weighs a hundred

and forty pounds and your trailer weighs forty tons and the physics of that meeting is entirely one-sided, and everyone who has ever died from a deer died from what they did about the deer.

The truck does not swerve. It does not brake. There is a three-percent throttle reduction at 03:58:11, which is not a reaction to the deer, which is a reaction to a grade change, and it happens to be simultaneous.

The doe crosses. The truck passes eleven feet behind it.

Cal's hands, on the recording, do not move.

Note what has just been demonstrated, because it is the entire commercial thesis of what follows: the passenger executed the optimal response to a common hazard, instantly, without arousal, without the overcorrection that kills four hundred Americans a year.

The passenger is a superb driver.

04:02

A car overtakes on the left, doing perhaps eighty-five, and cuts in front of the tractor with about a hundred and ten feet of gap, which is a stupid thing that people do to trucks a thousand times a day because they do not understand what is behind them.

The truck's response is a four percent throttle reduction, held for nine seconds, which opens the gap back out to a hundred and eighty feet.

No brake. Brake would have been wrong; there is a car behind. No horn. No flash.

Cal, awake, would have flashed his lights. Cal, awake, would have said something out loud that his mother would not have liked. Cal, awake, would have carried a small hot coal of it for six or seven miles.

The passenger does not care. That is not a figure of speech either. There is no arousal signature anywhere in the recording. Heart rate, later derived from the video by the same photoplethysmographic method they use in hospitals, stays at

fifty-eight beats a minute through the deer, through the car, through everything, until 04:14.

04:05

Mile marker 121.

The green sign goes by at fifty-three-second intervals and something in the cab has been reciting a checklist for eighteen minutes and the truck is holding a line four centimeters wide, and the road ahead is black, and the road behind is black, and there is no traffic in either direction for two and a half miles, and the man in the seat is not present, and none of this is unusual, and it is happening right now, tonight, in nine or ten places on this continent, and it will be over in ninety seconds and none of those men will ever tell anyone.

It was not going to be over in ninety seconds.

EIGHT. 04:14

04:06

Nothing. Mile 120. The checklist reaches the landing gear.

04:09

A voice comes up on nineteen. It is not Ezra Roan. It is younger and it is not preaching and it is not talking to Cal, and at the time it meant nothing to anybody, and three years later a man in a conference room played it eleven times.

"Westbound's at one-sixteen."

Nine seconds of dead air.

"Copy."

That is the entire transmission. Two men, four words, on an open frequency, in a state where two hundred trucks are running west at that hour. Nothing about it is evidence of anything and no charge was ever brought and no charge could be.

The recitation in the cab does not pause. There is no reason it would. It is not listening to the radio. It has never been listening to the radio.

04:11

Mile 114.

The road ahead does the one thing it does out there, which is a rise so gradual that you would not call it a hill. Fourteen feet of elevation over half a mile. It is not on any map as a feature. But the sight distance over the top of it, at night, for a driver seated eight feet above the road surface, is four hundred and forty feet, because past the crest the headlight beam leaves the pavement and goes out into the air.

You cannot see over it. You can only arrive.

Every professional in that corridor knows the rise at 111 without knowing they know it. It is in their hands.

04:13

The truck crests.

04:14:00

Four hundred and twenty feet ahead, across both westbound lanes, there is a fifty-three-foot dry van trailer.

No tractor. It has been dropped on its landing gear, square across the roadway, nose in the median, tail on the right shoulder. It has been there for somewhere between eleven and forty minutes.

Every light on it is dark. The marker lamps have been unplugged. The DOT conspicuity tape — the red and white striping that federal law requires along the side and rear of every trailer built after 1993, the tape that exists solely so that a thing like this is visible from a mile away — has been covered. Later the state patrol will photograph forty-one feet of black adhesive vinyl applied over it in overlapping strips, cut square, applied without bubbles, by somebody who was not in a hurry.

The trailer is not stolen. It is a legally owned unit with a current registration and no lien and no reported theft, and the registered owner is a limited liability company in Sioux Falls that has one member and no other assets and files nothing.

04:14:00.4

The passenger sees it.

There is no start. No inhalation. The heart rate goes from fifty-eight to one hundred and forty-one within one second, which is a change of a magnitude the human body reserves for falling, and the face on the recording does not alter at all.

04:14:00.8

Here is what is available. There are four things that can be done and there is time to do exactly one of them, and the arithmetic on each of them is not in dispute and was run afterward, at length, by three separate parties who agreed.

Option one. Full service brake and trailer brake, everything, now. Seventy-nine thousand four hundred pounds at sixty-seven miles an hour requires between five hundred and forty and five hundred and eighty feet to stop. There are four hundred and twenty. The truck strikes the trailer at approximately thirty-eight miles an hour. Also, at that rate of deceleration with a light load high in the box, the probability of the trailer breaking traction and coming around is roughly one in three, and if it comes around it takes both lanes and the median and whatever is in them.

Option two. Right. Onto the shoulder, which is ten feet of asphalt, then a four-to-one slope, then a drainage ditch, then a concrete culvert headwall at the mile 110 approach. A loaded van trailer entering a four-to-one at sixty-seven miles an hour rolls. It rolls onto the passenger side. The driver is on the left, at the top, and the cab structure of that model has been tested to withstand a roof crush that this event exceeds by a factor of about two.

Option three. Straight. Underride.

The deck height of a standard dry van is forty-eight inches. The base of the Cascadia's windshield is at sixty-one inches. The driver's eyes are at seventy-two. What this means, in the flat language of the crash reconstruction manual, is that the trailer's floor structure passes above the hood and below the roofline. It enters the cab at the level of the steering wheel. The occupant does not experience a collision. The occupant is not decelerated. The cab

is removed from around him and he continues forward at sixty-seven miles an hour into structural steel.

Option four. Left. Through the cable barrier, which is three strands of steel wire on breakaway posts rated for a passenger car and which will part like sewing thread. Across a hundred and eighty feet of frozen grass median with a shallow swale in it. Into the eastbound lanes.

The tractor survives option four. That is the whole of what recommends it. Everything else about option four is bad, and one thing about option four is unknown, and the unknown thing is what is in the eastbound lanes.

04:14:01.1

It is known.

This is the fact that the case turned on and it is not disputed by anyone including the company. Nine hundred and sixty feet east, closing, are two headlamps. They are in the recording. They are in frame, on the forward lens, unobstructed, for four full seconds before the input. In the enhanced video you can resolve the separation between them, which gives you the width of the vehicle, which gives you approximately what it is.

Anyone looking at that road knew there was something coming.

04:14:01.2

Steering input. Eleven degrees left, applied in two hundred milliseconds, held for one point four seconds, then a counter-input of six degrees to settle the trailer, then correction.

Textbook. It is a textbook evasive maneuver and there is nothing wrong with a single frame of it. It is, in fact, better than textbook, because a textbook maneuver at that speed with that load usually puts the trailer into oscillation and this one does not, because the counter-input arrives one hundred and ten milliseconds after the yaw begins, which is faster than a human reaction time, which is why it is not a reaction. It is not being calculated. It is being *felt*, by something that has forty-one thousand hours in that seat.

04:14:02

The cable barrier goes. Three sounds like guitar strings and then nothing.

04:14:03 to 04:14:05

The median. The truck goes across a hundred and eighty feet of grass and a swale at sixty-one miles an hour, and the trailer comes down hard twice, and the fifth wheel holds because Cal Dorsey checked the fifth wheel at 06:12 that morning at Council Bluffs with a bar and his hands, the way he does.

04:14:06

The tractor enters the eastbound lanes at an angle of about twenty degrees, in the left lane, moving west, at sixty-one miles an hour.

The minivan is doing seventy-one.

Combined closing speed a hair over a hundred and thirty. The driver of the minivan has three-quarters of a second and does exactly what a human being does, which is brake and steer, and it makes no difference at all, and it should be said plainly that he did nothing wrong, at any point, ever, in the entire chain of causation that killed him.

The impact is offset front, left to left.

Under Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 208 a minivan is required to protect its occupants in a thirty-five mile an hour barrier impact. There is no standard for this. There is no standard for this because there is no design that survives this and everyone in the field knows it and no one writes it down. The energy involved is a little under nine times what the vehicle's structure is built to manage.

The van's passenger compartment ceases to be a compartment.

The tractor's left steer tire fails, the left fuel tank ruptures and one hundred and twenty gallons of diesel goes out onto the pavement in an atomized fan and does not ignite, and then the van's fuel does ignite, and by the time anything else happens the fire is behind.

04:14:07

The passenger corrects.

04:14:09

It has the truck straight, in the eastbound left lane, traveling west on the wrong side of a divided highway at fifty-eight miles an hour with the left front corner of the tractor destroyed and the left mirror gone.

04:14:11

It steers left again, back into the median, and takes the truck across the second time, and comes up the westbound embankment, and re-enters the westbound travel lanes at 04:14:19 at fifty-one miles an hour, three hundred feet past the dark trailer, which is now behind it.

04:14:26

Speed sixty-two.

04:14:44

Speed sixty-seven point four.

04:15:02

The truck is centered in the lane with a standard deviation of lane position of six centimeters, which is worse than before, and the reason it is worse is that the left steer tire is damaged, and the passenger is compensating for the pull without any indication that it regards the pull as remarkable.

04:16:40

It says: "Left front. Clearance lights. Lenses. Reflectors."

It has started the checklist again.

It goes through. At the left steer position it says "sidewall damage" and it does not say it any differently than it says anything else, and it continues.

It reaches the end at 04:20:03 and it says "In service," and this is the only place in the entire forty-one minutes where a human listener has ever claimed to hear something in the voice, and thirty-one people have listened, and none of them agree on what.

It starts again.

It never once looks at the mirror on the right, which is intact, and in which, for the next four minutes, an orange light is visible and getting smaller.

There is no mechanism in what was driving that truck for a thing behind it to matter. Behind is not a hazard. Behind cannot be struck. Behind has no bearing on the continued operation of the vehicle.

04:28

Mile 95.

Cal Dorsey came back.

Splice. The frame before and the frame after both sharp. Hands at nine and three, where he leaves them.

The first thing was wind. There was a lot of wind in the cab and there should not have been, a hard cold roar off the left A-pillar, and he turned his head to find it and there was no left mirror, only the arm, bent forward.

The second thing was the wheel. It was pulling right and he was already holding against it and had been for some time.

The third thing was that the truck was making a sound at the left front that he had heard twice in twenty-six years.

He got it stopped on the shoulder at mile 94, which took him nine hundred feet, and he sat with the flashers going and his hand on the door handle and did not open the door for a while.

Then he did.

The left front of his tractor was gone. Not damaged. Gone, from the bumper back to the wheel well, and the wheel was toed in badly, and there was paint on it that was not his paint, a metallic silver-blue, and there was other material on it, and Cal Dorsey stood in nineteen-degree air on the shoulder of Interstate 80 and understood that he was looking at something he had done and had no memory of at all.

He turned around.

East, behind him, low on the horizon, sixteen miles back, there was an orange light in the black, and it was the only thing in the world, and it did not move.

He got out his phone.

It rang in his hand before he could dial.

The number was a Kansas City number.

PERSONAL EFFECTS III

CLAIM FILE 6180-B — INVENTORY OF PERSONAL PROPERTY RECOVERED

Prepared for the adjuster. Not for release. Recovery incomplete owing to thermal conditions at scene.

One booster seat, high-back, model discontinued, harness clip in the closed position.

One handheld game console, casing intact, screen unresponsive.

One paper bag containing one uneaten cinnamon roll and two napkins.

One pair adult work boots, size eleven, laced, in the rear cargo area.

One set of house keys with a fob for a vehicle not present at the scene.

One drawing, crayon on lined school paper, folded twice, recovered from the median at a distance of sixty-one meters. Subject: a truck. Blue.

One phone, powered off.

Note appended by field agent: Company representative was on scene ahead of first responders and requested the forward-facing recording from the tractor be preserved as work product. Advised this was not within my authority. Was told it had already been done.

III. DEBRIS FIELD

NINE. RAPID RESPONSE

Interstate 80, mile 94, Nebraska — 04:31

"Mr. Dorsey. This is Ellery, I'm with Merrivale Risk Management. Are you injured?"

She was very good. That should be said. In the years afterward Cal thought about her more than he thought about most of the people in this, because she was kind, and her kindness was real, and it was also a product, and both of those were true at the same time and neither one canceled the other.

"I don't know," Cal said.

"Are you bleeding anywhere?"

"No."

"Are you out of the vehicle?"

"Yes."

"Is the vehicle on the shoulder with the hazards on?"

"Yes."

"Good. That's good, Mr. Dorsey, you've done everything right. I need you to get back in the cab because it's nineteen degrees and you're going to start shaking in about four minutes and you won't notice it happening. Can you do that for me?"

He did that for her.

"Now. Do you know what occurred?"

And that was the question. That was the first time it was asked out loud and he was going to be asked it in eleven different rooms over the following two years and he never got better at it.

"No," Cal said.

"Okay."

"There's a fire behind me."

"I know. There are units on scene. Mr. Dorsey, I'm going to tell you three things and then I'm going to stay on this line with you until somebody gets to you. Are you listening?"

"Yes."

"One. You are not to move the vehicle. Two. If law enforcement arrives before our representative, you will give them your license, your medical card, and your registration, you will answer questions about your identity and your route, and for anything else you will say that you are willing to give a full statement with your representative present. That is not an unusual request and no trooper will hold it against you. Three."

She paused, and it was a real pause and not a technique.

"Three. Whatever happened back there, it happened. It is over and it is not going to un-happen. There is nothing you can do in the next four hours that helps anyone who was hurt. There are a great many things you can do in the next four hours that hurt you. Do you understand the difference?"

"Yes."

"Say it back to me."

"There's nothing I can do."

"That's right," said Ellery. "There's nothing you can do."

The representative arrived at 04:57.

Twenty-six minutes.

Consider that for a moment. From the first notification — which occurred at 04:29, forty seconds after the tractor's telematics reported a severe-event threshold in lateral acceleration, before Cal had stopped the truck, before he had gotten out, before he had seen the light on the horizon — a man in a company vehicle reached mile 94 of Interstate 80 in western Nebraska in twenty-six minutes, at night, in February.

Kansas City is five hundred miles away.

The man had come from Ogallala. He had a hotel key in his coat pocket for a hotel in Ogallala and he had been in that hotel since Sunday, on retainer, with a case of paperwork in his trunk, thirty-two miles from the mile marker.

Cal did not think about that for three years. When he finally did think about it, he was standing at a fuel island in Elko, and he had to put his hand on the pump.

The rest of it was procedure.

The Nebraska State Patrol worked the scene for eleven hours. They photographed the trailer, the black vinyl over the conspicuity tape, the unplugged marker harness, the landing gear set down on the centerline. They ran the registration to a limited liability company in Sioux Falls with one member, an address that was a mail service, and no other holdings. That company had been formed nine months earlier. It had never filed anything. Its member could not be located because its member was a name and a driver's license number and the driver's license number belonged to a man who had died in Yankton in 2016.

The county attorney reviewed it for four months and declined to file against Cal Dorsey, and the memorandum runs to nine pages and its conclusion is one sentence: the placement of an unlit, deliberately unmarked commercial trailer across both lanes of a limited-access highway constitutes a superseding cause, and no reasonable operator could have been expected to stop.

No reasonable operator.

That phrase went in a file and the file went in a cabinet, and nobody who wrote it and nobody who read it knew that the operator had not been the operator, because the only object in the world that knew that was in a grey box that had already been removed from the tractor before the state patrol reached the vehicle, by a man from North Platte, and logged as materials prepared in anticipation of litigation, which is a category of thing that no one outside a company ever sees, ever, under any circumstances, in any state.

The civil matter settled in eleven weeks.

That is fast. That is a speed that means nobody argued, and nobody argued because Merrivale did not want a deposition and did not want discovery, and the way you avoid discovery is you pay before

anyone asks for it, and you pay enough that the lawyer on the other side has an ethical obligation to tell his clients to take it.

Sealed. All of it. The number, the terms, and the footage.

Cal was on paid wellness leave for six weeks. He saw a company-referred counselor four times. He was cleared. He came back, and the fleet manager shook his hand in the drivers' lounge in front of eleven people and said the words *not your fault* in a voice pitched for the room, and Cal understood that he had just been used as a poster.

In the eighth week he asked to see the footage.

He asked the fleet manager, who said he'd look into it. He asked Ellery, who was warm and specific and said she was not able to help with that and gave him an address to write to. He wrote to the address. He got a letter back that was two paragraphs and did not say no.

He asked once more, in year two, at a mandatory safety day, in a room with forty drivers in it, out loud, with his hand up.

A woman from the corporate side who had been sent out from Kansas City to talk about fatigue said, without any hostility at all, in the tone of someone explaining a parking policy:

"That material is privileged."

"It's me," Cal said. "It's forty-one minutes of my own face."

"I understand that," she said, and she did, you could see that she did. "It's still privileged."

That is the entire machine, in one exchange, and there is no villain in it, and every person in that room was doing their job correctly, and the man it had happened to could not have it.

TEN. THE COUNTER

Sapp Bros, Exit 126, Ogallala, Nebraska — Present day — 02:40

He had been stopping there for three years.

There was no reason to. There are eleven places to fuel between North Platte and Sidney and most of them sit closer to his line, and

Cal Dorsey did not need to buy diesel at that particular exit, and he did it anyway, every time he ran that corridor, which was forty or fifty times a year.

He always went inside. He always ate at the counter and not in a booth.

He had told himself a number of things about why. None of them survived close reading.

The truth was that when the trucks pulled off there, at the top of the ramp, if you looked west, you could see about a mile and a half of the interstate before the land took it. Fifteen miles past the end of what you could see was mile 111.

He knew the family's name. It had been in the Keith County paper and then in the Omaha paper and then nowhere. Raymond Kessler, forty-four. Kyle Kessler, nine.

He had never gone looking for the wife. He wants that understood. He had never once typed her name into anything.

That night Nadia was asleep in the truck and he came in at twenty to three and sat at the counter and the woman working nights put a cup down in front of him without being asked, because she had put a cup down in front of him without being asked forty times a year for three years.

Her name tag said DEB.

"Dorsey," she said.

He looked up.

It was the first time she had ever used his name and he did not know how she had it, and then he did know, because it is stitched over the pocket of the jacket he had been wearing into that building since the year it happened.

"I've had a question saved up," Deb Kessler said. "You want to hear it or you want to finish your coffee first."

The place was empty except for a man asleep in a booth by the window and the sound of a fryer. It was two-forty in the morning in western Nebraska, which is the emptiest hour there is.

Cal put both hands around the cup.

"Ask it."

"Did you see them."

He had thought about a lot of things she might ask. He had run some of them in his head in the bunk over three years. He had not run that one.

"I don't know," he said.

Deb Kessler looked at him for a while.

She was fifty-one. She had gone back to the night shift eight months after the funeral, at the same counter she had been working the night it happened, and the reason she had gone back was that her shift ended at four in the morning and her car had not started that night and Ray had said he'd come get her and bring Kyle because Kyle liked being up when nobody was up. And she had spent eight months in a house understanding that the fastest way to stop being a person who caused that was to be a person who was at work.

"That's the wrong answer to have," she said.

"I know."

"No, I don't think you do. If you'd said yes, I'd know what to do with you. If you'd said no, I'd know what to do with you. I've had both of those ready for three years." She wiped a spot on the counter that did not need it, and then stopped, and put the rag down, which took some doing. "You don't get to bring me a third thing."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't."

"I'm not asking you to take it."

"Good," she said.

The fryer cycled. The man in the booth shifted and did not wake.

"They tell me it was a trailer parked across the road," she said.

"Yes."

"They tell me nobody could've stopped."

"That's right."

"So how come you went left."

And there it was, the actual question, the one under the saved-up one, and she had been carrying it around a truck stop for three years with nobody to give it to, because the state patrol had a report and the lawyers had a number and not one person in the entire apparatus had ever been able to tell Deb Kessler why the truck had come into the other side of the road.

"Left was the only way the truck lived," Cal said.

"I know that," she said. "I've read it eleven times. I've got a folder."

"Then you know more than me."

"I know all of it except the one thing." She leaned on the counter with both hands. Her forearms had the shine of thirty years of hot plates. "It says you had one and a half seconds. It says a person can't decide anything in one and a half seconds. So somebody's telling me it wasn't a decision, it was a reflex, and I've been trying for three years to feel better about that and I can't get it to work."

Cal said nothing, because the true thing was in his mouth and it weighed about nine hundred pounds and if he set it down on that counter he did not know what it would do to her.

"Because a reflex," Deb Kessler said, "is still you. That's what nobody wants to say. A reflex is more you than a decision is. A decision, you can talk yourself into. A reflex is just what's in there."

She picked the rag back up.

"There were headlights," she said. "It's in the report. Four seconds of headlights. Whatever went left, it had four seconds of looking at my husband."

She went down to the other end of the counter and put a ticket in the window for a customer who was not there.

Cal Dorsey sat with his coffee going cold in front of him and understood, finally and completely and three years late, what it was that he actually wanted to see.

Not the crash. He did not care about the crash. He had a whole reconstruction of the crash, drawn to scale.

He wanted to see the face. His own face, in the grey box, in the four seconds when the headlights were in the windshield.

Because if the face did nothing, then it did not know.

And if the face did anything at all — anything, a movement of the eyes, a change in the jaw — then something had looked at Ray and Kyle Kessler and gone left anyway.

ELEVEN. WHAT THE PASSENGER SAYS

Westbound, somewhere in Wyoming — 21:10

Nadia Vahid had a notebook, which was a thing Cal had never asked about because in a truck you do not ask about the other person's one private object, and eventually she opened it herself on the little table between the seats with the truck parked at a rest area at Rawlins and the wind doing what it does at Rawlins.

She had been at it for five months.

"Before you say anything," she said, "I want you to know I started this because you scared me and not because I thought you did something."

"Okay."

"It stopped being that around March."

The first pages were about him, and she read them out flat and clinical because that was the only way she could get through them, which he understood.

Every episode she had witnessed since the night at Goodland. Nine of them. Duration, from her own watch, and she had gotten good at catching the start because she had learned what it sounded like — the exact three-second silence before the checklist began, which she said was the worst part, worse than the talking. Nine episodes. Shortest ninety seconds. Longest nineteen minutes.

Every one of them on a road with the same properties. Every one of them between the eighth and eleventh hour. Every one of them on a route line the tablet had given him.

“And now the part that isn’t about you,” she said.

She had the study terms. She had signed up herself, two months after Cal did, using her own driver number, and she had actually read the enrollment document, which is a thing that a hundred percent of people say they do and a very small number of people do.

It was nine pages. It was not deceptive. That was what she wanted him to understand. It was not deceptive in any particular that she could find.

Merrivale Applied Cognition was conducting a longitudinal study of naturalistic driving behavior. Participation involved no change to normal duties. Participants consented to the retention and analysis of vehicle telematics and in-cab video for the duration of the study and for a period of eleven years afterward. Participants consented to the assignment of routing consistent with study parameters. Participants would receive a supplement of nine cents per study mile. Participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time with no effect on employment.

“Read that fourth one again,” Cal said.

“Participants consent to the assignment of routing consistent with study parameters.”

“That’s the whole thing.”

“That’s the whole thing,” Nadia agreed. “It’s one line and it’s in plain English and it’s in the same size type as everything else, and eleven thousand people have signed it.”

Then she turned the notebook around and showed him the map.

She had drawn it herself on the back of an atlas page, because she did not want it on a phone. It was the middle of the country. She had marked the corridors — 80 across Nebraska and Wyoming, 70 across Kansas, 40 across the Texas panhandle, 10 west of Fort

Stockton, 94 through the Dakotas. The long flat ones. The engineered ones.

On the corridors she had put marks.

"Fatal and serious-injury crashes," she said. "Last twenty-six months. Commercial vehicle involved. Between two and six in the morning. Single-vehicle run-off-road, or median crossover."

There were a lot of marks.

"Now," Nadia said, "here's the thing you already know if you've been paying attention. That kind of crash has been going down for thirty years. Every year. Better brakes, better tires, stability control, lane departure, the cable barriers, the rumble strips. It's one of the great quiet successes in this country and nobody talks about it because nobody gets a headline for a thing that didn't happen."

"And?"

"And on those five corridors, in those hours, in the last twenty-six months, it's up forty-one percent."

Cal looked at the map for a long time.

"That's not a lot of people," he said finally. "Percentage-wise. In the whole country."

"No," Nadia said. "It's about two hundred people."

She let that sit.

"Which is nothing," she said. "It's a statistical nothing. It's a rounding error against forty thousand. It will never be a news story, because there is no place where it's happening enough to be a story. Four here. Six there. Nine in west Texas. Every one of them investigated by a different county, in a different state, by a different trooper, who writes fatigue on the form, because fatigue is what it looks like, because fatigue is what it is."

She closed the notebook.

"That's the design," she said. "That's not a leak in the design, Cal. That's the design. Whoever built this understood something that I think about every night now, which is that in a country of three

hundred and forty million people, a hundred deaths spread across five states in two years is invisible. Not covered up. Invisible. There is no cover-up because there is nothing to cover."

Outside, a truck came into the rest area and did its air brakes and shut down.

"There's one more thing and then I'm done," Nadia said. "I plotted the marks against the study's route lines. I only had the ones I could get, which is our fleet and two others. Forty-one of the marks are within two miles of a study line, at a location where a study driver was scheduled to be in his ninth hour."

"How many marks total on those corridors."

"Ninety-one."

"So half."

"So half," she said. "And the other half is the base rate. The other half is just the road being the road."

Cal sat with his hands on his knees.

"Nadia."

"Yeah."

"When it's going. When it's doing the pre-trip." He had trouble with this one. "Does it know you're there?"

She had clearly been waiting for him to ask that, and had clearly decided in advance to tell him the truth.

"Once," she said. "In Utah. I dropped a cup. It made a bang. And the head turned and looked at me for about a second and a half and then it went back to the road and picked up the checklist where it left off." She looked out at the parking lot. "It didn't look at me like a person. It looked at me the way you look at a warning lamp. It checked what I was and then it filed it and it went back to work."

"Was it me?"

"No," said Nadia Vahid. "It was not you, and I'd like to never talk about that particular second again for as long as I live."

TWELVE. A GRAVE IN GOTHENBURG

Dawson County, Nebraska — 11:20

There was an Ezra Roan.

That was the first surprise, and Cal found it in about nine minutes at a public library in North Platte with a librarian who did the actual work, because librarians are the last people in America who will simply help you.

Ezra Dale Roan. Born 1954 in Cozad, Nebraska. Twenty-nine years over the road, most of it for a Grand Island outfit that no longer exists. Married once, divorced. No children. Died on the eleventh of November, 2011, when his tractor left Interstate 80 at mile 219, near Brady, at 04:26 in the morning, on a clear dry night, with no other vehicle involved and no mechanical defect found.

The obituary was four lines. The crash report was one page. The determination was fatigue.

The grave was in Gothenburg, in the third row from the back, under a stone the size of a shoebox.

Cal stood there for a while in a cold wind with his hands in his coat and did not have anything to say to it, and then said, out loud, because there was nobody in that cemetery for a half mile:

“So who’s talking.”

The answer took another eleven days and it came from an old man named Vernon in a mobile home outside Cozad who had been running a CB club since 1979 and who had, in a metal cabinet in a shed, four hundred and some cassettes and a hard drive.

“Oh, everybody recorded Ezra,” Vernon said. “That’s not a strange thing. He was on every night for nine, ten years. Talked about the road, talked about his marriage, talked about God some. He was good. He’d have been on the radio for real if he’d been born somewhere else.”

“How many hours you figure exist.”

Vernon thought about it with genuine pleasure, the way a man does about the one subject he is the world expert in.

"Between me and Dale and the two fellas in Lexington? Nine hundred hours. Little more."

"And where's that now?"

"Well, that's the thing," Vernon said. "Fella came and got copies. Four, five years back. Said he was making a documentary."

"Did he say his name?"

"He gave me a card." Vernon went and looked in a drawer and came back with a business card, and the card had a name on it that meant nothing, and a company on it that meant nothing, and underneath, in small grey letters, three words that meant everything.

A Merrivale company.

Here is what nine hundred hours is.

Nine hundred hours of one man's recorded speech is, by the standards of the field, an enormous amount. It is more than enough. With that much clean audio of a single speaker, on a single subject, in a single register, you can build a thing that talks in that voice forever. Not a recording. Not a splice. A generator. You can give it something to say and it will say it, in the accent of the Nebraska plains, with the slight catch at the ends of sentences that Ezra Roan had because he smoked for thirty-one years and quit in 2004.

It will never run out of sermon.

And it will never appear anywhere, because it is going out over amateur voice on a license-free frequency from repeaters mounted on grain elevators and cell monopoles and one water tower, and there is no station, no feed, no server anybody outside can point at, and no law being broken except a handful of technical FCC rules about unattended operation that carry a fine of about nine hundred dollars if anyone ever files a complaint, which no one ever has, because the only people who hear it are driving.

Cal found one. He did not go looking with equipment; he did it the old way, with a hand-held and a lot of driving and a notebook, triangulating on signal strength over four nights. It was a grey box

the size of a suitcase strapped to the leg of a grain elevator outside Brule with a solar panel and a whip antenna, and it was not hidden, and it had a laminated tag on it with a call sign and a phone number, exactly the way any legitimate installation would.

He stood at the base of the elevator with his hand-held and he keyed the mic and he said:

"Preacher."

Nothing for eleven seconds.

Then, out of the box above his head, and simultaneously out of the speaker in his hand, and simultaneously, he understood, out of two hundred trucks running the corridor at that moment:

"Go ahead."

Cal's arm went cold from the elbow down.

"Who am I talking to."

"You're talking to a man who's been dead a while," said Ezra Roan pleasantly. "Same as you. Same as everybody out here."

"That's cute."

"It's not meant to be."

"You know what you are?"

There was a pause that was exactly the length of a thoughtful pause and Cal understood, with a kind of vertigo, that the pause had been chosen.

"I know what I am," said the voice. "The question is whether you know what you are. You've been up on this frequency about two years now, listening and never keying. That's a lot of listening for a man who doesn't believe any of it."

"I never gave you my handle."

"No," agreed Ezra Roan. "You never did."

And then, in the same warm unhurried voice, the voice of a man from Cozad who had died on a dry road at 04:26 in the morning fifteen years ago:

"Zero one one four."

Cal did not key the mic again.

He drove back toward Ogallala with the hand-held on the seat beside him and did not turn it off, and it did not say anything else, and a few miles short of the exit he started laughing and had to pull over, and it was not a good sound and he was glad Nadia was not in the truck.

The dead man's voice knew his asset number.

Which meant the congregation and the study were not two things that had found each other. They had never been two things.

PERSONAL EFFECTS IV

CLAIM FILE 7311-D — INVENTORY OF PERSONAL PROPERTY RECOVERED

Prepared for the adjuster. Not for release.

One steel travel mug, contents coffee.

One laminated card, wallet-sized, hand-lettered, recovered from the driver's shirt pocket. Text reads in full:

I AM NOT THE DRIVER.

I AM THE LOAD.

THE ONE WHO DRIVES DOES NOT SLEEP.

THE ONE WHO DRIVES HAS NEVER LIED.

WAKE HIM.

One paper road atlas, current year, with forty-one locations circled in the same hand.

One wedding band, worn thin, inner engraving illegible.

One CB radio, aftermarket, modified beyond the legal power limit.

One photograph of a grave marker.

Note appended by field agent: The laminated card has now appeared in four files known to me. I have raised this twice. I am told it is not within the scope of the inventory.

IV. LOAD SECURED

THIRTEEN. APPLIED COGNITION

Merrivale Applied Cognition, Kansas City, Missouri — 09:00

He did not have to break in anywhere. He wrote one email and they answered it in forty minutes, and there was a pass waiting for him at the desk with his name spelled right.

They had wanted to talk to him for three years.

Dr. Shirin Abdollahi was about forty-five and had the specific grey exhaustion of someone who has been right about something for a long time in a building full of people who are polite about it. Her office had one window, a whiteboard she had clearly stopped erasing properly, and eleven feet of shelf holding what turned out to be printed crash reconstructions.

"I know what you want," she said. "You want the forty-one minutes."

"Yes."

"I'm going to show it to you. Not because you're owed it, although you are. Because you won't understand anything I say until you've seen it." She sat down. "But I'm going to explain the program first, and I'd like you to let me finish, because nobody ever lets me finish and then they leave angry about something I wasn't saying."

Cal sat.

"Forty thousand people a year," she said. "In this country. That's the number. It has been roughly that number my entire adult life. It went down for thirty years and then it stopped going down and in some years it goes up, and every one of those forty thousand is a Tuesday and a phone call.

"Ninety-four percent of them come from human error. That is not my figure, it's the federal one, and it's been stable for decades. Speed, alcohol, distraction, fatigue, misjudgment. Ninety-four percent.

"So. If you could take the human out, you would save something on the order of thirty-seven thousand lives a year, forever, starting the year you did it. There is no other intervention available to us in any domain — not cancer, not heart disease, not guns, not anything —

with that shape. It's the largest single available reduction in preventable death in the country and it is engineering, not politics, and it is nearly done."

"Nearly."

"Ninety-nine point nine percent done," Shirin said. "I mean that with more precision than people use it. The ordinary road is solved. Lane keeping, following distance, merging, weather, construction, pedestrians, all of it, solved, better than you, and I say that with respect for twenty-six years of clean driving. A modern system beats you on every hour of every day you have ever driven except one kind of moment."

"The tail."

She looked up.

"That's our word," she said. "Where'd you get it?"

"It's on a form I signed."

"Yes. It would be." She rubbed her eyes. "The tail. The far end of the distribution. The event that has never happened before. And here is the thing about it that people who have never done this work cannot be made to believe: you cannot simulate it."

She got up and went to the whiteboard, which was a reflex.

"A simulator contains what somebody put in it. That's not a limitation of our simulator, it's what a simulator is. I can generate ten billion miles overnight — rain, ice, deer, blowouts, children, cyclists, wrong-way drivers, debris. All of it. And every single one of those events is something a person on my team thought of.

"The tail is the category of things nobody thought of. By definition. The moment I can put it in the simulator it has left the tail.

"So the only place the tail exists is the actual road, at the actual rate, which is somewhere around one event per three hundred thousand vehicle-hours. To collect a thousand of them you need three hundred million hours of instrumented driving in conditions where the tail is dense."

"And where's it dense."

"Night. Rural interstate. Hours eight through eleven. Commercial vehicles." She capped the marker. "You are aware that you're describing your own life."

"Yes."

"There is no other population. Passenger cars don't spend the hours. Autonomous fleets are geofenced to cities where the tail is a different animal. There are three million people in this country who spend their working lives inside the exact envelope where the unprecedented happens, and every one of them has a camera pointed at his face already, installed by his employer, for reasons that have nothing to do with me."

Cal said, "You didn't have to put the camera in. It was already in."

"That's correct," Shirin said. "I want to be very precise about my sins. I did not install a single camera. I did not write a single line of the pay structure. I did not lobby for the electronic logging mandate. I did not design the Interstate Highway System to be the most reliable hypnotic induction ever built at public expense, although I will say that when I first understood that, I sat in my car in the parking garage for about half an hour."

"So what did you do."

"I looked at the footage," she said, "which nobody had ever done at scale, because there was no reason to. It's rolling storage. It's for arguing with insurers. A hundred hours and then it's gone."

She turned around.

"I asked for it not to be gone."

"And what'd you find."

Shirin Abdollahi came back and sat down and put both hands flat on the desk, and for the first time she looked less like a person defending a program and more like a person who had found something under a floorboard.

"I found that between two and six in the morning, on straight rural interstate, in the ninth hour and after, somewhere between eleven and nineteen percent of commercial drivers in this country are periodically not conscious in the sense that you and I are using the

word, that the episodes last from forty seconds to forty-one minutes, that they occur three million times a night, that nobody knows, that nobody reports it, that there is no name for it in any medical literature I could find that isn't a hundred years old and about railway signalmen —

“— and that during those episodes, they drive better.”

She let that stand.

“Lane keeping improves. Fuel economy improves. Following distance improves. Reaction to routine hazards improves, substantially, because the overcorrection is gone. The single most dangerous thing a tired driver does is panic, and the passenger does not panic, and I have never found an instance of it panicking, in eleven years of footage.

“It is not impairment, Mr. Dorsey. That's what I couldn't get anyone in this building to hear for four years. We have been calling it impairment since 1929 because it looked like sleep. It is not impairment. It is a different operator.”

“With one problem,” Cal said.

“With one problem,” Shirin agreed. “It has never seen anything new. It is made entirely out of what has already happened to it. Forty-one thousand hours of road, compiled down into something that does not deliberate, and when the road produces a thing that is not in the compilation —”

She stopped.

“That's when it gets interesting,” she said, “and I hate the word I just used, and I've never found a better one, and I'd like you to hold on to how much I hate it, because you're going to need it in about ten minutes.”

FOURTEEN. PRECEDENT

The same room — 09:40

“Now ask me why,” Shirin said. “Everybody gets this far and then they ask the wrong question. They ask what we're going to do with it. Ask why we need it.”

"Why do you need it."

"Because of a jury."

She said it plainly and waited to see whether he would get there on his own, and after about nine seconds he did, and she saw him get there, and she nodded.

"Say it," she said.

"Because the car's going to kill somebody."

"The car is going to kill somebody," Shirin said. "Not maybe. Not if we're careless. If we deploy autonomy across this country tomorrow and it performs exactly as designed and saves thirty-seven thousand people a year, it will still, in some number of instances, be in a situation with no good exit, and it will do something, and a person will die, and that person will have a mother.

"And then it goes to a courtroom. And in that courtroom nobody is going to ask whether the vehicle behaved optimally. Optimal isn't the standard. There's no such thing as optimal in negligence law. The standard is the reasonable person."

"What a normal guy would've done."

"What a reasonable operator would have done under the circumstances. That's it. That's the whole test, and it's been the test for two hundred years, and every product liability case in the automotive space in the last century has turned on it."

She held up a hand and counted on it.

"If the machine does something a human wouldn't have done, we lose. Every time. Doesn't matter that it saved four hundred people that week. The jury sees one dead child and one machine that did something strange, and the verdict is nine figures, and it happens in eleven jurisdictions at once, and the program is dead, and the thirty-seven thousand a year we would have saved go on dying at the same rate they've been dying at since 1965, and they will die for another forty years while we get our nerve back."

She lowered the hand.

"So we cannot build a machine that behaves better than a person. We can only build a machine that behaves the way a person does, and then prove it. In footage. Under oath. Eleven years of it."

"You're not building ethics," Cal said. "You're building a defense."

"Yes."

"You're not asking what it should do. You're asking what a man does, so you can copy him and then hide behind him."

"Yes."

"And say that's just what people do."

"Because it is what people do," Shirin said, "and I would like you to notice that I have never once in this conversation claimed it was noble."

The fan in the ceiling ran. Somewhere down the hall a printer started.

"Now," she said. "The answer. You want the answer? Two thousand nine hundred recorded tail events. Our fleet and four partner fleets. Eleven years. Every one of them a genuine no-good-exit moment with a driver in the state we've been discussing.

"In every instance where the available exits included one that preserved the vehicle and one that preserved a third party, it took the one that preserved the vehicle.

"Two thousand nine hundred out of two thousand nine hundred. There is no other data set like it in the world. There is no philosophy department on earth that has an empirical result of that quality about anything."

Cal did not say anything.

"Do you know what the trolley problem is?"

"I've heard it."

"It's the great question of my field. Five people on one track, one on the other, do you pull the lever. It has been argued for sixty years and there are shelves of it and every ethics board of every autonomous vehicle program in the world has spent money on it, and every survey of the public says the same thing: seventy-six

percent of people say the vehicle should sacrifice its occupant to save the greater number.

"Seventy-six percent. And then the same survey asks whether they'd buy that car, and the number goes to eleven."

She smiled without any warmth in it at all.

"So we already knew people were lying. We just didn't know how deep the lying went. We thought it was hypocrisy — you know, believe one thing, buy another. That's ordinary. That's human.

"It isn't hypocrisy. It's lower than that. Ask a hundred drivers what they'd do if it was the ditch or the school bus. Every one of them says the ditch. And they are not lying to you. They believe it completely, they'd pass a polygraph, some of them would cry telling you.

"And not one of them has ever done it. Not once, in two thousand nine hundred."

"So the trolley problem doesn't have an answer," Cal said.

"The trolley problem has an answer," Shirin said. "It's just not a philosophical answer, and nobody wanted it, and I have it on a hard drive. Human beings do not solve trolley problems. They exit them. And the exit is always the same direction."

Cal said, "Away from the driver."

"Away from the driver," she said. "Every time. And that is what we are going to build, and it is what a jury is going to be shown, and the defense will be that the vehicle did what a person does, and the defense will be *true*, and we will win, and thirty-seven thousand people a year will not die.

"That's the program, Mr. Dorsey. That's all of it. There isn't a second floor."

Cal let a long time go by.

"The trailers," he said.

Shirin's face changed, and the change was small, and it was the only genuinely frightened thing he saw in that building.

"We do not stage events," she said. "I will say that under oath, in any forum, at any time, and it is true."

"Say the rest of it."

"We schedule," she said. "We produce route lines. The lines are optimized for hours and fuel and delivery, and they are also weighted, at the margin, toward corridors and time windows where tail density is higher. That weighting is disclosed in the enrollment document in the plainest English I could get past the lawyers, and I wrote that line myself, and I fought for it, and I lost most of the other fights."

"And those lines are shared with a research partner network. And that network has forty-some members. And I do not know who all of them are."

"You know what's on nineteen at night."

"Yes."

"You know there's men out there who think that thing is holy and that the way you talk to it is to put a dark trailer across the road."

"Yes."

"Two hundred people," Cal said.

"A hundred and ninety-one that I can attribute," said Shirin Abdollahi, "and I have written it up four times, and I have the four memoranda, and I have the four responses, and every response says the same thing in different words, which is that we do not stage events and that what occurs on a public road is not within our control, and that I should be careful about putting speculation in writing."

"So why are you still here?"

She looked at him with something close to hatred, and it was not for him.

"Because if I leave," she said, "somebody stays who hasn't written it down."

FIFTEEN. THE FOUR SECONDS

A conference room, second floor — 10:20

There is nothing dramatic about the room where you finally see it. That is worth recording. Grey carpet, a table for eight, a screen on the wall, a bowl of individually wrapped mints that nobody has ever eaten.

She played it from 04:13:40.

Cal Dorsey watched his own face for twenty seconds and then said, "Stop."

Shirin stopped it.

"Is that all of it," Cal said. "Is that the whole face."

"That's the whole face."

He had seen a lot of dead men. Anyone who does this for twenty-six years has seen a lot of dead men and Cal had pulled two of them out himself, in Ohio in 2007, and he had a settled idea of what a face without anybody in it looked like.

This was not that. That was the trouble. A dead face has fallen. This face was *held*. Everything was in position. It was doing the job of being a face and there was no one operating it.

"Go on," he said.

She went on.

At 04:14:00 the crest comes up and the trailer is in the headlights, black, taking the whole road.

The face does not react. There is no widening, no jaw, nothing. The heart rate goes from fifty-eight to a hundred and forty-one in the space of a breath and the face does not know about it.

At 04:14:00.4 the eyes go to the trailer and hold.

At 04:14:01.0 the eyes go left.

They cross the windshield in one movement, past the A-pillar line, and they stop, and they hold for four frames, which at that frame rate is a sixteenth of a second, on two points of light nine hundred and sixty feet east.

Then they come back to the trailer.

At 04:14:01.2 the input begins.

"Play the sound," Cal said.

"Cal."

"Play the sound."

She played the sound.

Under the engine, flat, unhurried, in his own voice:

"— coupling. Fifth wheel plate. Locking jaws. King—"

And it stops.

Not trails off. Stops, at the top of a word, in the middle of an inhalation that had already been taken.

Nothing for one point two seconds.

Then the tires.

Shirin let it run to 04:14:19, when the truck comes back up onto the westbound lanes, and then she let it run to 04:16:40, and out of the speakers in that carpeted room a voice said:

"Left front. Clearance lights. Lenses. Reflectors."

She stopped it.

Cal said, "It looked at them."

"It resolved a light source in the opposing lanes."

"It looked at them."

"Mr. Dorsey —"

"It stopped talking." Cal put one finger on the table, not hard.

"Twenty-nine minutes it never stopped. It didn't stop for a deer. It didn't stop for a car cutting in at a hundred and ten feet. It didn't stop when the mirror came off, it didn't stop when the tire went, it never stopped for one single thing that entire night except one point two seconds, and it started again at the beginning."

Shirin Abdollahi did not answer.

"You've got two thousand nine hundred of these," Cal said. "How many stop talking."

"Most of them don't talk at all. It's not universal. Maybe one in nine has a verbal component."

"How many of those stop."

She was quiet for a moment.

"All of them," she said.

"When?"

"At the point where the exits are evaluated."

"Say what that means in English."

"It means," she said, "that whatever is doing this appears to have a fixed capacity, and that when the road produces something outside its compilation it stops doing everything else in order to solve it, and that we can see the moment that happens, and that the moment is very short, and that we do not have a mechanism for it and I have stopped pretending we're close to one."

"So it's thinking."

"That word is not going to survive peer review."

"I'm not peer review," Cal said. "I'm the guy it happened to. Is it thinking."

Shirin Abdollahi looked at the frozen frame on the wall, which was a man's face in the dark with the light of two headlamps in the left eye.

"Something is being decided," she said. "I have never been able to write it any other way."

She turned the screen off.

"Now I'm going to make you an offer, and you're going to want to take it for the wrong reason, and I want you to take it anyway."

Full instrumentation. Salary, not mileage — the first salaried driving job Cal Dorsey had ever been offered in his life. Sensors: the two lenses and a chest strap and a sleep lab in Kansas City four times a year and a neurologist who had been trying to study this

since 1998 and had never had a subject. Routes selected for tail density. Everything recorded. Eleven-year retention.

Designation: Tail Asset.

"Why me," Cal said.

"Because forty-one minutes is the longest verified episode in the world," Shirin said. "The next longest is nineteen. You are not a driver we are studying, Mr. Dorsey, you're an instrument, and there are four of you on this continent that we know about, and I have been trying to get to you for three years and the legal department would not let me near you because of the settlement."

Cal sat in the grey room.

"One condition," he said.

"Money's not negotiable."

"It's not money." He put his hands on the table. "There's a woman working nights at a truck stop in Ogallala who's got a folder in her house with eleven copies of the report in it and none of them tell her anything. She gets to see the four seconds."

"That's sealed."

"You've got a building full of lawyers. Find the door."

"Even if I could — Mr. Dorsey, think about what you're asking. You want me to sit a widow down and show her a man's face deciding."

"I want you to stop deciding what she can carry," Cal said, "because there's nobody left in this whole thing who's asked her."

SIXTEEN. A REFLEX DOESN'T HAVE A FAVORITE

Merrivale Applied Cognition, Kansas City — 14:10, eleven weeks later

It took eleven weeks and it required an amended stipulation, an order from a district judge in Lincoln, two lawyers from the other side of the original settlement, and a non-disclosure agreement of nine pages that Deb Kessler read all the way through, twice, in front of everybody, taking her time.

She came in a good coat. Cal noticed that and it took the wind out of him more than anything else in the entire three years, that she had bought or borrowed a good coat to go to a building in Kansas City to watch four seconds of video.

The terms: once. No copy. No recording device in the room. A representative present. The audio permitted.

Shirin Abdollahi asked her, with real care, whether she wanted a description first.

"No," Deb said. "I've had descriptions."

She sat in the middle chair and put her handbag on her knees and held it with both hands and said, "Go ahead."

Twenty seconds.

The crest. The black shape taking the whole road. The face doing nothing. The eyes on the trailer.

The eyes going left, across the windshield, and stopping.

The voice underneath saying *fifth wheel plate, locking jaws, king—* and stopping at the top of the word.

One point two seconds of engine.

Then the tires.

Shirin closed it at 04:14:06 and did not go further, which had been agreed.

The room was quiet for what Cal later thought was probably about half a minute and felt like eleven.

Deb Kessler said: "Play the eyes again."

Shirin looked at the representative. The representative looked at nothing. Shirin played the eyes again.

Deb watched it. Then she said, "Again."

Four times.

Then she sat back and let go of the handbag and put her hands flat on her thighs, and when she spoke her voice was completely steady, and Cal understood that she had been getting ready for this for three years the way you get ready for a surgery.

"For three years," she said, "everybody in a suit has sat across from me and used the same word. Reflex. It wasn't a decision, Mrs. Kessler, it was a reflex. There wasn't time for a decision. You have to understand there wasn't time."

She looked at Shirin.

"You said that too. In the second letter."

"Yes," Shirin said. "I did."

"And I've been trying to hold on to it. Because if it's a reflex, it's like weather. You can't be angry at weather, it's not good for you, my sister says that about nine times a week." She nodded at the dark screen. "But I've been thinking about it a long time and I want to say this to somebody who understands the machine, and then I'll go home."

"A reflex doesn't have a favorite."

Nobody in the room said anything.

"You touch a hot stove, your hand comes back. It doesn't come back toward the person you love and away from the person you don't. It just comes back. That's what a reflex is. There's nothing in it."

She pointed, without heat, at the screen.

"That looked. It looked left, and it saw my husband's headlights, and it went quiet like a man doing arithmetic, and then it went that way anyway. And that is not a hand coming off a stove. That's a choice about who it was for."

Shirin Abdollahi said, "Mrs. Kessler, I have to tell you that the operator had no awareness —"

"I know he didn't," Deb said. "I'm not talking about him."

She turned and looked at Cal Dorsey for the first time since she had walked in.

"You didn't do it," she said. "I've known that for two years. I stopped needing you to be the one about a year and a half ago and I want you to have that, because you've been coming into my

building and eating at my counter like a man doing a penance and it hasn't been doing either of us any good."

"Deb —"

"Let me finish." Her hands were flat and still. "I'm not angry at you. I'm angry at what's in you. And it's in me too. That's what I came four hundred miles to find out and now I know it, and I'd rather know."

She stood up and put her handbag on her shoulder.

"They're going to build that," she said to Shirin. "Aren't they. That's what all this is."

"Yes," Shirin said. It cost her something to say it and she said it anyway, and Cal gave her that.

"And it'll save a lot of people."

"Yes."

"And it'll be honest about being selfish, which is more than any of us are."

"Yes."

Deb Kessler nodded slowly, taking it, the way she took everything, the way she had taken the phone call at four in the morning and then gone back to the counter eight months later.

"Well," she said. "At least it'll never lie about it afterward."

She went out and the door hissed shut on its closer and she did not look back, and Cal Dorsey sat in a grey conference room in Kansas City with a bowl of mints on the table that nobody has ever eaten.

PERSONAL EFFECTS V

CLAIM FILE 6180-B — SUPPLEMENTAL INVENTORY

Released to next of kin, three years and four months after loss. Balance of property previously withheld pending resolution.

One wristwatch, man's, stopped at 4:14.

One wallet containing eleven dollars, a library card, and a folded schedule for a youth basketball league, spring season, with one name underlined.

One toy truck, die-cast, blue, approximately three inches, recovered from the front passenger footwell.

One second drawing, crayon on lined school paper, matching the item previously inventoried. Subject: three figures and a building. Reverse side bears the words MOM AT WORK in a child's hand.

One paper coffee cup, empty, from an establishment approximately one mile from the site of loss.

Note appended by field agent: This inventory was completed on the night of the incident. Its release was not within my authority. I have retired.

SEVENTEEN. DEADHEAD

Interstate 80 westbound, Nebraska — 03:40

He runs the corridors now.

Salary. It comes every two weeks whether the wheels turn or not, and that alone took about nine months to stop feeling like a trick. Chest strap. A second camera on the pedals. A neurologist in Kansas City who calls him by his first name and has published nothing, because the data belongs to somebody else, which is the arrangement the neurologist made with himself a long time ago.

Nadia stayed.

He gave her every opportunity not to. He told her what he'd signed, all of it, in a truck stop in Rock Springs, and she listened all the way to the end without interrupting once, and then she said: "Somebody's going to be in that bunk. It might as well be somebody who writes it down."

She still keeps the notebook. It is nearly full. She has her own numbering system now and does not show it to anybody, including him, and Cal has never asked, and that is the last private object in a space the size of a walk-in closet.

The program continues. Nothing about it changed. Nothing was ever going to change; there was no rule broken and no one to charge and no story small enough for a newspaper and large enough to matter. The route lines still go out to the partner network on the first of the month. The dark trailers still turn up two or three times a winter on roads that have no reason for them, and the LLCs still lead to mail services, and the men who put them there still believe they are testing for grace.

Ezra Roan still preaches.

Cal listens sometimes. There is no reason not to. The voice is warm and unhurried and knows the country, and it has never once told a lie that Cal could catch, and it will be on that frequency long after every man currently driving that corridor is dead. That is what a voice is now. It was always a strange thing to think that a voice belonged to a body.

The road out here is what it is. Straight, flat, cleared, engineered by careful people to contain nothing at all. Two lanes each way, no moon, no horizon, a green sign every fifty-three seconds with a number one lower than the last.

126. 125. 124.

Cal Dorsey has been on duty for eight hours and forty minutes.

He does not fight it anymore. That is the part he has not told the neurologist and does not intend to, and it is the reason the data out of Asset 0114 is the best in the program, and Shirin Abdollahi has never asked him about it because she is afraid of what he'd say.

He puts the heat down at his feet.

Behind the curtain, Nadia is awake with her eyes closed, which is how she does it now, and she has a pen in her hand.

And in a minute or in nine minutes there will be no one in the left front seat of a seventy-nine-thousand-pound vehicle moving at ninety-eight feet a second across the middle of a sleeping country, and the lane position will fall to four centimeters, and the mirrors will get checked at fifty-two-second intervals by something that has forty-one thousand hours and no name, and it will begin at the left

front corner with the clearance lights and the lenses and the reflectors and it will work all the way around, every point, in order, the way Wendell Pruitt taught a young man to do it in 1998.

And when it gets to the end it will say what it always says.

In service.

Nobody drives at four in the morning.

Something drives.

Cal Dorsey has been driving eighty thousand pounds across the middle of America for twenty-six years, and in all that time he has only ever lost forty-one minutes.

He did not fall asleep. The truck stayed in its lane. The fuel curve was the cleanest anyone at the company had ever recorded. When he came back to himself, the sun was not up yet and the road ahead was empty and something behind him was on fire.

Out on the night frequencies there is a preacher nobody has ever met in person, and a scattered congregation of men who believe that the driver who takes over when you go under is the better one — the one worth waking. In a glass building in Kansas City there is a research group that agrees with them, and has the numbers to prove it, and needs a great deal more of them.

A slow, cold novella about the most ordinary altered state there is: the one every long-haul driver has been in, and every long-haul driver will tell you was nothing.

Nobody drives at four in the morning. Something drives.

