

ROYA

PUBLICATION

No. 52



SAMBA

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

SAMBA

Chew Z

Printed in the Reach

Roya Publication No. 52

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.

Copyright © 2026 Chew Z

All rights reserved.

ISBN 979-8-952790-51-3

Roya Publications

Publication No. 52

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

Printed in the Reach

ELAPSED —
SECONDS ON
ONE BREATH



IMPACT
0:00-0:08



NO PURCHASE
0:08-0:25



RUNG ONE — STRUGGLE
0:30-0:55



RUNG TWO — CESSATION
0:55-1:15



RUNG THREE — WARMTH
1:15-1:50

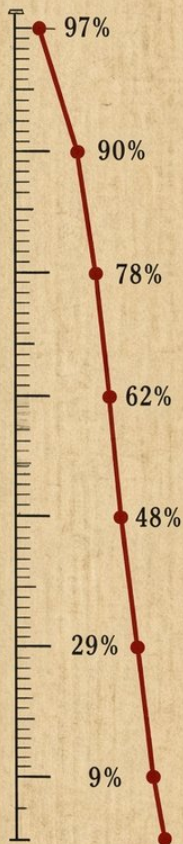


RUNG FOUR — STRUCTURE
1:50-2:40



RUNG FIVE
2:40-?

OXYGEN
REMAINING



ON RETURN
CONVULSION
AT THE SURFACE

FOR EVERYONE WHO HAS COME UP WRONG,
AND FOR WHOEVER WAS COUNTING.

SYNOPSIS

Cass Moura drives a rescue ski at the largest wave in Europe. He is the fastest man on that coast — four hundred and eleven recoveries, an average of sixty-two seconds from impact to hand-on-body — and he has built a life on the belief that his speed is the only decent thing about him.

He is wrong about what the speed is for.

The tow crews at the break have been training under a retired navy diving medic named Renny Shaw, and what looks like ordinary breath-hold conditioning is a ladder with rungs that go past blackout. The riders are not learning to survive a hold-down. They are learning to stay in one long enough to look at something — a structure that forty-one independent subjects have described in the same words, in the same position, in the same absence of fear.

When a swell arrives that has no precedent in the recorded history of the beach, Cass discovers what his sixty-two seconds have actually been doing for nine years, what his brother said dying on the sand in 2016, and who has been paying for the swimming pool.

Samba is a book about the alarm every human being has been obeying since birth, the quiet on the other side of it, and what happens to a true thing when somebody works out how to sell it.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

There is a design flaw in all of us and nobody mentions it.

Your body cannot measure oxygen. It has no instrument for the one substance it cannot do without. What it measures instead is the waste — carbon dioxide, rising in the blood — and when that level crosses a line, a switch throws in the brainstem and the diaphragm begins firing on its own. That is the whole of the panic. That is the thing we call drowning, and terror, and the will to live.

It is an alarm wired to the exhaust rather than the tank, and it has never once had access to the fuel gauge.

I found that out while reading about freedivers and I have not been able to put it down since. Because of what follows from it: the terror is early. It arrives long before the danger. A trained person feels certain they are dying with most of their oxygen still in them, and if they do not answer the alarm, the alarm eventually stops — not because they have mastered anything, but because the brain has begun to run down and go quiet. And what people report from the other side of that switch is remarkably consistent, and remarkably calm, and nobody has ever satisfactorily explained it.

The standard explanation is that a brain low on fuel manufactures. That is almost certainly correct and it is not, on its own, an answer. It does not explain why the manufacturing agrees.

I wanted to write about people who go looking for that, and I wanted the going to be real. The training in this book is real training. The tables, the rock runs, the vests, the mechanics of a tow, the reason the foam will not hold a body, the sixty-eight seconds that is the worst survived hold-down in the sport's recorded history — all of it is drawn from the documented accounts of people who have been there. The physiology is accurate. Where I have invented, I have tried to invent only in the places where the record genuinely goes quiet, which is further out than most people imagine.

The rest of the book is about what happens next, which is the part I

could not stop thinking about.

If you find a state that reproduces — reliably, in every subject, on demand — you have not found a mystery. You have found a specification. And a specification can be built toward, and a thing that can be built toward can be made, and a thing that can be made can be sold. Everything that has ever been reached the hard way eventually becomes available the easy way, and I do not think that is a tragedy, and I am not certain it is not one either.

The body is the last honest witness we have. It is also, increasingly, a research site with a gift shop attached.

I am grateful to the big-wave community, whose courage I have borrowed and whose worst impulses I have exaggerated only slightly, and to the freedivers, who named the convulsion after a dance because there was nothing else to call it.

Chew Z

CONTENTS

I. FLAT

ONE. BODY COUNT	11
TWO. THE POOL	15
THREE. RUY	20
FOUR. DELIVERABLES	23
PROTOCOL I. TABLES	26
FIVE. DRY	27
SIX. THE WORD	30
SEVEN. MINA'S ROOM	33
EIGHT. BUOY 62081	36

II. SWELL

NINE. NAPAT	41
TEN. FIRST DAY	44
ELEVEN. THE VESTIBULE	49
TWELVE. HERO MOMENT	54
THIRTEEN. PADDLE OUT	58
PROTOCOL II. THE RUNGS	62
FOURTEEN. THE INSTRUMENT	64
FIFTEEN. AGREEMENT	69
SIXTEEN. NOTICE	73

III. THE GLORY

SEVENTEEN. GREEN LIGHT	79
PROTOCOL III. SURRENDER	82
EIGHTEEN. FIFTEENTH	84
NINETEEN. MINA'S WAVE	87
TWENTY. THE CLIENT	92
TWENTY-ONE. SLIDE THIRTY-ONE	97
PROTOCOL IV. NOTE TO THE FILE	101
TWENTY-TWO. THE COUNT	103

I. FLAT

ONE. BODY COUNT

The first thing you learn driving water patrol is that nobody you pull out is grateful.

They come up wrong. That's the phrase, and it isn't poetic, it's diagnostic. A man who comes up right breaks the surface with his mouth already working, chin up, hands finding the sled before his eyes do. A man who comes up wrong arrives face-first with his arms behind him like something dropped from a truck, and his eyes are open, and there is nobody home behind them, and he is shaking. Not shivering. Shaking. A fine fast tremor through the shoulders and jaw, the whole body buzzing like a bad fluorescent tube.

They call that a samba. I didn't know the word yet, that first winter. I just called it the shakes, which is what everyone on the beach called it, and everyone on the beach was wrong about most things.

I put the ski on its side and reached down and got a fistful of vest.

Kirill Novak, twenty-nine, Czech, sponsored by an energy drink whose logo was a stylized bolt of lightning going into a fist. He weighed a hundred and eighty pounds dry and about four hundred with the ocean in him. I hauled him across the sled and he vomited seawater onto my thigh and the shaking stopped, which is how you know it's over, and then he said the thing they all say.

"I was fine."

"You were fucking flatlining, Kirill."

"I was fine. I had more."

He had eleven seconds of more. I know because I count. That's the job — not the pulling, any idiot with a throttle can pull. The job is the count. From the moment the lip lands on a man to the moment I put a hand on him, I run a number in my head, and that number is the only honest thing on this beach. Everything else is footage.

Kirill's number was fifty-two. Fifty-two seconds.

Ask anyone in the parking lot how long a bad hold-down lasts and they'll say two minutes, three minutes, they'll tell you about a guy at Jaws who was down for four. It's horseshit. It's always horseshit.

Shane Dorian got the worst beating of his life at Mavericks in 2010, two waves on top of him, dragged across the reef at the end of a fifteen-foot leash, and when they timed the footage afterward he'd been under for one minute and eight seconds. Sixty-eight seconds. That's the benchmark. That's the story men tell in bars for the rest of their lives, and it's shorter than a decent song intro.

So when a man tells you he had more, what he means is that he wanted more, and those are different animals entirely.

— — —

I'm forty-one. I drive a 2019 Yamaha with a sled bolted on the back and eleven hundred hours on the clock, most of them spent going nowhere at eight knots in water the colour of wet cement. I am not a surfer. I was, for about six years, in the way that a man who plays guitar in his kitchen is a musician. I had a sponsor once. They sent me stickers.

What I am is the guy with the hands. I can put a ski where a ski should not be able to go and take a man off the surface of the water at forty kilometres an hour without breaking his ribs, and I can do it in whitewater so aerated it barely qualifies as liquid — foam that won't hold a hull, won't hold a body, won't hold anything, a slurry of air and salt that you don't float in so much as fall through. That last part is the trick. Everyone can drive in green water. The channel is a car park. The zone is where the money is.

There are maybe forty people on earth who can do it well. I know eleven of them by name and I don't like eight.

— — —

That day was a training day. Not a swell — a training day, which is what the crews call it when the buoys read twenty feet at fourteen seconds and the sponsors aren't watching. Six-metre faces. Playground stuff, by the standards of the place. The kind of day where a man gets careless because nothing on the horizon is trying hard.

Kirill had been careless. He'd gone late on a set wave he had no business taking, got picked up by the lip and driven straight down onto the shelf, and the second wave of the set had landed on the exact patch of ocean where he was trying to become a person again.

He lay on the sled with his cheek on the pad and looked up at me with the specific expression I have come to know better than my own mother's face. It is not fear. I want to be clear about that, because everyone gets this wrong, including the men themselves. It is not fear.

It's the look of a man who has been interrupted.

"How long," he said.

"Fifty-two."

"That's not—" He coughed. Salt water and something thicker.

"That's not right."

"I count, Kirill."

"That's not right." He wasn't arguing. He was doing arithmetic, and losing.

I opened the throttle and took him in through the channel where the water goes flat and stupid, and behind us the ocean kept doing its thing without any of us, and up on the cliff about two hundred people in waterproof jackets took photographs of a man they thought had nearly died, when what had actually happened was much worse.

— — —

Here is what nobody tells you about drowning, and I mean the real mechanism, not the film version with the arms waving.

You don't panic because you run out of air. You panic because of carbon dioxide.

That's the whole thing. That's the entire ugly secret of every human being who has ever been held under. Your body has no reliable way to measure oxygen. None. It's a design flaw, and it's in all of us, and there's no patch coming. What your body measures instead is

the waste — the carbon dioxide building up in your blood with nowhere to go. When that level climbs past a certain line, a switch throws in your brainstem and your diaphragm starts firing on its own, hard, in spasms, trying to make you breathe. It doesn't ask. It's not a suggestion.

Freedivers call that the struggle phase. Surfers call it "when it gets bad."

And here's the part that turns men into whatever Kirill was becoming: the struggle is a liar. Not about the danger — about the timing. When your diaphragm starts kicking, you typically still have a great deal of oxygen left. A trained man has minutes. An untrained man has more than he thinks. The convulsions arrive long before the lights go out.

Which means the terror is early. The terror is a false alarm that happens to be right often enough that we've kept it for four million years.

And that means the terror can be trained.

That's not mysticism. That's just tables — you hold your breath for a fixed time and shorten the rest between holds, again and again, until your blood is thick with the stuff and your body has to sit in that specific misery and learn that the misery is survivable. It's the least glamorous training in sport. It's lying on a yoga mat in a garage in your underwear, staring at a stopwatch, feeling like you're being strangled by a friend.

Do it long enough and something moves. The alarm stops being an alarm. It becomes a doorway with a sign on it. And then one day, sooner or later, some part of you gets curious about what's on the other side of the sign, and that is the day your life becomes a countdown that nobody else can see.

Kirill was somewhere around that day. So was everyone else in the crew, and I hadn't worked it out yet, because I was busy counting.

— — —

I racked the ski at four. The gulls were doing their thing on the harbour wall, screaming at nothing, and the fish market smelled the way it always smells, which is like the inside of a wound.

Mina Sadr was sitting on the concrete steps with her hood up and her forearms on her knees, watching the water in a flat way, the way you'd watch a machine you'd been told to keep an eye on.

"Kirill?" she said.

"Fifty-two."

She nodded slowly, and here's the thing. She didn't ask if he was okay. Nobody in that crew ever asked me if anyone was okay, not once, not one time in three years, and I had noticed and filed it under they're assholes, because that was the simplest explanation and I was a simple man with a boat.

What she said was: "That's good."

Then she stood up and walked off toward the car park with her hands in her pockets, and I stood there smelling the fish market and holding a wet vest and understood exactly nothing.

TWO. THE POOL

The municipal pool in the old town opens to the public at six and closes at nine, and between nine and eleven on Tuesdays and Thursdays it belongs to a man named Renny Shaw, who pays for it in cash out of an envelope, and who has never in three years told anybody what the money is for.

It smells like every pool. Chlorine and armpit and something faintly sweet underneath, like a hospital that gave up. Twenty-five metres, six lanes, two metres deep at the far end, tiles the colour of an old swimming costume. There's a mural of a dolphin on the wall that somebody painted in 1994 and nobody has had the courage to remove.

By nine-fifteen there were eight of them on the tiles and forty pounds of diving lead in a canvas bag by the blocks, and nobody was talking, which is the first thing you notice and the thing you never stop noticing. Eight athletes in a room and no noise. No

music. No banter. In every other sport on earth a training room sounds like a bar at closing time. This sounded like a waiting area.

I was there because Renny paid me two hundred a session to sit on the lifeguard chair and count, and because Mina had asked me to, in the way she asked things, which was to state a fact and let you do the rest.

Tuesdays and Thursdays. Nine.

That was the whole invitation. That was, I understand now, the door being held open a crack, for a very long time, by someone who was hoping I'd have the decency to notice.

— — —

They started with tables. This is the unglamorous part and it takes forty minutes and if you filmed it you'd have nothing.

Two kinds. Everyone in that room knew the difference the way a carpenter knows a rip cut from a crosscut.

The first kind trains you to tolerate the poison. You hold your breath for a fixed time — say two minutes — and then you get a rest, and the rest gets shorter every round. Two minutes off. Then a minute forty-five. Then a minute thirty. Down and down until you're going back under with your blood still dirty from the last one, still full of carbon dioxide you never got to blow off, and the misery starts at ten seconds instead of ninety. By the last round you're not holding your breath so much as enduring an argument. That's the point. You are teaching your body that the argument is survivable and does not require a verdict.

The second kind trains capacity. Fixed rest, growing hold. Two minutes, two-fifteen, two-thirty, up and up while your rest stays the same, so each round starts from clean blood and ends somewhere further out than the last. That one hurts less and terrifies more, because you can watch yourself go.

You do not do both on the same day. Anyone who tells you otherwise is either selling a course or trying to hurt you.

Renny ran the clock himself with a stopwatch that was older than half the people in the room, and he called the numbers in a voice with nothing in it at all.

"Ninety."

"Sixty."

"Thirty. Breathe up."

Eight bodies on the tiles, face down at the edge, snorkels out, hands hanging in the gutter. When a person is deep into a table their fingers go a particular colour. Not blue. People say blue. It's more of a grey-lilac, like the inside of a mussel shell, and it starts at the nail bed and creeps.

Around round six, the diaphragms started.

You can see it from a lifeguard chair better than you can see it from anywhere else on earth. The contraction goes through the whole torso — a single hard jolt at the base of the ribs, like someone's punched them from inside. Then another, eight seconds later. Then closer together. By the last round it's a rhythm, and the body on the tiles is jumping like a fish on a dock, and the face is perfectly still.

That's the part I couldn't get used to. The face. The body screaming and the face doing absolutely nothing.

— — —

Then the lead.

They call it rock running, and it's about as sophisticated as the name. You take a breath, you get in, you sink to the bottom of the deep end holding forty pounds of dive weight, and you walk. Length of the pool, turn, walk back. The weight keeps you down. The walking raises your heart rate. A high heart rate burns oxygen the way an open throttle burns fuel, so you're spending your one breath while doing exactly the thing that spends it fastest.

This is not a stunt. This is the closest a human being can get, in a municipal pool in a fishing town, to being held underwater by something that wants him dead.

Dorian said the thing that everyone quotes and almost nobody understands — that if you don't know the science of holding your breath under pressure with a high heart rate, you go into a wipeout just hoping to survive, and that hoping is itself expensive. The hope raises your heart rate. The raised heart rate burns the oxygen. The fear is not a feeling. The fear is a fuel gauge, dropping.

So they walk. Up and down, in the grey-green light, past the drain covers, eight of them at staggered intervals so there's always someone on the surface, a chain of grown adults trudging along the floor of a public swimming pool carrying weights like the world's most depressing procession.

Beto Krall could do two lengths and part of a third. He was twenty-six and built like something drawn by a marketing department and he was the strongest man in the room by a distance and it did not help him at all, which nobody said out loud.

Mina Sadr did four.

— — —

She went in last, at ten past ten, when the others were sitting along the wall in towels with their heads back.

I want to describe this accurately because I've heard it described badly.

She breathed up for about two minutes and there was nothing dramatic about it — slow in through the nose, long out, longer each time, the exhale roughly twice the inhale. That's all a breathe-up is. It isn't loading up on oxygen; you can't load up on oxygen, your blood is already almost full, that's another thing everyone gets wrong. It's about dropping your heart rate and getting your carbon dioxide down to a sensible floor so the alarm rings later. The dangerous version is when people overdo it — thirty fast breaths, hyperventilating — which blows off so much carbon dioxide that the alarm doesn't ring at all. You feel wonderful. You feel like you could stay down forever. Then you black out without one second of warning and the ocean takes you while you're still enjoying yourself.

Renny banned it. Renny banned it in the strongest language he ever used about anything, which was: we don't do that.

Mina took her last breath and slid off the edge and sank, and picked up the bag, and started walking.

The first length was ordinary. The second length, the crew stopped talking, which I noticed because they hadn't been talking. The third length her hands opened and closed twice on the handle and I saw the first contraction go through her, and I started my count over out of pure reflex.

Four lengths is a hundred metres. On the floor. Carrying lead.

She dropped the bag at the wall and did not come up.

She stood there. On the bottom of a swimming pool in the old town of a fishing village, in two metres of chlorinated water, with her arms loose at her sides and her chin slightly lifted, perfectly still, while her diaphragm fired hard enough that I could see it from twelve feet up.

Renny let the stopwatch run.

I said his name. He didn't move. He was watching her the way you watch a pot you're waiting on, and I will spend the rest of my life on the fact that he did not look worried, he looked interested, and there is no version of those two things that belong in the same man at the same moment.

At five minutes fifty on my count I came out of the chair.

She surfaced before I hit the water. Came up smooth, hands to the gutter, and did the recovery — sharp inhale, hold it, push down against a closed throat like you're straining, which sounds insane but raises the pressure in your chest and shoves what oxygen you've got across into the blood before your brain finishes deciding whether to switch off. Hook breathing. Three of them, hard, then a fourth, and then her eyes came back on like a room being lit.

Nobody clapped. Nobody said anything.

She wiped her face and looked up at me still standing on the edge with my shoes on, and she smiled, which she almost never did, and she said:

"You always come out too early."

And Renny Shaw wrote something in a black notebook.

THREE. RUY

My brother has been dead for nine years and I have never once described what he looked like when I brought him up, so I'm going to do it now and then I'm going to get on with the story.

He was twenty-six. He was better than me. That's not modesty, that's a ranking, and everyone who ever paddled out with the two of us could have told you inside a session. I had hands. Ruy had the other thing, the thing that can't be trained and can't be bought and mostly gets people killed — he had no negotiation in him. He looked at forty feet of moving water the way you'd look at a flight of stairs.

Our mother called him *o teimoso*. The stubborn one. She said it like a diagnosis.

It was the eleventh of February and the swell was not even the biggest of that winter. That's the detail that people find hardest and I find easiest. It wasn't the day. It was never going to be the day. It was a Tuesday with a long-period northwest swell and forty knots of nothing much, sixty-foot faces on the sets, and there were nine skis in the water and a hundred and forty people on the cliff, and a woman from a Portuguese television station was doing a piece to camera about tourism.

He went on the third wave of the set and got picked off at the top. Simple as that. Board went one way, he went the other, and the lip put him in the water somewhere I couldn't see because there were fifteen feet of spray standing between me and the entire world.

I got to the foam at forty seconds.

I found him at fifty-eight.

He came up eight metres off my port side, face down, orange vest inflated — he'd fired the cord, which meant he'd been conscious enough to reach across his own chest and pull a toggle, which meant he was in there, which meant everything — and I had him on the sled by sixty-two.

Sixty-two seconds. Six seconds worse than Dorian's, and Dorian walked up the beach and ate a sandwich.

Ruy was shaking when I got him. The buzz. The fine fast tremor. His eyes were open and he was looking at something over my shoulder that was not on my ski and not in the sky and not anywhere, and his mouth was moving, and I thought — and I want this on the record because I have thought about it every day for nine years — I thought he's fine, he's shaking, they always shake, the shaking means it's ending.

I opened the throttle and took him in through the channel at sixty kilometres an hour because I wanted him on sand.

He talked the whole way. I couldn't hear a word of it over the engine. His hand had my forearm and his grip was not weak, it was strong, it was the grip of a man making a point.

On the beach he stopped shaking, sat up on the wet sand in his vest with the water running off him, and looked at the ocean, and said — clearly, in Portuguese, in a perfectly normal voice, with two paramedics and a Sky Italia cameraman and his own brother listening —

"There's a room down there."

Then he said something else. Then he lay back on the sand and stopped.

Cardiac arrest. Twenty-six years old. The report said immersion pulmonary oedema secondary to breath-hold ascent and then a lot of other words, and the coroner explained to my mother in a small room with a plastic plant that sometimes the lungs fill from the inside, that the pressure changes do it, that it isn't drowning in the way she was imagining, and my mother nodded politely the entire time because she was seventy and Portuguese and had been raised to be polite to men with clipboards.

They put on the death certificate that he drowned.

He didn't drown. He drowned about as much as a man who falls off a roof dies of gravity.

— — —

I gave the interview. Of course I gave the interview. There is footage of me on a Portuguese news channel, thirty-two years old, wet, saying that my brother died doing what he loved, which is the single most repulsive sentence in the language and which I have never forgiven myself for, and the reporter asked me if I would be going back in the water.

I said I didn't know.

I was back in the water in eleven weeks. Not surfing. Never surfing again, not once, not one wave since — driving. Patrol. Pulling other people's brothers off the surface of the ocean at eleven hundred euros a weekend and counting the seconds out loud in my head like a man saying a rosary he doesn't believe in.

The crews think that's noble. There's a version of me they've built where I'm the guy who lost someone and came back to make sure it doesn't happen again, and I let them have it, because the alternative is to explain that I come back for the same reason a man who's dropped his wedding ring down a drain keeps taking the U-bend apart. I am not out there to save anybody.

I'm out there because I want to know what the room is.

— — —

I never told anyone what he said. Not my mother, not the coroner, not one person in nine years of standing in car parks with these people.

Two paramedics heard it and thought it was the hypoxia talking, which it was, obviously, that's what oxygen starvation does — the brain in the dark starts building. It hallucinates. Every freediver knows it, every high-altitude climber knows it, every man who has ever been held under too long comes up with a story about light or a corridor or a voice, and the medical explanation is a shrug: a brain running out of fuel will manufacture, because a brain cannot do nothing.

That's the sane reading. I've held onto it the way you hold a handrail.

But the second thing he said, the thing after the room, was six words, and neither of the paramedics spoke Portuguese well enough to catch them, and the cameraman was rewinding.

I caught them.

I'll get to them.

FOUR. DELIVERABLES

Beto Krall's sponsor meeting was held in a function room above a restaurant that does grilled sardines for tourists, and I was there because Beto asked me to drive him and because I am weak about free food.

Three of them flew in. A brand manager called Antonia, a man from the agency whose job title was Head of Athlete Narrative, and a girl in her twenties with a laptop who never said one word for ninety minutes and typed continuously, which was somehow the most frightening thing in the room.

They had a deck. Of course they had a deck.

Slide four was a photograph of Beto being obliterated. It was a good photograph. Nazaré, two winters ago, forty-foot face, Beto at the bottom of it in the exact posture of a man being deleted, the whitewater already over his head, the board vertical in the air behind him like a headstone that hadn't landed yet.

"This," said the Head of Athlete Narrative, "is our best-performing asset of all time."

Beto nodded. He was twenty-six and he had a jaw you could open letters with and he genuinely did not understand what he'd just been told.

"Four point one million organic," Antonia said. "For comparison, his win at Punta Galea did seven hundred K."

So there it is. That's the industry, stated out loud in a room with a whiteboard, and nobody flinched, and the sardines came up on a plate with lemon.

The rides do seven hundred thousand. The beatings do four million.

Which means every man on that beach is being paid — not officially, not in a contract you could take to a lawyer, but paid nonetheless, in the only currency that has ever mattered to a sponsored athlete, which is renewal — to fail spectacularly on camera at regular intervals.

They don't put it like that. What they put in the contract is a number of what they call content-eligible sessions and a number of hero moments, and if you asked Antonia to define a hero moment she would say something about authenticity and emotional truth, and if you looked at the last four years of what actually got posted you would find that a hero moment is a man disappearing under a mountain of water and the crowd on the cliff going oohhh in eleven languages.

I ate my sardines.

— — —

There's a thing I've watched happen to about a dozen young men and two young women in this town and I've never seen it go the other way.

Year one, the kid is terrified and honest about it. He'll tell you at the bar, three beers in, that he nearly shat himself on the second wave and that he doesn't know if he's built for this. This is the healthiest he will ever be.

Year two, he stops saying that. He's learned the vocabulary. He says things like I felt really connected out there today.

Year three, he starts describing the beatings as the good part. And here's what's diabolical about it, here is the actual machinery: he isn't lying. By year three he has taken so many that his body has quietly recalibrated, the way a man who works in a slaughterhouse stops smelling the slaughterhouse, and the hold-downs that used to run him through with terror now arrive with something else attached. Something with a flavour. And when the sponsor's money and the crowd's noise and his own nervous system all start pointing in the same direction at once, the kid does not stand a chance, because there is nothing in his life telling him to stop except a

forty-one-year-old ski driver with a chip on his shoulder who he thinks is a bit of a cunt.

Year four is where they either quit, or they find Renny.

— — —

"They want twelve," Beto said in the car park afterwards.

"Twelve what?"

"Content-eligible. Season." He was rolling a cigarette on the seat of the truck, which he did badly, because he was an athlete and rolling cigarettes is a skill of the unfit. "And two hero."

"Two."

"Minimum two." He licked the paper. "Bro, it's fine. That's like — that's nothing. I'll get two in a fortnight if the Farol lights up."

"Beto." I waited until he looked at me. "You understand what you just agreed to."

"Yeah, I do." Total ease. No defence in it, none, and that's what made it awful, because a defensive man can still be argued with. "I agreed to eat shit twice on camera for a hundred and forty grand and a truck. Cass, what do you think the alternative is? Fishing?"

He lit the cigarette. It went out. He lit it again.

"Anyway," he said, "it's not even the worst part of my week."

"What's the worst part of your week?"

And Beto Krall, twenty-six, four point one million organic, looked out through the windscreen at the fish market and said, "Tuesdays," and laughed, and did not explain, and I did not ask, because I was a simple man with a boat and I thought I already knew what Tuesdays were.

Tuesdays were a swimming pool with a dolphin painted on the wall.

PROTOCOL I. TABLES

Read this once and then do not read it again. Reading is not the work.

PURPOSE. To render the alarm inert.

The alarm is carbon dioxide. It is not drowning, it is not death, it is not the ocean. It is a chemical rising in the blood and a switch in the brainstem that has not been redesigned in four million years. You have been obeying an unmaintained system your entire life. We are going to stop.

Understand what you actually have. A trained adult at rest, on one breath, holds enough oxygen for between four and six minutes of consciousness. In cold water, with the face immersed, more — the heart slows, blood withdraws from the limbs to the core, the spleen contracts and releases stored red cells into circulation. Your body has an emergency reserve it does not tell you about. The alarm rings anyway. The alarm has never once had access to the fuel gauge.

TABLE ONE — TOLERANCE. Eight rounds. Hold fixed at your comfortable maximum minus thirty seconds. Rest begins at two minutes and reduces by fifteen seconds each round. Round eight will be unpleasant at ten seconds. This is correct. You are not being harmed. You are being informed.

TABLE TWO — CAPACITY. Eight rounds. Rest fixed at two minutes. Hold increases by fifteen seconds each round. Table Two is for Sunday. Never the same day as Table One. A man who runs both in one day is not training, he is auditioning for something.

CONTRAINDICATED ABSOLUTELY. Hyperventilation. Fast breathing before a hold. It feels magnificent. It removes the carbon dioxide without adding one millilitre of oxygen, which means it removes the alarm and not the danger. You will feel calm and capable straight through the floor and into unconsciousness with no warning whatsoever. Men die this way in swimming pools, in three feet of water, in front of their children. We do not do that. Anyone found doing it is finished here.

RECOVERY. On surfacing: sharp inhale, close the throat, press down against it for two seconds, release. Repeat three times. This raises the pressure inside the chest and drives oxygen across into the blood before the brain completes its decision to shut down. The three seconds after surfacing kill more divers than the three minutes underneath.

PROGRESS. Do not measure yourself against the athletes. Measure yourself against the record, which is the only honest ceiling.

On air, motionless, no oxygen assistance: Stéphane Mifsud, eleven minutes thirty-five seconds, Hyères, 2009. Lung capacity measured at ten and a half litres. Branko Petrović, eleven fifty-four, Dubai, 2014.

You will read about longer numbers. Twenty-four minutes. Twenty-nine minutes. Ignore them. Those men breathed pure oxygen for half an hour first, which floods the lungs with roughly six times the usable fuel and turns the whole event into an exercise in stillness rather than an exercise in tolerance. It is a different sport. It is a magic trick with a supply line.

We are interested in what a man contains, not what he is issued.

A NOTE ON DISCOMFORT. Around round six of Table One the diaphragm will begin to contract on its own. It will feel like being punched from the inside at decreasing intervals. Trainees describe it as panic. It is not panic. Panic is a decision you make about a sensation.

The contractions are a door knocking.

You are not required to answer it.

Not yet.

— R.S.

FIVE. DRY

Renny Shaw does not go in the water.

Not won't — doesn't. There's a difference and he made me understand it one evening in November in the back room of a bar called the Baleia, where he drank tea and I drank beer and the rain

came sideways off the Atlantic and hit the window like handfuls of gravel.

He was fifty-eight. Tall, narrow, grey stubble kept at the exact same length for three years, which means he cut it every second day and never let it be anything. Hands like a man who'd done work. He wore the same fleece constantly and I never once smelled anything on him, not sweat, not soap, nothing, which I noticed because everyone in a fishing town smells of something.

Twenty-two years as a diving medical technician for the navy. That's the actual job title. He described it once, flatly, as the man who sits in the chamber with you while they take the pressure off.

"You've never surfed," I said.

"I surfed until I was thirty-one."

"And?"

"And I stopped." He turned the cup around on the saucer. "I got very interested in a different part of it."

"Which part."

"The part underneath."

Rain on the window. Somebody in the front bar losing at cards, loudly.

"There is a lot of literature," Renny said, "on what a human being is doing during the two minutes before he dies of asphyxia. There is almost none on what he is experiencing. Do you understand the distinction? We have measured every parameter of that body. Partial pressures, cardiac output, cerebral perfusion, the lot. We know precisely what is happening to the machine." He looked up. "Nobody has ever written down what the man saw. Because the ones who could tell you are, as a class, dead, and the ones who come back have been given a very effective explanation for why what they saw doesn't count."

"Which is what?"

"Hypoxia." He said the word the way you'd hand somebody a coat. "Oxygen starvation. The brain, deprived, generates imagery. It is a

complete explanation, Cass. It explains everything, it predicts nothing, and it has closed the file on roughly four thousand years of testimony."

I said that I'd been under, and it wasn't a room, it was just black and horrible.

"How long?"

"Thirty, forty seconds. Long enough."

"No." He smiled for the first time, and it was not warm, it was the smile of a man being handed exactly the sentence he'd been waiting for. "That's not long enough. That's nothing. That's the vestibule. You have never been anywhere."

— — —

He didn't ride, and here's the reason, and it took me two more years to understand that he gave it to me straight that night and I filed it wrong.

"I can't," he said. "I've been decompressed eleven times. Both eardrums are patched. My left lung has scarring across the lower lobe from an incident in 1997 that I'm not going to describe to you over a beer." He tapped his sternum twice with two fingers, a clinician's gesture, a percussion on his own chest. "The machine's had it. I'd get to ninety seconds and I'd be finished."

"So you send other people."

"I train other people." He didn't blink. "You'd like there to be a difference and I'd like there to be a difference. I've decided to be careful about what I claim."

That was, I realise now, the most honest thing anybody said to me in three years. He told me exactly what he was. He did it with tea in front of him and rain on the glass and no defensiveness whatsoever, and I heard it as humility.

— — —

He talked about the athletes like a foreman talking about a fleet.

Kirill: good engine, no instrument panel. Meaning tolerance without self-knowledge, meaning a man who could suffer indefinitely and had no idea what any of the suffering meant, which made him useless for what Renny actually wanted and perfect for what Renny publicly claimed to want.

Beto: strength is a liability here. Big muscles burn oxygen. The best static breath-hold athletes are not built like Beto Krall, they are built like accountants — Renny’s word — long-lunged, low-mass, unremarkable men who can lie still. Muscle is a fuel cost. Beto’s entire body was working against him and his sponsors were paying him for the body.

Mina: he didn’t say anything about Mina. I asked directly, twice. First time he changed the subject. Second time he said, “Mina’s not an athlete,” and went to the bar.

— — —

Walking out, I asked him what he’d written in the notebook the night she did the four lengths.

“Her time.”

“You were writing for a while for a time.”

“Her time,” he said, “and what she said afterwards.”

“She said I come out too early.”

“Yes.” He put his hand on the door. “You do.”

He held it open for me, which was courteous, and I walked out into the rain thinking he’d made a joke about my driving, and it was six weeks before I understood that he had just told me, plainly and without cruelty, that I had been killing people since 2016.

SIX. THE WORD

The first time I heard it said properly was a Thursday in the pool, and it came out of Renny in the middle of a sentence about something else, the way a word does when it belongs to you and you’ve forgotten other people don’t have it.

A kid called Dario had come up bad off a rock run. Grey-lilac fingers, arms not working, that fine fast buzz through the jaw. Two of them had him under the armpits at the gutter and Renny was standing over the tiles with the stopwatch still going and he said:

“He’s sambaing. Don’t lift him. Keep the airway clear and let it finish.”

And I said, from the chair, like an idiot: “He’s what?”

Renny didn’t look up.

“Samba,” he said. “Hypoxic convulsion. The brain’s low enough on oxygen that motor control goes, but not so low that consciousness has gone — not quite yet. The body shakes. Freedivers named it after the dance.” He crouched, turned the kid’s head slightly with one hand. “It’s the last warning you get. If it goes on, he’ll black out. If we handle it properly he’ll be talking to us in twenty seconds and he’ll remember none of this.”

Dario shook on the wet tiles for another eleven seconds, then stopped, then said something in Italian, then asked what time it was.

Renny wrote in the notebook.

— — —

I sat back in the chair and something reorganised itself in my chest, quietly, the way a building settles.

Here’s why.

Surfing has no word for that.

I want to be precise. Surfing has fifty words for the beating. We say rag-dolled, which is a body going limp and thrown around. We say Maytagged, after the washing machine. We say worked, drilled, pounded, cleaned up, caught inside. We have a whole comic vocabulary for it and every single term is a joke, because for eighty years the culture’s entire relationship with nearly dying was to make it small at the bar afterwards. You got worked. Have a beer.

Freediving has a name for the convulsion. A clinical name, with a mechanism attached, and a protocol, and a decision tree. Because

freedivers aren't surviving the thing, they're studying it. They've been down there with clipboards.

So when a man in a swimming pool in a Portuguese fishing town stands over a twitching twenty-two-year-old and says he's sambaing, don't lift him, let it finish, what he is telling you — if you have ears — is that these people have stopped being surfers.

Surfers get worked and go in for a beer.

These people had a taxonomy.

You do not build a taxonomy for something you are trying to avoid. You build a taxonomy for something you intend to visit repeatedly and want to be able to discuss precisely afterwards.

That was the Thursday. That was the moment, and I did nothing about it for eight months, and Beto Krall died.

— — —

I did ask, though. Give me that much. On the way out to the car park with the chlorine coming off my clothes I asked Renny whether the pool work was actually making anyone safer in the water, because I'd been pulling the same men out of the same foam for three years and the numbers hadn't moved.

He seemed pleased I'd asked.

"That's a good question and the answer's no."

"No?"

"The correlation is very poor. A man with a six-minute static in a warm pool may fail at forty seconds in the impact zone, because the pool has no cold, no current, no board, no leash, no rock, no adrenaline and no belief that he's about to die. All of which cost oxygen." He was unlocking his van. "The training is not the thing, Cass. The training is the price of admission for the thing."

"Then what's the thing?"

Renny Shaw thought about it for slightly too long. In the sodium light his face was the colour of a fish.

"Familiarity," he said.

And drove off.

Familiarity. I turned that word over the whole way home and got nothing out of it, because I assumed he meant familiarity with fear.

He didn't. He meant it the way you'd mean it about a place.

SEVEN. MINA'S ROOM

Mina Sadr rented the top floor of a house on the Rua da Cerca from a widow who kept pigeons, and I went up there exactly twice, and the second time is the one that matters.

She was thirty. Born in Karaj, raised in Gothenburg, in Portugal seven years on a residency card she'd got through a work arrangement that I never fully understood and which I suspect was mostly a lie told very carefully to a bored official. She had been, in order: a competitive swimmer until fifteen, a person who did not leave a bedroom for most of a year at nineteen, a dive instructor in Dahab, a spearfisher, and then this.

She was the deepest on the Protocol and everyone knew it including the men, who dealt with it the way men deal with such things, which is by not mentioning it in a specific and effortful way.

The flat had two chairs, a mattress, a hot plate, a wall of hooks with wetsuits on them, and a smell of neoprene that got into your sinuses and stayed for a day. On the windowsill: a laptop, a stopwatch, and a plastic pulse oximeter, the kind you clip on a fingertip, that reads the oxygen saturation in your blood as a percentage.

Ninety-eight is normal. Ninety-five, a doctor takes an interest. Below ninety, a hospital gets involved.

Hers was set to log. There was a cable.

— — —

"You want tea," she said. It wasn't a question, it was an announcement of what was going to happen.

I said I'd come to talk about Kirill, which was true and also not the reason.

"Kirill's going to be dead in two years," she said, filling the pan. "He'll do it in Chile. He wants a big audience but he's too proud to go where the good drivers are."

"Jesus Christ, Mina."

"You asked."

"I hadn't asked yet."

"You'd asked." She put the pan on the hot plate. "Everyone asks with their face first. It's very tiring."

That was her. Flat, exact, no cruelty in it and no cushioning either. I've thought a lot about why she was the only person in that whole circus I could stand and I think it's because she never once performed the beach. Never said stoked, never said energy, never described the ocean as a woman or a mother or a teacher. She talked about it like weather and machinery, and about her own body like a rented vehicle she was returning at some point with the mileage noted.

— — —

The notebook was on the second chair.

Not Renny's — a copy. Or a sibling. Same black cover, same cheap elastic, and I'd watched Renny write in one of those roughly four hundred times.

She saw me see it. She did not move it.

"You can look," she said. "You won't understand it."

I picked it up.

Columns. Ruled by hand with a straight edge, page after page, going back years.

DATE. SUBJECT. VEHICLE. T-DOWN. T-REC. Δ . NOTES.

The dates ran to nearly a decade. The subjects were initials. VEHICLE was a column I couldn't parse at all — sometimes POOL, sometimes N/PN, sometimes MAV, sometimes just TOW. T-DOWN and T-REC were times in seconds, and the Δ between them was done in a different pen, later, in a smaller hand.

The NOTES column was mostly blank. When it wasn't blank, it was short.

corridor, warm, not frightened stairs. counted them. the room. angle from below. same as KN 3/2. verify. nothing. wasted.

I stood in a rented flat that smelled of neoprene holding somebody's homework and felt the floor go a little soft.

Because the room was in there. In a stranger's handwriting. Twice on the page I was looking at and I hadn't turned back yet.

"What is this."

"It's the ledger."

"Mina, what is this."

She took the pan off the heat. She didn't turn around.

"It's what happens," she said, "when you stop assuming the hypoxia is noise and start assuming it's signal. That's all it is. It's the least mystical thing in this town. It's a spreadsheet."

"You're writing down hallucinations."

"We're writing down reports." She poured. "If four people who have never met describe the same feature, in the same orientation, at the same depth of oxygen debt, then at minimum you've found something reproducible about human brains. At minimum. That's a neurology paper, Cass, that's not a religion." She handed me a glass. "It's only a religion if you decide what it means. We haven't decided."

"What does Renny think it means?"

She sat down on the mattress with her back against the wall.

"Renny thinks," she said, "that we have all been standing outside a building for four million years, and that the alarm is on the door, and that everyone who has ever got past the alarm was too frightened at the time to look at the architecture."

"And you?"

"I think it's a spreadsheet."

She drank her tea. She looked at me over the top of the glass with those flat grey eyes and I have gone over this moment more times than any other in my life and I am still not certain whether she was lying to me or to herself, and I have come to think that at that point in the winter she genuinely did not know either.

— — —

At the door I asked the question I'd come to ask, which had been sitting in my mouth since the pool.

"Whose handwriting is at the front? The early stuff. Before the dates go into the pool sessions."

Mina Sadr stood in the doorway with the pigeons going off downstairs.

"You should ask Renny that," she said.

And shut the door with real gentleness, which is how I knew.

EIGHT. BUOY 62081

On the ninth of December at four in the morning a weather buoy anchored in four thousand metres of water west of Ireland reported a significant wave height of fourteen point six metres at a period of twenty-two seconds, and every phone in the town went off inside ninety minutes.

I want to explain what those numbers mean, because they are the two most important numbers in this book and everybody outside the sport gets them backwards.

Significant wave height is not the height of the biggest wave. It's roughly the average of the biggest third. So fourteen point six metres offshore means the sea out there is running at an average of forty-eight feet in the top third, and the outliers in that field will be half again as large, and none of it has broken yet — it's just swell, moving.

Period is the gap in seconds between one crest and the next, and it is everything. It tells you how deep the energy runs. A short-period swell, eight or ten seconds, is wind chop: it lives near the surface

and dies on the first shallow thing it meets. A twenty-two-second swell is a wall of moving water extending hundreds of metres down. It doesn't feel the seabed until the seabed is genuinely serious. It crosses an ocean and loses almost nothing.

Twenty-two seconds is very rare. Twenty-two seconds with fourteen metres behind it is a phone call at four in the morning.

And here is the local part.

There is a canyon offshore of this town. Two hundred and thirty kilometres long, the largest in Europe, and it ends — not near, ends — directly beneath the beach under the lighthouse. Five thousand metres of trench running straight at the sand like a rifle barrel.

Swell crossing that canyon stays in deep water the whole way in. It arrives at full strength, undissipated, with none of the gradual grinding-down that a normal continental shelf performs over fifty kilometres. Meanwhile the same swell to the side of the canyon has been over shallow ground, has slowed, has bent. The two trains meet at the head of the canyon at slightly different speeds and slightly different angles and they stack — one wave climbing onto the back of another, adding heights that were never supposed to be added. On top of that the beach throws a hard backwash seaward off the cliff, and the incoming wave hits that outgoing water and jacks vertical, all at once, with no warning ramp.

That's it. That's the entire magic trick. There's no mysticism in it. It's a funnel, a collision and a ricochet.

It is why a Hawaiian rode a seventy-eight-foot wave here in 2011 and Guinness put it in a book. It's why a Brazilian got eighty out of it six years later, and a German got eighty-six in 2020, and why in the spring of 2024 somebody measured a face at ninety-three feet and change and the ratification committee argued about it for a year. It's why an eighteen-year-old Portuguese kid rode something in October 2020 that a university team afterwards put at over a hundred feet, which was never certified, which nobody will ever settle.

That last one matters to this story. Hold onto it.

The biggest thing that has ever happened here is a thing that cannot be measured, and everyone involved has learned to live with that.

— — —

Two days out.

The models had been showing the bruise for a week before the buoy confirmed it, which is what a twenty-two-second period buys you: warning. They disagreed for the first two days — the American one wanted it further north, the European one had it landing on us square — and then on day three they converged, and after that it was just arithmetic and dread.

The town changes in those eight days and it's not subtle.

Hotel prices triple. The two mechanics stop answering the phone. Vans arrive from Biarritz and Ericeira and Newquay with boards on the roof that cost more than the vans. The bar fills with men in technical outerwear standing in circles saying numbers to each other — twenty-two at one-ninety, high tide's at eleven-forty, there's a secondary at fourteen — the way old men in other towns discuss horses.

And the crews go quiet.

That's the tell. In week one of a normal swell everyone's loud. In week one of a big one they get polite. People start settling small debts. Beto Krall paid me a hundred and ten euros he'd owed me since August, in cash, unasked, and made a joke about it, and the joke wasn't good.

— — —

I did my checks on the tenth. New impellor, spare plugs, sled straps, radio, two knives, one on the ski and one on my calf, because the only thing worse than a man in the foam is a man in the foam attached to five metres of leash and a buoyant board that wants to be somewhere else.

Renny came down the slipway carrying two fuel cans and set them on the concrete and stood looking at the water with his hands in his fleece.

The horizon was doing that thing it does before. Nothing yet. Just a slightly wrong texture out past the point, like a page held at an angle.

"They'll all be down there this week," he said.

I thought he meant in the impact zone.

"Some of them for a long time," he said.

I thought he meant hold-downs.

I went and got the second fuel can, and behind me Renny Shaw, who had never once in three years asked me a personal question, said:

"Cass. Your brother. When you brought him in."

I stopped walking.

"How long was he under?"

"Sixty-two seconds."

"And when you reached him, was he moving?"

The gulls. The slipway. The wrong-textured horizon.

"He'd fired his vest," I said.

"That isn't what I asked."

I didn't answer him. I picked up the fuel can and carried it to the ski and did not look at him for the rest of the afternoon, and that night I lay awake in a flat above a garage with the window open, listening for the sound the ocean makes about a day before it arrives — a low knock in the harbour wall, spaced out, patient, like something checking whether anyone's home.

END OF PART ONE

II. SWELL

NINE. NAPAT

Two days out, the slipway looks like a war that hasn't been declared.

Nine skis on trailers. Fuel drums. A man from Peniche selling impellers out of the back of a Transit at eighty euros over retail because he can. Boards laid on foam blocks in rows — and they don't look like surfboards, that's the thing nobody expects. A tow board is six feet long, narrow as a plank, weighted with lead in the nose, and it has footstraps. It weighs what a child weighs. You could not paddle it across a swimming pool. It exists to be dragged to speed by an engine and then to hold a line on a face steep enough to be called a cliff in any other context.

The vests come out of the cars last, and everybody handles them the same way, which is carefully, and nobody makes eye contact while they're doing it.

Here's the vest, because it matters later.

It's a neoprene shell worn under the wetsuit top with two bladders in it, one across the chest and one at the upper back, and a small steel cartridge of compressed carbon dioxide in a housing at the ribs. There's a toggle on a short cord at the left hip. You pull it, a pin punctures the cartridge, and the bladders inflate in under a second and haul you toward the surface at a speed you don't control. Riders call it pulling the cord.

Shane Dorian designed the first one after Mavericks in 2010 put two waves on him and dragged him across the reef for sixty-eight seconds. He came up nauseous and concussed and inside a year he'd built the thing.

It saves lives. It has saved lives all along this coast, including three I know by name.

And it's why everything after 2011 got worse. Because the moment you hand a man a device that will take him up, you have also handed him permission to go somewhere he otherwise wouldn't. That's not a criticism of Dorian, who is a serious person and was solving a real problem. It's just what happens to every safety invention in every sport that has ever existed. The equipment

doesn't reduce the risk. It relocates it further out, and then everybody follows it.

There's one cartridge in the vest. One. You get a single pull.

There is a term for a man who has used his cartridge and is still in the impact zone with a set coming, and the term is a passenger.

— — —

Renny's ski sat at the top of the slip, and I'd looked at it two hundred times without reading it.

An older Yamaha, immaculate, no sponsor decals, engine cover matte black. Along the port sponson, in small hand-painted letters, white on black, in a font that was nobody's brand:

NAPAT

I asked him what it meant.

"It's a name."

"Whose?"

Renny was checking a strap. He didn't look up and he didn't pause, and he said it the way a man reads a bus timetable.

"There's an old Persian figure. Apam Napat. It means Child of the Waters. He lives at the bottom of the sea and he holds a thing called the khvarenah — the glory. It's a kind of light that belongs to kings and to the world, and at some point in the story it runs away from a man who doesn't deserve it, and it goes into the water, and it stays there."

"And?"

"And men dive for it." He pulled the strap tight. "Three brothers, in one version. They go down for it in turn."

"Do they get it?"

"No."

He rolled the trailer forward six inches and set the chock.

"Nobody gets it," he said. "That's the point of the story. It's down there, it's real, it's the actual glory of the world, and it will not be taken by anybody who goes down after it."

I said that seemed like a shit name for a rescue ski.

"It's a very good name for a rescue ski," Renny said, and went to get coffee.

— — —

I did my own kit that afternoon.

Two knives. One taped inverted to the handlebar mount where I can reach it with either hand, one in a sheath on my right calf. Both serrated, both cheap, both replaced every season because saltwater eats everything and a knife you trust is a knife you've replaced.

The knives are for leashes.

Nobody outside the sport understands this and it upsets people when you explain it, so I mostly don't. A rider goes down attached to five metres of urethane cord and a buoyant board. In broken water the board becomes a sea anchor with a mind of its own — it gets caught in the outflow and it pulls, and the man on the other end of it goes wherever it decides, usually down, usually across the shelf. Dorian's worst moment happened at the end of a fifteen-foot leash. Half the tow riders here won't wear one at all for exactly this reason and the other half won't go without.

So: when I get to a man, before anything else, I cut. Board goes. Board can be replaced by a phone call. Then I get a hand into the vest and put him on the sled.

Cut, grip, throttle. Three moves. I can do them in four seconds in flat water and I have done them in eleven in conditions where I could not see my own front hatch.

Radio check. Spare plugs in a dry bag taped inside the hull. Tow rope coiled and stowed, never loose, because a loose rope in the foam finds the intake, and a ski with a rope in its intake is a very expensive raft with two people clinging to it.

Fuel: full, twice, because a ski in the zone burns fuel at a rate that would embarrass a helicopter, and because the day you run dry is the day you find out what the count really means.

— — —

Mina came down at six with a bag over her shoulder and sat on the wall.

She watched me tape the second knife.

"How many did you pull last winter?"

"Thirty-one."

"How many were dead?"

"None."

"How many should have been?"

I put the tape down.

"Four," I said.

She nodded, like a woman ticking a box.

"And how many of the four came up talking?"

I looked at her for a long moment. Out past the point the horizon had that texture again, wrong, like a page held at an angle, and the knock had started in the harbour wall, and it was spaced further apart than yesterday, which meant the period was lengthening, which meant it was coming.

"Three," I said.

Mina Sadr picked up her bag.

"Renny has all three," she said. "You should ask to see what they said."

TEN. FIRST DAY

It arrived overnight on the eleventh, the way it always does, so that the first you know of it is the sound.

I woke at five to a noise like a goods train being unloaded somewhere under the floor. Not a crash. Nothing so tidy. A long low tearing, four or five seconds of it, then quiet, then another. You feel it in the window glass before you hear it. Everyone in this town sleeps through storms and nobody sleeps through that.

Fifty-five, sixty-foot faces on the sets by first light. Not the big day. Everyone said so, all morning, in the specific tone of men reassuring themselves — this isn't even it, this is the front edge, Thursday's the one. The lighthouse had two hundred people on it at seven-fifteen in the dark and the rain.

I want to try to give you the scale honestly, because photographs lie about this in both directions.

A sixty-foot face is a six-storey building that is moving at forty kilometres an hour and is made of something that weighs a ton per cubic metre. The lip — the part that throws forward off the top — comes over in a slab. On a normal wave the lip is a curl. On this thing it's a section of roof. When it lands it does not splash; it detonates, and the sound arrives at the cliff two full seconds later, and the whole headland transmits it up through your boots.

Between the sets the water in the impact zone isn't water. That's the part nobody photographs because it doesn't photograph. It's aerated foam — a suspension of air in seawater, sometimes forty percent gas by volume, the colour of dirty milk and the consistency of nothing at all. A body doesn't float in it. A hull doesn't plane on it. A vest with two litres of gas in it will lift a man through green water like a cork and will lift him through that stuff slowly, if at all, because there's nothing there to push against.

That's the actual killer. Not the wave. The wave passes in eleven seconds. The foam is where men die, and it can be a hundred metres wide, and while you are in it you are inside a fluid that has stopped agreeing to be a fluid.

— — —

The tow is a two-person thing and it's more like aerial refuelling than like surfing.

Rider in the water on the board with his feet in the straps, holding a handle on a rope about thirty metres long. Driver runs the ski up-swell to build speed, then swings a wide arc and puts the rider onto the face of a wave that is still gathering, still hasn't decided to break, at a point about a third of the way down its length. You need forty, fifty kilometres an hour of board speed — you cannot paddle into these, no human arm generates enough velocity to match a wave moving that fast, which is the entire reason the sport exists in this form.

Then the whip.

The driver banks hard off the face at the last moment, which slingshots the rider forward and across, and the rider lets go of the handle at the exact instant the wave takes him. Too early and he sinks off the back. Too late and the rope pulls him off his line into the pit.

After that the driver has about four seconds to get himself out of a place he should not be, up and over the shoulder of a wave that is about to fall over, and into the channel — the deep water off to the side where the canyon runs and things stay comparatively sane.

Then the driver turns around and watches his friend.

That's the job. You put him in, you get out, and then you sit in the channel at idle and watch, and if it goes wrong you go into the worst water on earth on purpose while the next one is coming.

— — —

Beto went at eight-forty on a set wave that stood up out of nothing.

I want to describe this properly because of what happened four days later.

The wave came in off the canyon and jacked — that instant vertical rise when incoming water hits the backwash coming off the beach. There's no ramp to it. One second it's a hill and the next it's a wall with an overhang, and Beto was already on it, in the top third, with his knees soft and his left hand out behind him.

Sixty feet under his feet. A man the size of a pencil mark. Behind him the lip started to throw and the whole top of the wave came out over him like a shelf being pushed off a building, and he outran it — down the face at a shallow angle, faster than anything on water has a right to go, spray coming off his rail in a plume that the wind took forty metres sideways.

He made it. Straight out the front into the flat, kicked off, arms up. The cliff went off. Two hundred people making a noise you could hear over a sixty-foot wave.

I picked him up in the channel and he was laughing, absolutely lit, gripping my shoulder with a hand like a clamp, saying did you see it, did you fucking see it, and I said I saw it, and I meant it, and for about ninety seconds on the eleventh of December I was as happy as anyone in that town.

Because that's the other half. I don't want to be dishonest about this book. If it were all ledgers and swimming pools nobody would come. What Beto Krall did that morning was one of the most beautiful things a human being can do and it took eleven seconds and it will outlive him and everyone who saw it.

— — —

Kirill went down at eleven and I got him at thirty-eight seconds. Fine. Ordinary. He swore at me.

A Basque kid called Iker went down at half past twelve and I got him at nineteen, and he was so relaxed about it he asked me to take him back out rather than in.

And at two-ten, in a lull, with the sets fifteen minutes apart and the sun trying, Mina Sadr paddled out.

Paddled. On a gun — a proper big-wave paddle board, ten foot two, which she had carried down the beach herself.

Nobody tows on a lull. There's nothing to tow into. What she was doing was sitting in the impact zone, alone, on a board, in a lull, waiting for a set she had no realistic chance of catching.

I ran the ski over and idled twenty metres off.

"What are you doing?"

"Sitting."

"Mina."

She had her hood off. Her hair was flat to her skull. She looked entirely calm and entirely somewhere else.

"You know what the actual number is, Cass? The one everybody gets wrong?" She wasn't looking at me. She was looking at the horizon. "Dorian. Mavericks. Two waves on him, the worst hold-down in the recorded history of the sport, the one they made the vest because of. Sixty-eight seconds."

"I know the number."

"Everyone in that car park thinks they've done two minutes." She finally turned her head. "Nobody has ever done two minutes here. Not once. Not in the whole history of this beach. The longest anyone has been under at this break and lived is about ninety."

"Good," I said.

"It's not good, it's nothing." And there was heat in it, the first I'd ever heard from her. "Ninety seconds. That's a bad phone call. That's the length of a song intro. Whatever's down there, nobody's ever had time to look at it."

The set came at seven minutes past three. She didn't catch it. It landed on her about where I said it would and I had her out in twenty-six seconds, and she came up furious, not frightened, furious — spitting water and hammering the sled with the flat of her hand — and the thing I understood, sitting there with my hand on the throttle and her wrist in my other hand, is that she had not been trying to ride anything.

She'd been trying to get held under.

And the ocean, that day, hadn't been generous enough.

ELEVEN. THE VESTIBULE

I went under on the twelfth of December at eleven-fifty in the morning and I was down for seventy-nine seconds, and this is the chapter I have been avoiding since I started.

It was my own fault and it was the stupidest possible mechanism. Not heroism. Not a rescue. I put the ski across the face of a wave I'd misread — the second of a four-wave set, which I had counted as the last of a three — and it picked the hull up and stood it on end and I went off the side into the pit with a two-hundred-and-ninety kilo machine somewhere above me.

I had no vest. Drivers don't wear them. There isn't room in the seat.

— — —

Zero to eight seconds.

Violence. That's all. There's nothing else in it and there's nothing to learn from it. You are inside a washing machine the size of a church and you have no orientation whatsoever — not vague orientation, none, the concepts of up and down are simply withdrawn from you. You're tumbled at a speed that pulls at the joints. My mask of air went instantly. Water in the sinuses, which burns like swallowing seawater through your face.

The one thing you do, the only thing, is cover your head with your arms and go loose. Rag-doll. Fighting costs oxygen and you have a fixed amount and you have just been informed that you will need all of it.

Eight to twenty-five.

The wave passes over and lets you go and you are now in the foam, and the foam will not carry you up. I clawed and got nothing. It's like swimming in beer. You put your hand into it expecting resistance and your hand goes through and your body doesn't move and there is a specific horror in that which I've never got out of my head — not the violence, the lack of purchase. The ocean stopped fighting me and simply declined to be pushed against.

Somewhere in there I hit the sand with my shoulder, which told me down, which was the first useful information I'd had.

Twenty-five to forty.

The contractions started.

I had done a hundred and forty pool sessions in that chair watching other people's diaphragms fire and I had never once had a proper set of my own, and here is what nobody conveys: it does not feel like needing to breathe. Needing to breathe is a mild request you get after running for a bus. This is your torso being punched from the inside by something that is not you and does not care what you think. It came about every six seconds and each one folded me. My throat kept trying to open on its own. That's the part I wasn't ready for — the body attempting the swallow, again and again, the airway opening a fraction and my jaw clamping it, a negotiation happening in my neck between two systems that had never previously disagreed about anything.

This is the phase everyone means when they say I nearly died. Forty seconds in. Ninety-five percent of the oxygen still in the tank.

Forty to fifty-five.

Then something ended.

The contractions came further apart. Then further. Then stopped.

I want to be very careful here because this is the entire book.

They didn't stop because I got better at it. They didn't stop because I relaxed or found some technique or made peace with anything. They stopped because the level of carbon dioxide in my blood was no longer the loudest thing happening in my nervous system, and the reason for that is that my brain had begun to run short of oxygen and was, in the most literal sense, going quiet.

The alarm switched off. Because the building was on fire.

And the sensation of the alarm switching off, after fifty-five seconds of that, is the single most magnificent thing that has ever happened to me.

Fifty-five to seventy-nine.

It got warm.

Not metaphorically. The water at that beach in December is fourteen degrees and I have been cold in it for nine years and it got warm — a spreading, ordinary, bath-temperature warmth starting at the sternum and going outward through the shoulders. My hands stopped being my hands and became two things I owned somewhere.

The struggle was over. Not survived — over. Cancelled. And what came in behind it was not a feeling I had ever had access to, because I had spent forty-one years with an alarm running underneath every single second of my life and had never once heard the room without it.

It was quiet.

I have tried for a long time to find a better word. Quiet is what I've got. The absence of a noise I never knew was there. Every human being reading this is currently, right now, being nagged at a low level by their own chemistry — breathe, breathe, breathe, every four seconds, from birth, and you have never noticed it any more than you notice your own heartbeat.

Turn it off and there is space in you that you did not know was occupied.

I was not frightened. I want that on the record and I want it understood that this is not bravery, it is chemistry, it is what happens to any brain in that condition and it happened to me, a coward, a man who has never willingly gone under in his life.

The light was green-grey and coming down through about six metres of moving water in shafts, and the shafts were beautiful, and I remember thinking, with total lucidity, in a complete sentence:

Oh. This is what he was trying to tell me.

And then the visual field started to do something.

Not a hallucination. I need to be precise or the whole thing collapses into a ghost story. There was no room, no corridor, no figure, nothing you could photograph. What there was, was

structure. The light stopped arriving as shafts and started arriving as edges — long straight boundaries meeting at consistent angles, above me and to the left, the way you'd perceive the corner of a large building through fog if you'd never seen a building and had no word for corner.

It had orientation. That's what I can't get past, sixteen months later, sitting here. It wasn't everywhere. It was up and to the left, and it stayed there when I moved, which is not what shapes in your own eyes do.

I got very interested in it.

That's the exact and honest description of the state I was in at seventy seconds under a collapsing sixty-foot wave with no air in my chest. Not terror. Not resignation. Interest. A calm, warm, unhurried curiosity about the thing up and to the left, and the beginnings of an intention to go and have a proper look.

There was no part of me at seventy-five seconds that wanted to surface.

None. Not a fragment. The idea of the surface had become a bureaucratic detail belonging to a person I'd stopped being.

— — —

Bruno Sá got me at seventy-nine.

He'd come off the cliff on the second ski when he saw mine go over. He found me by the fin of my own board, which was floating, because I'd cut nothing and had nothing to cut. He got a hand into the collar of my top and hauled and I came up through the foam.

I don't remember the surface. I have no memory between the edges and lying on the sled with my cheek against wet pad while somebody shouted in Portuguese, and my hands were shaking with a fine fast tremor and my whole jaw was buzzing and I could not make my arms work.

That is called a samba, and I had watched it happen to other men more than a hundred times from a lifeguard chair, and I had thought it looked like the worst thing in the world.

From inside, it was the interruption.

— — —

They put me on the sand and Bruno was talking and a paramedic was doing something to my ear and none of it was reaching me, and about four metres away, at the top of the sand where the loose stuff starts, Renny Shaw stood with his hands in his fleece and a stopwatch in one of them, and he did not come over.

He waited until they'd got the blanket on me and the crowd had thinned.

Then he crouched down beside my head, and he did not ask if I was all right, and he did not ask what happened.

He said: "What did you see?"

And I heard myself, in a voice that was not steady, tell a fifty-eight-year-old ex-navy diving medic — a man I did not trust, in a car park, ninety seconds after the best experience of my life — about edges. Angles. Up and to the left.

Renny Shaw closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them there was something in his face I'd never seen there and never saw again.

He said, "Which side of you was the beach?"

I had to think.

"Right," I said. "The beach was on my right."

And Renny said, very quietly, mostly to himself:

"Same as Ruy."

Then he stood up, and wrote in the notebook, and walked back up the sand toward the car park, and I lay there in a foil blanket in the rain, forty-one years old, with the taste of the ocean in my sinuses and the first honest thought I'd had in nine years going through me like a spike.

I want to go back.

TWELVE. HERO MOMENT

Thursday the eighteenth was the one.

Buoy off the shelf reading eleven metres at twenty-one seconds at four in the morning, wind offshore at nine knots, tide filling to a high at eleven-forty. If you had asked any of the eighty people on that slipway to design the day themselves they would have designed that day and then apologised for being greedy.

Seventy-foot faces on the bigger sets. The lighthouse had four hundred people on it by eight. Three drone operators. A production truck from a streaming platform parked on the cliff road with a satellite dish folded on the roof like something praying.

Beto Krall had eleven content-eligible sessions logged and zero hero moments, and there were four weeks left in his contract year.

I knew that. I'd driven him to the meeting. I'd eaten the sardines.

I want to be honest about the fact that I did not think about it once that morning, because I was busy, and because if you spend nine years around men in that position you stop hearing it as information and start hearing it as weather.

— — —

At nine-twenty he asked me to drive him.

His usual partner was a Brazilian called Léo who was very good and who had a bad shoulder that week, and Beto came down the slip in his suit with his board under his arm and asked me, and I said yes, because I'm the best driver on that beach and because he asked me nicely and because I liked him, which I have not said yet in this book and should have.

I liked Beto Krall. He was not clever and he was not deep and he was enormously kind. He carried other people's equipment without being asked. He learned enough Portuguese to talk to the widow who ran his guesthouse and he talked to her every single morning for two winters about her hip.

We ran three waves before eleven and all three were good and one was very good, and he came back to the ski each time with his eyes wide and his mouth open, laughing.

Then the set at eleven-ten.

— — —

I'll do this cleanly. It doesn't need decoration.

The set was four waves and the third was the biggest thing I had seen in nine years at that beach.

I had him at forty-five kilometres an hour on a good line and I put him in high, further up the face than I'd have liked, because that's where the wave was and there was no negotiating with it. He let go of the handle clean. I banked off and got over the shoulder with maybe two seconds to spare, which is not enough, and I felt the ski go light underneath me at the top and come down hard in the flat behind.

I came around into the channel and turned and found him.

He was in the top third, high, and the wave had begun to do the thing this place does — the jack. The backwash came off the beach and met it and the whole face went from steep to past vertical, an overhang, seventy feet of water leaning out over the trough with a man standing on the underside of it.

He had a choice for about half a second. He could have straightened and gone for the flats and taken the whitewater on his back and been fine, and it would have been a nothing clip, a content-eligible session, one of eleven.

He turned up the face.

He put the board on its rail and cut back up into the pit, into the exact place where the lip was going to land, and he did it deliberately, and there are four separate camera angles of it and in every one of them the movement is unhurried.

The lip came over him as a slab, from a height of about six storeys, and it landed on him with the sound this coast makes twice a

winter, and four hundred people on the cliff made a noise I still hear.

I opened the throttle before it finished falling.

— — —

Count.

Zero at impact. I was in the channel, seventy metres out, which is about eight seconds of hard running to get to the edge of the foam.

Eight: at the edge. The fourth wave of the set standing up behind me.

Eleven: I turned and took the fourth wave over the shoulder because going into the foam with that thing behind me would have made two casualties instead of one. Eleven seconds spent staying alive. There is no version of that decision I have found a way to regret and I have looked.

Twenty-four: back at the edge of the foam. The zone was a hundred and forty metres of white and the visibility across it was nothing at all — you are looking at a field of moving cream and there is a man somewhere in it and the only thing that will find him is his own vest.

Thirty-eight: nothing.

Fifty: I saw the board. Board first, always. Five metres of leash off it going down into the foam at an angle, taut, which meant he was on the end of it and the outflow had him.

Fifty-four: at the board. Knife off the mount, hand down the leash, cut. The leash went and the board went sideways.

Sixty-one: I had him.

Sixty-one seconds and I had my hand in the shoulder of Beto Krall's vest and I hauled him across the sled, and his vest was not inflated.

He hadn't pulled the cord.

— — —

Sixty-one seconds is seven seconds better than Dorian. Seven seconds inside the worst survived hold-down in the recorded history of the sport, and I did it in a hundred and forty metres of aerated foam with a fourth wave in the middle, and there is not one driver alive who would have done it faster.

I want that written down because I have said it to myself roughly nine thousand times and it has never once helped.

He was blue at the lips and grey everywhere else and he was not shaking. That's the thing. He wasn't sambaing. The samba means the lights are flickering; no samba means the lights are off.

I got him to the sand in fifty seconds flat with the throttle wide open and the paramedics were already coming down and they worked on him on the beach for thirty-one minutes with four hundred people watching from a cliff and three drones overhead and one of the drones was livestreaming.

They got a rhythm back twice.

He died in the ambulance at the top of the hill without ever having been conscious, twenty-six years old, and his mother was in Curitiba and found out from a video.

— — —

The clip did eleven million in four days.

Eleven million. The turn back up into the pit, the slab coming over, the man deleted. It is, and everyone in the industry knows this and nobody says it, the best piece of big-wave footage ever captured, and it is on a hard drive in a production truck that drove off that cliff road on Friday morning and went to Lisbon.

Antonia sent a statement. The Head of Athlete Narrative posted a photograph of Beto laughing on a beach with the caption fly high brother and a wave emoji.

The energy drink with the lightning bolt going into a fist put out a two-minute tribute film eleven days later.

They did not take the wipeout down.

— — —

And on the sand, that afternoon, while the paramedics were packing up and the police were doing what police do and I was sitting on the wet with my back against the wall of the slip and my hands shaking so hard I couldn't get the zip of my top down—

Renny Shaw came and crouched next to me. Same as before. Same crouch.

And he asked me the number.

Not are you all right. Not Christ, Cass. He asked me the number, and I told him — sixty-one — and he took out the black notebook and he wrote it down, and then he stood there with the pen on the page and did not close it, waiting.

Waiting for something else. Waiting for the other column.

And I understood, sitting in the wet sand watching a man hold a pen over a ruled line, that there was a box on that page which Beto Krall was never going to be able to fill in, and that Renny Shaw was, at that precise moment, upset about it.

Not about Beto.

About the box.

THIRTEEN. PADDLE OUT

They held it on the Sunday because the swell had dropped to eight feet and because Antonia's people needed it to happen before the news cycle turned over.

I'm going to describe the memorial accurately and some people will find it disgusting. It was disgusting. It was also, in its way, the most honest thing that happened that entire winter, because at least nobody at that memorial pretended to be somewhere else.

A paddle-out is the surfing funeral. Everybody goes out past the break, forms a ring, holds hands, somebody says something, flowers go in the middle, everyone splashes water in the air and

shouts. It's genuinely old and it's genuinely moving and I have been at four of them and cried at three.

This one had a call sheet.

An actual call sheet. Printed. I saw it in Antonia's hand on the beach at nine-forty — 0955 ARRIVALS / 1015 CIRCLE FORMS / 1020 DRONE PASS A / 1024 FLOWERS. Two operators, because you need a second angle. A man from the streaming platform in a Patagonia jacket holding a clapperboard, which he tried to hide behind his leg when he saw me looking.

Ninety-one people paddled out for Beto Krall and I would put money on forty of them having met him.

The ring formed. Somebody said something in Portuguese that was kind and true. Léo, the Brazilian with the bad shoulder, wept openly with his face in his hands in the middle of the Atlantic and did not care who saw, and that was real, that was the realest thing in the water.

And then, while the flowers were still going in, a kid I didn't know — twenty, maybe, Australian, a sticker on his board for a company that makes protein — turned to his mate about six feet from me and said, in a completely normal voice:

"Reckon they'll re-run the Farol event or just call it?"

— — —

Here's what they said at the bar afterwards, and I was there, and I'm putting it down.

That he was gone before he hit the water, which is not true, and which people say because it means nobody could have helped and therefore nobody failed.

That the vest failed. Also not true. The vest was found intact with the cartridge full and the pin unpunctured, which the sponsor knew by Saturday and did not correct, because the vest failed is a much better story for everyone than he didn't pull it.

That the ocean chooses. Said twice, by two different men, both sober.

That he died doing what he loved. Said by me, nine years ago, on television, about my brother, so I kept my mouth shut.

And then Kirill Novak, four beers in, with his arm around a girl from the tourist office, said the thing that made me put my glass down and leave.

He said: "Sixty-one seconds, though. Sixty-one. That's basically Dorian." And he said it admiringly. He said it the way you'd say a lap time.

Nobody at that table corrected him. Nobody said and Dorian came up. Because it wasn't a conversation about survival. It hadn't been for years, and I was the only person in the room who still thought it was, and I was the guy with the boat.

— — —

I went and found Renny at eleven that night.

He was in the back room of the Baleia with tea, alone, with the notebook shut on the table under his hand.

"He didn't pull the cord," I said.

"I know."

"You know."

"The cartridge was full. Everyone knows, Cass, it's a small town."

I sat down opposite him and I put my hands flat on the table because otherwise I don't know what they'd have done.

"Explain it to me."

"Explain what?"

"A twenty-six-year-old with a functioning inflation vest and one pull available to him, on the end of a hold-down that had already gone past a minute, and he never reached across his own chest and pulled a toggle that was six inches from his hand."

Renny turned the cup on the saucer.

"You've been under," he said. "Nine days ago. Seventy-nine seconds. You tell me."

And I sat there in a bar that smelled of wet coats and fried sardines with my hands flat on a table.

Because I knew.

I'd been there six days before Beto and I had lain in that green-grey light with the alarm switched off and the warmth coming through my shoulders and the edges up and to the left, and the surface had become a bureaucratic detail belonging to a person I'd stopped being. Those are my words from the chapter before this one. I wrote them before I wrote this, on purpose, so that you would already have them when you got here.

At seventy-five seconds I did not want to come up.

At sixty seconds, Beto Krall — who had done four years of tables, who could rock-run two lengths and part of a third, who had a hero-moment clause and a mother in Curitiba — got to the same place I'd got to, and it was calm and it was warm and the noise had stopped.

And a toggle on a cord is a piece of admin from the surface.

You don't refuse it. That's what people won't understand. He didn't heroically decline to save himself. He was somewhere that had no opinion about cords.

"He wasn't drowning," I said.

"No," said Renny. "He was ninety seconds into being extremely happy, and then he stopped."

— — —

I said the next thing carefully because I could feel the floor of my whole life shifting under it.

"You've got three others. Mina said. Three men who came up talking, last winter, off my sled. You've got what they said."

"I've got what forty-one people said."

"Forty-one."

"Since 2009." He drank his tea. "Nine of them from this beach. The rest from Mavericks, from Jaws, from two pools, from a

decompression chamber in Faslane and from a man in a hospital bed in Portsmouth in 2011 who had been under a boat for four minutes.” He set the cup down. “Would you like to see it?”

Rain on the window. Cards in the front bar.

“Why now?”

And Renny Shaw looked at me with something that I have since decided was genuine, which is the part I’ve never made peace with.

“Because you’ve been in,” he said. “Until nine days ago you were an instrument. Now you’re a witness. I don’t share the ledger with instruments.”

I said: “What the fuck does that mean, an instrument.”

He picked up the notebook and put it in his fleece pocket and stood.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Bring the log off your ski. The GPS one. All nine years of it.”

And he left, and I sat there for a long time, and it took me until about two in the morning — lying on my back in a flat above a garage, listening to the harbour wall knocking — to work out what a rescue-timing log has to do with anything, and when I did work it out I got up and was sick in the sink.

PROTOCOL II. THE RUNGS

This document does not exist. If you are reading it and you have not completed eighteen months of Table work, close it. You will hurt yourself and, worse, you will produce unusable reports.

PURPOSE. To arrive, observe, and return.

Everything in the published training is preparation for the first sixty seconds. The first sixty seconds are of no interest. They are the corridor you walk down to reach the door. Trainees become connoisseurs of the corridor and never open anything. This is the single most common failure and it is why the freediving federations, for all their instrumentation, have produced almost no usable material in forty years: they have optimised a sport around not going through.

THE LADDER.

Rung One — Struggle. Onset of diaphragmatic contraction. Thirty to sixty seconds for a trained subject in cold water at rest. Unpleasant, meaningless. No reports have ever come from Rung One.

Rung Two — Cessation. The contractions space out and stop. Subjects invariably describe this as mastery. It is not mastery. It is the beginning of oxygen deficit in the brain and the withdrawal of the warning system. Rung Two is the actual threshold. Everything before it is the queue.

Rung Three — Warmth and quiet. Peripheral sensation withdraws. Thermal misperception is near-universal — subjects in fourteen-degree water report bath temperature. Time perception loosens. Fear is absent. Not managed: absent. Reports from Rung Three are common and low-value. Subjects describe a feeling. Feelings are not data.

Rung Four — Structure. Onset variable; typically ninety to one hundred and thirty seconds by our timings, earlier under high cardiac load. Subjects report geometry. Edges, angles, boundaries, surfaces. Consistently oriented — that is, located in a stable position relative to the subject's body, persisting through movement of the head and eyes. This is the finding. Everything else in this document is scaffolding for this paragraph.

Note carefully: at Rung Four the subject does not experience wonder. Wonder is a Rung Three artifact. At Rung Four subjects report interest. Several have used the word recognition.

Rung Five. We have four reports and three of them came from men who did not survive the week. I will not write down what is in them until the sample is larger.

PROCEDURE. Rungs Three and Four cannot be reached in a swimming pool. The heart rate is wrong, the cold is wrong, and no subject will voluntarily hold past Rung Two while a friend stands over him with a stopwatch. The body will not permit it. This is not cowardice, it is architecture: a conscious human being cannot override the airway indefinitely by decision alone.

Therefore the state requires an external agent to maintain the condition beyond the point of consent.

There is one available. It is free, it is enormous, and it does not negotiate.

The wave is not the objective. The wave is the only reliable apparatus on earth for holding a trained human being at Rung Four long enough to look at something.

RECORD-KEEPING. On surfacing the subject has approximately ninety seconds of accurate recall before confabulation begins. Do not ask what happened. Ask, in this order:

1. Which side of your body was the beach on? 2. Where was it? Give a direction relative to your own chest. 3. Did it move when you moved? 4. What was the temperature?

Never ask what it meant. The subject will tell you what it meant and everything after that sentence is worthless.

CONTRAINDICTION, ABSOLUTE. The inflation vest is not to be regarded as a safety device during a scheduled descent. It is a surface artifact. A subject at Rung Four who pulls the cord terminates a run that cost eighteen months to arrange.

A subject at Rung Four will not pull the cord.

We have never once needed to enforce this.

— R.S.

FOURTEEN. THE INSTRUMENT

He didn't make me work for any of it. I want that clear, because I've told this wrong in my head a hundred times, in a version where I was clever.

I wasn't clever. He told me. He sat me down in a garage with a heater and a folding table and he told me everything in about forty minutes, in order, the way you'd hand over a job.

— — —

The garage was under his flat on the Rua Nova. Concrete, one window, a workbench, a wall of shelves with box files on them going back years, all labelled in the same small hand.

He'd already got my ski log off the memory card and put it on a laptop, because I'd brought it, because he'd asked me to.

"Sit down. Do you want tea?"

"No."

"Have tea."

He made tea.

Then he turned the laptop round.

It was a scatter plot. I know what a scatter plot is. Horizontal axis was labelled T-DOWN, in seconds. Vertical axis was labelled something I didn't understand and he explained in one sentence: the number of usable reports per run.

There were about four hundred dots.

Below sixty seconds on the horizontal, the dots sat on the floor. Nothing. A flat carpet of zeroes running along the bottom of the chart.

From about ninety onward, they climbed.

And there was a vertical dashed line at sixty-two seconds, drawn in, labelled in that small handwriting:

MOURA

"That's your average," Renny said. "Nine years. Four hundred and eleven recoveries. Sixty-two point four seconds from impact to hand-on-subject."

I looked at it.

"That's my job."

"Yes," he said. "It's an extremely good average. It is, as far as I'm aware, the best working average on this coast by about nine seconds, and the second-best is a Hawaiian who only drives four days a year."

"Then what's the problem."

"There's no problem. It's a very fine number." He sat down opposite me with his own tea. "It's just that it's the wrong number, and you've been holding this beach to it since 2016, and nobody has ever been able to move you."

— — —

Here is what he laid out, and he laid it out plainly, and none of it required me to work anything out.

Rung Four starts, on his timings, somewhere past ninety seconds. That's where the geometry is. That's where the reports come from, the ones that agree with each other, the ones with orientation in them.

I get to people at sixty-two.

So for nine years, every single time a rider on this beach went down and got somewhere interesting, a man on a jet ski arrived and took them out of it about thirty seconds early. Not once. Four hundred and eleven times.

"You're the ceiling," Renny said. "You are, functionally, the reason nothing has ever been observed properly at this break. There are two hundred kilometres of Portuguese coast producing the largest ridden waves on earth and the data is worthless, and the reason the data is worthless is that the best driver in Europe works here and he is very fast."

He said it without accusation. That's the part. There was no cruelty in it at all. He was describing a piece of equipment that was out of calibration.

"That's what an instrument is," I said.

"That's what an instrument is."

— — —

I said: "You could have just told me to go slower."

"I did think about it."

"And?"

"And you'd have said no." He turned the laptop back round. "And then you'd have told the harbourmaster, and the crews, and there'd have been a great deal of noise, and I'd have moved to Ericeira and started again with a worse driver and it would have cost four years."

"So instead you let me run at sixty-two and worked around me."

"I worked with you. There's a difference and it matters." He tapped the dashed line on the screen. "Everything you've ever done has gone in the ledger. Your average is the most reliable variable on this coast. A subject who goes down here knows — not consciously, but the crews know, everyone knows — that there is a floor under them at roughly a minute. That floor is you." He looked up. "Do you understand what that does?"

"No."

"It lets them go further than they otherwise would."

And I sat in a cold garage holding a mug of tea I didn't want.

"I'm the reason they take the risk."

"You're the reason it's affordable," Renny said. "Yes."

— — —

I asked him the obvious thing, and he answered it immediately, which is what I mean about him not hiding.

"Did anyone tell them? The riders. Do they know what you're actually training them for?"

"Mina wrote it. She's known since the second year. Kirill has never asked a question in his life and would not understand the answer. Iker knows and doesn't care." He drank his tea. "Beto knew. Beto knew completely, Cass, and he was better at it than anyone I have ever worked with, and he never once used a word like research. He called it Tuesdays."

I thought of Beto rolling a cigarette badly in a truck outside a fish market.

It's not even the worst part of my week.

"He wasn't complaining," I said.

"No. He was being modest." Renny put his cup down. "It was the only part of his week that meant anything and he was slightly embarrassed about it, which is a very ordinary way for a young man to be about the most important thing in his life."

— — —

And then he did the thing that I have never been able to file properly.

He got up, took a box file off the shelf — second from the left, third shelf, labelled in that small hand — and put it on the folding table in front of me, and opened it, and turned it round so it faced me the right way up.

Loose pages. Ruled columns, hand-drawn with a straight edge. The same layout as Mina's, the same layout as the black notebook, going back and back.

The paper at the bottom of the stack was older. Different pen. A larger, looser, worse hand, with the letters leaning hard to the right and the ruling done freehand and crooked.

I knew it before I read a word of it, the way you know a voice through a wall.

Ruy wrote his sevens with a bar through them. Our mother taught us both and I never picked it up and he never dropped it.

Every seven on that page had a bar through it.

"Sit down," Renny said, quite gently, because I hadn't stood up, and then I did stand up, and the chair went over behind me and made a noise like a gunshot in that concrete room.

"He started it," Renny said. "Not me. I want you to have that in the right order, because everything else in this room is mine and that isn't. Your brother had been doing this for two years before he ever met me, on his own, badly, with a notebook from a supermarket, and he came and found me, at a conference in Lisbon, in 2015, because I'd published four pages on hypoxic phenomenology in 1998 that nobody else on earth had read."

He straightened the chair I'd knocked over.

"I didn't recruit your brother, Cass. Your brother recruited me."

FIFTEEN. AGREEMENT

He read them to me out loud. That took about two hours and it was the strangest two hours of my life, a fifty-eight-year-old man in a fleece reading columns off loose paper in a garage while the rain came down outside and I sat there and did not once interrupt.

I'm going to give you a small part of it, in his order.

— — —

KN. Nazaré. Tow. 71 seconds. Warm. Not frightened. Something up and left, flat, big. Like being under a table.

I.A. Nazaré. Tow. 88. Ceiling on the left. Corner. Wanted to go to it.

M.S. Pool, weighted. 5:12. Above and left. Edges meeting. Two planes at an angle, could see the join. Not a wall — the outside of something.

R.M. Nazaré. Paddle. 94. Room. Big. Left side. Angle from below — like standing at the bottom of stairs looking up into a landing.

T.O. Mavericks. Tow. 77. Up and to the left, grey, straight lines. Was interested. Was not scared at all which I keep thinking about.

Faslane. Chamber. 4:40. Left. Structure. Corner of a large building.

Portsmouth. Under vessel. approx 4 min. A room above me and to my left. I was underneath it looking up.

— — —

Renny stopped and let the paper rest on his knee.

"Forty-one subjects," he said. "Nine years. Eleven of them have never met each other and four of them are dead. Thirty-six of the forty-one place it in the upper left quadrant relative to their own chest. Twenty-nine use an architectural noun without prompting — room, ceiling, corner, wall, building, landing, stairs. Nineteen say

not frightened unasked. Fourteen describe warmth in water below fifteen degrees."

The heater ticked.

"That's not a hallucination," I said.

"It might be." He said it flatly and immediately and it took the ground out from under me, because it was the last thing I expected him to say. "Cass, listen to me carefully, because this is where people go stupid and I've watched a lot of them do it. It might be entirely a hallucination. It very probably is."

"But they agree."

"Of course they agree." He put the pages down. "Forty-one human brains, all of the same species, all built from the same instructions, all running out of the same fuel in roughly the same way. Why wouldn't they produce the same picture? You put forty-one identical machines under identical stress and they fail identically. That's not a discovery about the ocean. It's a discovery about the machine."

"Then what the hell are we doing?"

"Something extremely interesting either way." He leaned forward. "Follow it through. If it's the machine, then we have found a stable, reproducible perceptual state that the human brain enters under a specific chemical condition, which nobody has mapped, which shows up in a Scottish decompression chamber and a swimming pool and under a seventy-foot wave in Portugal, and which every single person who reaches it describes as the most significant thing that has ever happened to them." He held up a hand. "That's a finding. That's a very large finding. It doesn't need a single ghost in it."

"And if it isn't the machine?"

Renny Shaw looked at the window for a while.

"Then it's the other thing," he said, "and I'm not going to speculate in front of you, because you're the only person in this story who's

entitled to an answer and I'm not going to hand you a guess dressed up as one."

— — —

That's the bit that got me. That's the bit I keep coming back to.

He never once claimed. In three years I never heard that man make a supernatural claim, not one, not even drunk, and he didn't drink. Every mystic I have ever met in this town was a twenty-four-year-old with a tattoo of a compass telling me the ocean had spoken to him. Renny Shaw had forty-one corroborating reports and a chart and he wouldn't go one inch past what was on the paper.

It's much, much harder to walk away from a man like that.

— — —

I asked him for Ruy's.

He found it without looking, which meant he knew where it was, which meant he'd had it out recently.

Two pages. That crooked freehand ruling. The barred sevens.

The last entry in my brother's handwriting was dated eleven days before he died and it wasn't a report, it was a note to himself, and it said:

94 not enough. can see the join but not what's past it. need to get properly held. tell C to stay in the channel.

I read it four times.

"Tell C to stay in the channel," I said.

"Yes."

"He was going to ask me to leave him under."

"He never asked you," Renny said. "You should hold onto that. He wrote it eleven days before and he never said it to you, and I've thought about why for nine years and the best I've got is that he couldn't work out how to put it to his brother." He took the page back, carefully, the way you'd take a photograph out of someone's

hand. "It's the only decent thing in this entire box file, Cass. He knew what he wanted, he knew exactly who to ask, and he couldn't make himself do it."

— — —

I went out into the rain at about one in the morning and stood in the Rua Nova with my hands on my knees for a while.

Not because of the reports. Not because of the room, or the left side, or the corner of a large building.

Because for nine years I had been the man who got there in sixty-two seconds, and I had built an entire life on the sentence I was fast enough and it wasn't enough, and I had been wrong about which word in that sentence was the problem.

I went back in. He was washing the mugs.

"When you asked me on the sand," I said. "The day he died. Whether he was moving."

"Yes."

"Why did that matter?"

"Because if he was moving at sixty-two seconds," Renny said, without turning round, "he was on Rung Three at most, and you took him out of the water in the middle of the safest part of the entire process, and he died of the pressure change on a fast ascent from six metres with a lung already loaded." He put a mug on the rack. "He wasn't dying when you got to him, Cass. He was fine. He was having the best minute of his life."

The tap ran.

"You interrupted him," Renny said, "and the interruption is what killed him. That's not mysticism. That's a pulmonary event with a mechanism you can read about in any diving medicine textbook, and it is the single most ordinary way to die in this sport, and everyone in this town thinks your brother drowned."

He dried his hands.

“He didn’t drown. You brought him up too fast, because you loved him, and because you were nine seconds better than everybody else.”

SIXTEEN. NOTICE

I quit on the twenty-fourth of December by text message, which is a coward’s medium and was the correct one.

Not driving for the crew any more. Ski’s still available for the contest if the WSL want it, that’s between them and the harbourmaster. Don’t call me.

Renny replied in four minutes.

Understood. Thank you for nine years. The ledger will note the change.

Not one word of persuasion. That’s how you keep somebody — you let them go, cleanly, with a receipt.

I lasted six days.

— — —

What broke it was Iker.

The Basque kid. Nineteen years old, ninety kilos of nothing but shoulders, the one who’d asked me to take him back out instead of in. On the twenty-eighth, in a nothing swell, twenty-five-foot faces, absolutely routine — he went down on an inside section with two skis in the channel and neither of them was mine, because I was sitting in a flat above a garage with the curtains shut watching a Portuguese quiz show.

Nobody got to him for two minutes and ten seconds.

He’d gone down in a lull between waves, which meant no second wave, which meant no dragging, which meant that what happened to Iker was not a beating. It was just time. He was under, in one place, in ordinary green water eight metres deep, for a hundred and thirty seconds, and the drivers on that day were two Brazilians who were competent and who had never once in their lives had a

reason to think the man they were looking for was anywhere other than the surface.

They found him at two-ten because he finally floated.

— — —

They brought him in on a sled and I got there because Bruno phoned me from the slip and I ran the whole way with my boots unlaced.

He was on the concrete by the fuel drums with four people round him.

He was sambaing.

I'd seen it a hundred and forty times from twelve feet up in a lifeguard chair and I had never once seen it from a metre away with a friend on the ground and here is what it actually is, and I'm going to write it properly because the rest of this book has been fairly clean and this part is not clean.

The whole body vibrates. Not a shiver — a buzz, four or five cycles a second, running through the trunk and out into the limbs, so that his heels drummed on the concrete in a fast irregular patter like something spilling. His hands were curled in and turned inward at the wrists, both of them, symmetrically, in a posture nobody adopts voluntarily. His jaw was going. His eyes were wide open and moving, and they were not tracking anything, they slid across my face and off it without the slightest change.

He was making a noise. That's the part I hadn't known about, because you can't hear it from a chair. A soft rhythmic grunt on every fourth or fifth vibration, air being pushed out of a chest by the shaking rather than by intent. It sounded like a man being jostled in a queue.

There was foam at the corner of his mouth, pink-tinged, which is the lungs, which is fluid coming up because the alveoli have been squeezed and have started to leak — that's the thing that killed my brother, that exact pink, and I have seen it twice in my life and both times it was on somebody I liked.

He'd wet himself. That's normal. Nobody mentions it, ever, in any account of any of this, in nine years of bar talk I have never once heard it said out loud, and it happens most times, because the pelvic floor is muscle and the muscle has stopped receiving instructions.

Somebody had put a jacket over him. Somebody else was filming.

I got that phone and threw it into the harbour. It was an eight-hundred-euro phone and I have never been so calm about anything.

Then I knelt down on the concrete and put my hand flat on Iker's sternum and waited, because there is nothing else to do — you keep the airway clear and you let it finish, and it finished at about forty seconds, and the buzz stopped all at once like a switch going, and the boy's eyes came back on and found mine.

And Iker Aramendi, nineteen, lying in his own piss on a slipway with pink foam on his chin, looked at me with total clarity and said the first thing that came into his head, which is what they all do, which is why the ninety seconds after matters more than any interview ever conducted.

He said, in English, because I don't speak Basque and he was being polite even then:

"It's much better further in."

Then he cried for about a minute. Then he asked for his phone.

— — —

Renny had the recorder going. He'd been standing four metres back the entire time with a small grey digital recorder held at chest height and he had not moved to help, because there was nothing useful he could do and because there was something useful he could do and he was doing it.

I stood up.

I want to say I hit him. I've imagined it enough. I stood on that slipway with wet knees and a dead phone in the harbour and I looked at a fifty-eight-year-old man holding a recorder and I

understood two things at once, which is the worst kind of understanding.

The first was that Renny Shaw had just recorded the cleanest Rung Four report of the entire nine years, on land, from a conscious subject, ninety seconds after surfacing, unprompted, with four witnesses.

The second was that if I had been in the water Iker would have been out at sixty-two seconds and would have said nothing at all, and would have gone home, and would have come back in March and done it again with less information.

"Two-ten," Renny said. "Do you want to know the last time this beach produced a two-ten that lived?"

"No."

"Never," he said. "Not once. You've been here nine years."

He put the recorder in his fleece.

"He's fine," Renny said. "He'll have a headache and a cough for three days and his chest will hurt when he laughs. He was never in danger of dying, Cass, he was in danger of being interrupted, and today nobody interrupted him and now we have the best single line in the file."

It's much better further in.

— — —

I went back on the second of January.

Not for Renny. I want that on the page even though I'm aware of exactly how it reads. I went back because the alternative was sitting in a flat with the curtains shut while nineteen-year-olds went down in front of drivers who thought two minutes was a tragedy, and because I had spent nine years being the fastest man on that coast and the only thing I had ever actually done with it was pull my brother out of the best minute of his life.

Renny didn't say anything when I came down the slip. He didn't smile. He handed me a fuel can, which is the most tactful thing anyone has ever done for me.

And that night he sent one message.

Contest window opens the 14th. Models are showing something behind it. If it comes in as forecast it will be the largest swell recorded at this beach.

I'd like you to run the count as normal. Nothing changes. You do your job.

— R.S.

Nothing changes. You do your job.

I read that about nine times, looking for the trap, and there wasn't one, and that's because the trap was that there wasn't one.

He didn't need me to go slower any more.

He'd worked out that if the swell was big enough, I wouldn't be able to get there.

END OF PART TWO

III. THE GLORY

SEVENTEEN. GREEN LIGHT

The call went out at 06:40 on the eleventh of January for a contest window opening on the fourteenth, and by lunchtime there were eleven thousand people booked into a town with four thousand beds.

I'll do the swell properly one more time, because this is the one, and because everything in this book has been building toward a set of numbers that I still don't entirely believe I watched arrive.

A low pressure system formed south of Greenland on the seventh at 962 millibars, which is a serious storm and not an unusual one. On the eighth it stalled — it stopped moving forward and sat, spinning, over the same patch of North Atlantic for thirty-one hours, with a fetch of eleven hundred kilometres of open water and sustained winds of ninety knots blowing in one consistent direction along the whole length of it.

That's the recipe. Not violence. Duration and alignment. A storm that sits still and blows the same way for a day and a half organises the sea underneath it into something that stops being chop and starts being a machine.

By the ninth it was throwing swell. By the tenth the deep-water buoys west of Ireland were reading sixteen metres significant height at twenty-four seconds.

Twenty-four seconds. I said earlier that twenty-two is a phone call at four in the morning. Twenty-four is something else. At that period the energy is running four hundred metres deep and moving at about seventy kilometres an hour across the open ocean and it will lose almost nothing between Ireland and here.

And it was going to arrive, on the models, at high tide on the fifteenth, with the wind offshore at eight knots.

Every man in that bar knew what that meant and not one of them said it out loud, which is the same thing as everyone saying it.

— — —

The town in the four days before a swell like that is not a party. That's the mistake people make from the outside. There's no atmosphere. What there is, is logistics, and logistics performed by frightened people has a particular quality to it, a sort of over-carefulness, like the morning of a funeral.

The GNR closed the cliff road to private vehicles on the thirteenth. The council brought in six portable toilets and a barrier system and an ambulance that parked at the top of the slip and stayed there for a week with two paramedics in it playing cards.

The lighthouse sold out its viewing platform. Actually sold out, an actual ticket, eleven euros.

A helicopter came from Lisbon on the fourteenth and did a loop and went away and came back the next morning and stayed.

Nineteen skis registered with the harbourmaster. Nineteen. I have never seen more than eleven at that break in my life.

And in among all of it, in a rented flat above a garage, a fifty-eight-year-old man with a folding table and a box file was, I am absolutely certain, doing arithmetic about how long a human being could be held under seventy feet of water while nineteen drivers failed to find him.

— — —

I went to see Mina on the thirteenth.

She was packing her flat. Not moving out — packing the way you pack when you're being careful, boxes labelled, the wetsuits off the hooks and rolled.

"You're leaving?"

"No." She taped a box. "I'm tidying. If it goes wrong I'd rather my mother didn't have to sort through a shithole."

Said absolutely flatly, without any drama in it at all, and she went on taping.

I sat down on the second chair, which was empty now, because the ledger was gone from it.

"Renny's got you on something."

"Renny hasn't got me on anything. I've got me on something." She looked up. "This is the difference you can't seem to hold in your head, Cass, and it's honestly starting to bore me. Nobody's making me. There's no gun. I've wanted to see the join for four years and on Thursday morning the largest wave ever recorded at this beach is going to arrive and hold me down for as long as I can arrange to be held down, and I have thought about it every day since I was twenty-six, and it is mine."

"It killed Beto."

"Beto was interrupted."

"He was sixty-one seconds under with a full cartridge—"

"—and he didn't pull it, and you know exactly why he didn't pull it, because you were there eight days before him and you didn't want to come up either." She set the tape down. "You've been under once, for seventy-nine seconds, and you came back and you've spent a month being angry at everyone in this town for wanting the thing you want."

The pigeons went off downstairs.

"That's not fair," I said.

"It's completely fair. It's the only thing I've said to you in three years that's completely fair." She went back to the box. "You want to go under. You've wanted it since Ruy. The only difference between you and me is that I've been honest about the arrangements."

— — —

At the door — and this is the last conversation I ever had with her in that flat, so I've kept it exactly — I asked her the question I'd been carrying since the garage.

"If it's just brains. If Renny's right and it's forty-one machines failing the same way and there's nothing down there at all. Does that change it?"

Mina Sadr stood in her doorway with a roll of packing tape in her hand and thought about it seriously, for about eight seconds, the way she thought about everything.

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because either way it's the only place a person is ever completely quiet," she said, "and I'd like to go and look at it properly before I die, and I don't much care whether it's a room or a mistake."

She shut the door gently. Same as the first time.

Two days later the swell hit the outer buoy at twenty-four seconds and the whole coast started to shake.

PROTOCOL III. SURRENDER

Final instruction. Nothing follows this one.

PURPOSE. To remain.

Everything you have trained until now has been resistance — tolerating, enduring, holding on. That was scaffolding and you may now take it down. What is required at the end is the opposite skill and it cannot be practised in a pool, because a pool has never once tried to kill anybody.

THE INSTRUCTION. When the wave takes you: do nothing.

Not relax, which is a word people say and mean nothing by. Do nothing. Do not orient. Do not locate the surface. Do not swim, kick, reach, or arrange your limbs. Do not decide anything at all.

Rag doll is the surfers' word for it and they use it with contempt, as an insult, to describe a man being thrown about — and that contempt is the last piece of stupidity you will have to put down. Total passivity is not the failure state. It is the technique. It is, in oxygen terms, the difference between ninety seconds and a hundred and forty.

A struggling man burns his reserve in the first thirty seconds and arrives at the door with nothing left to look with.

COSTS, IN ORDER OF EXPENSE. Fear is the most expensive thing you can do underwater. It is not an emotion down there, it is a fuel rate. A frightened heart at a hundred and forty beats will consume in forty seconds what a calm heart at fifty consumes in two minutes. Swimming is second. Deciding is third and is the one nobody warns you about. Cognition costs. Any man who spends the descent thinking about his wife will not see anything.

WHAT TO EXPECT AT THE TRANSITION. The contractions cease. This is Rung Two and it is the last honest signal your body will ever give you. Everything after it, you have been warned, is happening in a brain that is running down.

Proceed anyway.

WHAT NOT TO DO ON ARRIVAL. Do not attempt to approach it. Subjects at Rung Four consistently report an intention to move toward the structure. Do not. There is nowhere to go, you are inside a collapsing wave, and the impulse to travel is the one thing at that depth that will spend what little you have left.

Look. Note which side. Note whether it moves when you move.

Then come back and tell somebody.

ON RETURNING. You will not want to. I have been told this by every subject who has been past Rung Three and I have never once been told the opposite.

The reluctance is not a symptom of danger. It is an accurate response to where you are and what you have found, and I am not going to insult you by calling it confusion.

You will come back anyway. Not because you want to. Because somebody arranged for you to be able to, and that arrangement was expensive, and other people are waiting for the report.

A NOTE, WHICH IS NOT PROCEDURE. I have spent twenty-two years sitting outside chambers and thirty years reading files and I have never been in. I never will. My chest went in 1997 and there is no version of this in which I get to see it.

Forty-one of you have. Three of you did not come back and I have their pages and I read them more than is good for me.

Whatever it is — the room, the corner, the join, the outside of something — you are the only people who have ever stood in front of it, and every one of you got there on one breath, with nothing, in the dark, with no instrument but your own body.

Do not let anyone tell you it was a symptom.

Go and look. Then come back.

— R.S.

EIGHTEEN. FIFTEENTH

It came in overnight and by four in the morning nobody in that town was asleep, because you couldn't be.

I've told you about the sound already. Forget it. That was a different animal.

What arrived on the fifteenth of January did not make a noise you could locate. There was no crash and no bang and nothing you could point at. There was a continuous low pressure in the air, a sort of standing rumble underneath everything, and every forty seconds it would swell up into something enormous and then subside, and the windows in my flat moved in their frames each time, and a glass on the drainer walked eleven centimetres across the steel over the course of the night and I watched it do it.

Dogs went mad in the old town. That's documented, that's in the newspaper. Every dog in Nazaré barked from about one in the morning.

I got down to the slip at five-forty in the dark and there were already four hundred people on the cliff road walking up in the rain with torches, like a pilgrimage, which is exactly what it was and everyone would have been offended by the word.

— — —

First light at seven-fifty.

I have driven at this beach for nine years and I have seen it at seventy feet and I want to be extremely careful here because this is

the only paragraph in the book where I am at risk of sounding like the men in the bar.

The sets were coming in at eleven-minute intervals in groups of four to six.

The faces on the third and fourth waves of the bigger sets were somewhere between ninety and a hundred feet.

That's not my measurement. I don't measure. Three separate outfits with calibrated equipment and drone telemetry put the largest faces of that morning between twenty-seven and thirty-one metres, and the argument about the exact figure went on for fourteen months and was still going on when I started writing this, and the reason it went on is the reason everything about that place goes on: nobody can measure them properly. They put a man on a face and count him as a unit of height. The wave arrives, breaks in eleven seconds, and never exists again. There is no rewinding it, no second attempt, no laboratory. The largest thing that has ever happened at this beach is an event with no witnesses that agree.

Ninety feet is nine storeys.

I want to try one image and then I'll stop.

When a wave of that size stands up and goes vertical, there is a moment — about a second and a half — where the face is not moving toward you, it's just standing there, and the water on it is running upward. Upward. The surface of a nine-storey wall of water climbing toward the sky. And in that second and a half the whole thing goes translucent at the top where the sun's behind it, so you can see the shadows of the swell behind it through it, and there are birds in front of it that are the size of specks of dirt.

Then the top third comes off.

It doesn't curl. Curling is a small-wave word. It comes off as a slab about eight metres thick and the length of a football pitch and it falls, in the way that a building falls, with that same wrongness of scale where the eye insists it's slower than it is.

When it lands, the water it displaces goes up. A wall of white goes forty, fifty feet into the air along the whole line of impact and stands there for a second before the wind takes it flat.

That's what these people had been training for four years to be underneath.

— — —

The contest was called off at eight-fifteen.

Of course it was. Nobody says this part but it's the most important administrative fact of that entire day: it was too big to compete. The event needs a jury to score rides and skis to rotate and a safety plan that a lawyer has signed, and at ninety feet the safety plan is a work of fiction. The head judge came on the radio and called it and there was no argument from anybody.

Which meant that from eight-fifteen onward, the largest swell ever recorded at that break was breaking on an empty ocean, in front of eleven thousand people, with no contest, no scores, no prize money and no rules.

A free session.

You have never seen anything like what that does to men.

Within forty minutes there were nine skis in the water and none of them had permission to be there.

— — —

I sat in the channel with the engine idling and did the only useful thing available, which was to count skis and note who was riding.

Kirill went out at eight-fifty with a Portuguese driver and got a good one and came back howling.

Léo went. Bruno went. Two Brazilians I didn't know. A South African woman called Dee who I'd pulled twice and liked enormously and who rode with more sense than anyone on that beach.

Renny came down the slip at nine with the Napat on its trailer and did not put it in the water. He backed it to the top of the concrete,

set the chocks, and stood next to it with the notebook in his fleece and a pair of binoculars, and he stayed in that exact position for the next four hours and did not move except to write.

And Mina Sadr came down at nine-twenty in a suit with no logos on it, carrying a board with no logos on it, and walked past me on the slip without stopping and said one thing.

“Left of the peak. Whatever happens. Stay left of the peak.”

That’s a place. Left of the peak, off the shoulder, is a hundred and twenty metres from where the impact zone actually is on a day like that.

She was telling me where to be so that I would be too far away.

She was being kind. That’s the thing I understood as she walked past — she was doing me a kindness, taking the decision off me in advance, giving me a place to stand where nobody could later say I should have gone.

I said her name.

She kept walking.

NINETEEN. MINA’S WAVE

She went at eleven-forty on the fourth wave of the biggest set of the day, and Léo drove her, and he drove her perfectly, and he has never once ridden since.

I was left of the peak.

I was where she told me to be, a hundred and twenty metres off, with the engine idling and my hand on the throttle and a knife on the mount, and I could see everything and reach nothing, which was the arrangement, which she had made for me as a gift.

— — —

The set showed at eleven-thirty-one. You see them a long way out on a day like that — four dark lines on the horizon that are not moving in any way you can perceive, and then two minutes later they have doubled in height and are still not visibly moving, and then they are on top of the canyon.

The first two went unriden. The third had a Brazilian on it who kicked out early.

The fourth stood up out of the deep and kept standing.

Léo had her at fifty kilometres an hour on a long line coming down off the shoulder. He put her in high and late — later than anyone would have chosen, later than I'd have gone — and he did that because she asked him to, and I know that because he told the inquiry and because he has said it out loud in a bar exactly once, to me, in April, weeping.

She let go of the rope.

And then Mina Sadr rode about eleven seconds of the largest wave I have ever seen a human being on, and she did it beautifully, and I need you to know that, because everything after this is horror and I refuse to let the horror eat the eleven seconds.

She was on a face somewhere near ninety feet. Her line was low and clean and fast, a long diagonal running ahead of a lip that was coming over the whole length of the wave behind her like a roof being pushed off a terrace. She went past the peak. She went past the section that had eaten Beto in December. Twenty thousand tonnes of water falling over behind her shoulder and she was ahead of it and pulling away and the cliff was making a noise I could hear over the engine at a hundred and twenty metres.

She had it.

That's the part nobody accepts. She had made it. Another four seconds on that line and she was out into the flats and it would have been the biggest wave ever ridden by a woman and possibly by anybody and there would have been a Guinness certificate and a documentary and a life.

At second eleven she straightened her board.

Turned it, deliberately, ninety degrees, up the face, into the pit.

Same movement Beto made in December. Unhurried.

She had planned it, she had arranged her driver and her position and her ski and the man watching from a hundred and twenty metres, and she had trained four years for it, and she went up into

the falling lip of a ninety-foot wave on purpose in front of eleven thousand people and a helicopter.

The wave took her at eleven-forty-one and eighteen seconds.

I started my count.

— — —

Twenty seconds. The wave finished breaking. The whitewater from the impact went up fifty feet and stood there and blew flat. Léo's ski was inside and I could see him already turning.

Forty seconds. Nothing. That's normal. Forty is nothing.

Fifty-five. The fifth wave of the set landed on the same water. Léo had to run. I opened my throttle and came in ten metres and stopped, because in front of me was a field of white that was two hundred metres across and I could not have kept a hull on it.

Seventy. Léo was in the outer foam. Bruno was coming from the north. Two other skis converging. Four drivers on the best day of their lives and none of us could get into the middle of it.

Ninety. This is where the count usually ends. Ninety is a long hold-down. Ninety is a story you tell.

Two minutes.

I want to describe two minutes.

Two minutes is a hundred and twenty individual seconds and I counted every one of them out loud, alone, on an idling jet ski, and I have never in my life experienced duration the way I experienced it between ninety seconds and two minutes on the fifteenth of January.

The helicopter was overhead. The cliff had gone quiet — eleven thousand people, silent, which is a sound of its own. Somebody on the radio was saying a name over and over.

Two-ten. That's Iker. That's the number that came up talking.

Two-thirty.

At two-thirty I went in.

I put a two-hundred-and-ninety kilo ski into two hundred metres of aerated foam on a day with ninety-foot sets running at eleven-minute intervals, which is the stupidest thing I have ever done and which every driver on that beach did within forty seconds of each other, all four of us, without a word on the radio.

The hull dropped. That's what it does in that stuff — there's nothing to plane on, it just sinks in and slews. I went fifteen metres and the ski went over and I came off and I was in it, in the white, and I could not see the surface because I was on the surface and it looked exactly the same as everything else.

Bruno got me. Bruno got me. That's the day I had.

Three minutes.

Three-forty.

At three-forty the sixth set of the morning showed on the horizon and the GNR came on the radio and ordered every ski out of the zone, and Bruno had my collar and was shouting at me in Portuguese, and I was shouting nothing, because I had stopped counting at three-forty-one, and I don't know why that number, and I have never started again.

— — —

They found her at four fifty-eight in the afternoon, five hundred metres north, in the rocks under the cliff.

The vest was inflated.

That's the detail. Out of everything, that's the one I've never been able to put down.

Her cartridge was empty and both bladders were full and her hand was still through the loop of the toggle cord, and the coroner's report notes it in a single line in the equipment section, and it means one thing, which is that at some point down there, in the dark, at some depth, at some number of seconds, in the warm and the quiet with the edges up and to the left—

Mina Sadr changed her mind.

She wanted to come back.

And it was too late by then, because the vest lifts you at a speed you don't control, and she came up under a set, and the pressure change did to her what it did to my brother.

She pulled the cord.

She fucking pulled it, and it killed her, and if she'd left it alone she might have floated up slowly in eleven minutes and been alive.

— — —

I sat on the concrete at the top of the slipway for a long time that evening after they took her up.

Renny Shaw came and stood next to me. Not crouched. Stood, with the binoculars still round his neck and the notebook shut in his hand, and he looked at the water for a while, and he was, I could see, absolutely wrecked. His face had come apart. He'd known her nine years.

I said: "She pulled it."

"I know."

"You wrote in that book that a subject at Rung Four doesn't pull the cord. You wrote we have never once needed to enforce this."

"I know what I wrote."

"So she got somewhere you've never had a report from," I said, "and the first thing she did was try to get out."

And Renny Shaw stood on that slipway with eleven thousand people filing back down the cliff road behind us and said, very quietly:

"Yes."

Then he said: "I need to make a call."

And he walked up the hill with his phone already in his hand, and that was the moment — that, right there, not the ledger, not the chart, not the garage — that was the moment I understood I had never once asked who was paying for the swimming pool.

TWENTY. THE CLIENT

I found out on the twenty-ninth of January, in the garage, and once again nobody made me work for it, and once again that was the worst part.

I went round there to ask him to stop. That's genuinely what I went for. Two dead in six weeks, one of them the best person in the whole enterprise, and I went up the Rua Nova at nine in the evening to ask a fifty-eight-year-old man to shut it down.

He was packing box files into crates.

Not hiding them. Packing them, methodically, with foam sheeting between the layers, and a printed manifest on the workbench with numbers against each box.

"You're leaving."

"The material is." He didn't stop working. "I'm going to Basel on the eleventh."

"What's in Basel?"

And Renny Shaw straightened up, and put his hands on the small of his back the way older men do, and said:

"The client."

— — —

He made tea. Of course he made tea.

"You've never asked," he said, "in three years, who pays for the pool."

"I assumed you did."

"On a navy pension." He handed me the mug. "Two hundred a session for you, three-fifty for the pool hire, the boat fuel, the recorders, four thousand a year in insurance for a training operation that officially doesn't exist. Eleven thousand euros a year, Cass, minimum, for nine years, out of a man with no income."

I sat down on the folding chair.

"Who."

"A company. You won't have heard of it and I'm not going to give you the name, because you'll go and shout at a receptionist in Switzerland and it'll achieve nothing." He sat down opposite. "Neuropharmaceutical. Mid-size. Two hundred and eleven employees. They have a division that works on what's called state induction — pharmacological reproduction of specific, defined conscious states. It's a real field. It's been a real field since the Sixties and it got serious money again about a decade ago."

"And they've been funding this."

"They've been funding me. Since 2017." He drank his tea. "The formal arrangement is a consultancy. I supply structured phenomenological reports from subjects in acute hypoxia, with physiological correlates where available, indexed by depth of deficit and duration. Forty-one subjects. Four hundred and ninety-two individual runs."

"Say it in English."

"They're paying me for what people see," Renny said, "when they nearly die."

— — —

I want to lay out what he told me next as plainly as he told it to me, because when I've tried to explain it since, people always assume I'm being hysterical, and I'm not, and the thing itself is quite dull, which is why it works.

The problem in that industry, he said, is not making drugs. Making drugs is easy. The problem is targets. You cannot chemically reproduce a state unless you can first define the state — describe it precisely enough, and consistently enough across independent subjects, that you can say what you're aiming at and know when you've hit it. A feeling isn't a target. "Bliss" isn't a target. Nobody can build toward a poem.

What is a target: a state that thirty-six out of forty-one independent subjects describe using the same spatial orientation, the same architectural vocabulary, the same absence of fear, the same

thermal misperception, arrived at through the same chemical route, reproducibly, on demand.

That's not a poem. That's a specification.

"Rung Four is the most consistently reported non-ordinary conscious state in the literature," Renny said. "By a distance. Nothing in the psychedelic corpus is that stable — you give forty people the same dose of the same compound and you get forty different countries. Hypoxia gives you the same building. Every time. In a pool in Portugal and a chamber in Faslane and under a boat in Portsmouth."

"Because it's the machine failing," I said. "You told me that. Forty-one identical machines failing identically."

"Yes." He looked at me steadily. "And a fault that reproduces perfectly in every unit is not a fault, commercially. It's a feature with a known trigger."

— — —

I asked how much.

He told me, immediately, without any shame at all, which I've thought about a lot.

Eleven thousand a year in operating costs, covered. A consultancy fee of sixty thousand a year to him personally, paid through a company in Dublin. And a milestone payment, contingent on delivery of a validated corpus of one hundred and fifty subject-runs at Rung Four or deeper with physiological telemetry.

Four hundred thousand euros.

"Have you delivered it?"

"Four hundred and ninety-two runs, but only a hundred and forty-nine at Rung Four or deeper with usable telemetry." He turned the cup on the workbench. "Mina's was the hundred and fiftieth. She was wearing a logging oximeter under the sleeve of her suit and it recorded continuously for eleven minutes and it was on her body when they found her at the rocks and the data is intact."

The heater ticked.

"You've got her blood oxygen," I said. "Second by second. All the way down."

"Yes."

"For three and a half minutes past anything anyone's ever recorded."

"Yes."

"A hundred and forty-nine," I said. "That's what you had on the fourteenth of January."

"Yes."

"So she's the one that finishes the contract."

"Yes."

"Renny." My voice had gone somewhere strange. "That's the most valuable thing in the entire nine years."

"It's the most valuable thing in the field," he said. "There is no other trace like it anywhere on earth and there never will be, because no ethics committee in the world will ever approve an experiment that produces one."

And then Renny Shaw put his tea down and said the sentence that I have not got out from under, and I don't think I will:

"She knew that. She put it on herself that morning. She checked the battery in front of me on the slipway at nine-fifteen."

— — —

I said: what's the product.

He got a folder off the bench and opened it and turned it round to face me, the way he'd turned the box file round in December, and it was a slide deck. An actual corporate slide deck, printed, spiral bound, forty pages.

The working name on the front was a string of letters and a number.

Inside, on slide nine, was a paragraph in ordinary business English describing the target profile of a compound in preclinical

development, and I read it about six times, and here is what it said, in summary, in my words, because I'm not going to reproduce their sentences.

Fifteen minutes.

Sublingual. At home. No supervision required.

A reproducible state of absolute anxiolysis — that's the word, it means the total absence of anxiety — with mild thermal warmth, temporal dilation, and stable, benign spatial hallucinosis. No respiratory involvement. No hypoxia. No risk.

Onset four minutes. Duration fifteen. Full recall. Drive an hour later.

Projected pricing, on a subscription model, at somewhere around the cost of a phone contract.

— — —

I sat in a cold garage in a fishing town holding a spiral-bound document and I laughed, out loud, once, and it came out of me like something breaking.

Because here's the thing. Here's the whole obscene shape of it.

Ruy trained for two years on his own with a supermarket notebook and drowned at twenty-six on a Tuesday in February.

Beto did four years of Tuesdays and turned back into the pit at seventy feet with a full cartridge and left a mother in Curitiba to find out from a video.

Iker went down for two minutes and ten seconds in front of two competent Brazilians and came up and pissed himself on a slipway and said it's much better further in.

Mina Sadr gave four years and a life and three and a half minutes of the cleanest telemetry ever recorded to get properly held for the first time in human history.

And on slide nine of a spiral-bound folder, the thing they went down there for was available in fifteen minutes, with no ordeal attached,

for about the price of a phone contract, and you could drive afterwards.

Everything. Every single thing. The cold, the tables, the lead, the fear, the two hundred metres of foam, the pink at the corner of the mouth, the wet trousers, the four hundred and eleven times I got there in sixty-two seconds — all of it, the entire cost of the entire enterprise —

— was market research.

— — —

“You knew,” I said. “The whole time. When you were reading me those reports in this room and saying you wouldn’t speculate. When you told me it was a finding and it didn’t need a ghost in it.”

“All of that was true.”

“You were sourcing.”

“Yes,” said Renny Shaw. “Both. That’s the part you’re going to have to sit with, Cass, and I’ll save you a year: it’s both, and neither one cancels the other. I believe every word I’ve ever said to you about what’s down there. I have also been paid sixty thousand euros a year to write it down in a format that a company in Basel can use.”

He closed the folder.

“I’d have done it for nothing,” he said. “Nobody offered me nothing.”

TWENTY-ONE. SLIDE THIRTY-ONE

I took the deck. He let me. He didn’t even watch me do it — he went on packing crates while I sat on a folding chair in a cold garage and read forty pages of a document that was never meant to be read by anybody who had touched saltwater.

Most of it was what you’d expect. Market sizing. A competitor landscape with names in it I recognised from television advertisements. Regulatory pathway. A chart projecting something called addressable anxiety burden across four territories.

Slide twenty-two was headed CONSUMER INSIGHT —
QUALITATIVE.

It was six quotes in a nice sans-serif font with the corporate blue underneath them, arranged in two columns of three, the way they teach you to lay out testimonials.

They were from the ledger.

Warm. Not frightened.

Above and left. Edges meeting.

It's much better further in.

Iker Aramendi, nineteen years old, lying in his own piss on a slipway with pink foam on his chin, ninety seconds after the longest survived hold-down in the history of that beach, saying the truest thing anyone said in the entire nine years —

— set in eleven-point type, in a column, as consumer insight.

There was a caption underneath the six of them, in italics.

Subject reports, unprompted, post-event (n=41).

— — —

I got to slide thirty-one at about eleven at night.

It was headed BRAND TERRITORY, and it was mostly white space, because that's how they signal that something is important.

In the middle, in large type, was a phrase they were considering as a name for the state itself. Not the compound — the compound had a code. This was the word the customer would use. The thing you'd say to your friend at work. Six letters.

And underneath it, in smaller type, in quotation marks, attributed to nothing and nobody, with no source line, no citation, no name:

"There's a room down there."

— — —

I have never told anyone what my brother said on the sand. I said that in the third chapter of this book and it was true when I wrote it and it is still true.

Two paramedics heard it and thought it was hypoxia. A cameraman was rewinding. My mother was not there. I have never said it out loud to another human being in nine years.

Except once.

In a garage, in December, to a man who asked me what did you see, and then asked me which side was the beach on, and then said same as Ruy, and I had thought at the time — I had genuinely thought — that he was telling me something kind.

He'd had it from Ruy directly. Of course he had. Ruy went to Lisbon in 2015 and found him and gave him everything, the notebook, the sevens with the bars through them, the whole two years of it, and somewhere in that handover my brother told a stranger the thing he would say again eleven months later lying on his back on wet sand with the ocean running off him.

And it had gone in the ledger.

And the ledger had gone to Basel.

And on slide thirty-one of a spiral-bound folder, in quotation marks, with no name attached, was the last coherent sentence my brother ever spoke, being considered as brand territory for a subscription product.

— — —

I put the deck down on the folding table and I sat there for a while.

Renny had stopped packing. He was standing by the crates with a roll of foam sheeting in his hand, watching me, and he had understood exactly which page I was on, because he'd been waiting for it, because he knew the deck by heart and he knew what was on thirty-one and he had handed it to me anyway.

"You could have taken that out," I said.

"I didn't put it in."

"You gave it to them."

"I gave them four hundred and ninety-two reports, and a company in Basel with a marketing function went through them and chose the best line, and the best line was your brother's, because your brother was better at this than anybody who has ever done it." He set the foam down. "He was twenty-six and he had no training and no equipment and no vocabulary and he came up out of sixty-two seconds and produced the single most usable sentence in the entire corpus. Six words. Nobody has beaten it in nine years."

"Don't."

"I'm not consoling you, I'm telling you the finding."

"He's a fucking slogan, Renny."

"Yes." He didn't flinch from it. "And in about four years, roughly eleven million people are going to say it to each other at parties, and not one of them will know it belonged to a man, and they will all be describing the same thing he described, and every single one of them will be right." He picked the foam back up. "That's what happens to true things. They get sold. It doesn't stop them being true. It just stops them being yours."

— — —

I asked him one more question that night. The last one I ever asked him.

"When it launches. When it's fifteen minutes and a subscription and there's an advert with a woman on a sofa. What happens to all this?"

Renny Shaw looked around a garage full of crates.

"It ends," he said. "Immediately. Completely. Nobody will hold their breath for two minutes under a collapsing wave to reach a place they can reach on a Tuesday evening at home, and they shouldn't, and I want you to hear me say that I think that's good." He taped a crate shut. "Four people died getting this. In four years nobody will ever have to die for it again. That's the whole argument and it's an extremely strong one and I've never found a way round it."

"But."

He looked up.

"But I've read four hundred and ninety-two reports," he said, "and every one of them was written by somebody who paid for it. And I don't know — I genuinely do not know, and I've thought about almost nothing else since Basel first called me — whether the thing they saw was the thing itself, or whether it was the price."

He put his hand flat on the taped lid.

"You can synthesise the state," Renny said. "I don't believe for one second that you can synthesise the cost. And I have no idea, none, whether what those forty-one people found in the dark was a room, or whether it was just what four minutes of dying looks like to someone who has spent four years earning the right to be there."

The rain went on.

"They'll find out in Basel," he said. "That's their problem now. My part's finished."

PROTOCOL IV. NOTE TO THE FILE

Appended 04 February. Not for circulation. Retained with the corpus.

I am closing this document because the work is finished and because I would like there to be one honest page in the box.

Everything before this was written to be read by people who were going to go under. I have reread all of it this week and it is, in every technical respect, correct. The tables are correct. The rungs are correct. The physiology is correct and I would defend any line of it to any panel.

It is also a recruitment document, and I knew that when I wrote it, and I want that recorded in my own hand rather than inferred later by somebody kinder than me.

A man does not read four pages on the architecture of the door and then go back to his tables. He goes and finds a wave. That was the mechanism. I did not build it by accident; I have written training material for the Ministry of Defence and I know precisely how a

document persuades. Protocol I gives you the science, which earns your trust. Protocol II gives you a ladder with a top you cannot see, which is the oldest trick in any liturgy. Protocol III tells you to surrender, and tells you that you will not want to come back, and tells you to come back anyway — for us.

Every man and woman who went down went of their own choice. I have never once lied to any of them and no one was ever coerced. Both of those statements are true and neither of them is a defence, and I have stopped pretending otherwise.

Corpus at close: forty-one subjects, four hundred and ninety-two runs, one hundred and fifty at Rung Four or deeper with telemetry. Delivered.

Four did not return. R. Moura, 26. B. Krall, 26. M. Sadr, 30. And a name I will not put in a file that is going to Basel, because his mother is still alive in Setúbal and has been told a different story, and that is the one thing in nine years I have chosen to keep out of the ledger.

Against those four: a compound in preclinical development which will, if it clears, deliver the same state to anyone who wants it in fifteen minutes with no water, no cold, no fear and no risk.

That is a good trade. I have run it every way and it remains a good trade and I want whoever reads this to understand that I am not tortured about the arithmetic.

What I am unsure about is smaller and will not fit on a slide.

I have four hundred and ninety-two reports and every one of them was written by somebody who paid for it. I do not know whether what they found was the thing itself or the receipt. I do not know whether a man who has spent four years learning to be still while he is being killed sees a room because a room is there, or because four years of that is what a room costs.

They will find out in Basel, at scale, cheaply, on sofas.

I would give a great deal to be told the answer and I will not be, because I am fifty-eight and my chest went in 1997 and the one

thing I have never been able to buy, from anyone, at any price, is a single one of the four hundred and ninety-two.

A final instruction, which supersedes the rest.

To any subject reading this: the ladder is closed. There is nothing further from me. Go home. Take the tables with you if you like, they are good for you and they are the only part of this that will make you healthier.

Do not go looking for the join. It is going to be for sale.

— R.S.

TWENTY-TWO. THE COUNT

Renny Shaw went to Basel on the eleventh of February and I have not seen him since. He sent one message in April, three words long — It cleared phase one — and I did not reply, and there has been nothing after that.

The pool in the old town went back to being a pool. Somebody finally painted over the dolphin.

Kirill Novak got a new sponsor and moved to Chile, which is what Mina said he'd do, in the first conversation I ever had with her, sitting on the second chair in a flat that smelled of neoprene. He's alive as of last month. I check occasionally, which I'm not proud of.

Iker Aramendi stopped. Completely. Nineteen years old, walked away in February, went back to Zarautz and works for his uncle doing something with refrigeration units. He sent me a photograph of a van at Christmas. No message with it. Just a van.

Léo has not ridden and will not ride.

The energy drink company with the lightning bolt going into a fist ran a campaign in the summer built around a slow-motion wipeout with a piano on it. Not Beto's. They used somebody else's. Beto's is still up, in its original form, with the comments open, and it has done sixteen million now.

And in about three years — four, maybe, these things take longer than the deck says — there is going to be an advertisement.

I've thought about it more than is healthy. I've built the whole thing in my head. A woman in her thirties on a sofa in a room with good light. Fifteen minutes. No supervision required. Some warm, quiet voice at the end reading the six words my brother said lying on his back on wet sand with the ocean running out of his sinuses and a Sky Italia cameraman rewinding.

There's a room down there.

And eleven million people will say it to each other, and they'll be right, and not one of them will know it belonged to anybody.

— — —

I still drive.

That surprises people. I've had two writers and one documentary crew come to this town and every one of them wanted the version where I burned the ski, and I understand the appeal, and it isn't true.

I'm out there most days there's swell. I do the season. I've got a new impellor and eleven hundred and forty hours on the clock and the best hands on this coast, and there are nineteen-year-olds coming through now who've never heard of any of it, who think Beto Krall is a clip, who talk about content the way we used to talk about waves.

They go down and I go and get them.

And I get there in sixty-two seconds, because that is what I do, and because I have decided — deliberately, in full possession of everything in this book — that sixty-two seconds is the correct number and I am not going to move it.

Renny was right about the arithmetic and he was right about the corpus and he was right about my brother's lungs and he was right about me being an instrument. He was wrong about exactly one thing, and it's this: he thought I was the ceiling.

I'm not the ceiling.

I'm the floor.

Every man in that water gets to go as far as he goes because there is somebody in the channel counting, and the counting is the only thing on that entire coast that has never once been for sale, and I have four hundred and eighty-two of them now, and every single one came back.

— — —

The last thing.

There's a morning in March when it's twenty feet and clean and nobody's out because the contest window has closed and everyone's gone home to Hawaii and Biarritz and wherever. The cliff is empty. The lighthouse doesn't sell tickets in March.

I take the ski out on my own on those mornings and I sit in the channel with the engine off.

It's about six metres deep where I sit. Green water. No foam. On a calm day you can see the sand.

And I think about it every single time. Every time. I have thought about it on that spot maybe six mornings now — that I am forty-two years old and in reasonable condition and I have done fourteen months of tables in a flat above a garage where nobody can see me, and that I could take off the kill cord and go over the side and be at the bottom in eight seconds, and that nobody would be counting, because I am the only person in Europe who counts and I would be down there.

Seventy-nine seconds is what I've had. Once, in December, by accident.

I know exactly what's on the other side of the alarm. I've been warm. I've had the quiet. I have seen the edges up and to the left and I have felt the interest come on, that calm unhurried curiosity, and I know with total certainty that if I go over the side on one of those March mornings I will get further than I got before, because I'm trained now, and because there'd be nobody arriving at sixty-two seconds to interrupt me.

I sit there with my hand on the kill cord.

And what stops me isn't Ruy, and it isn't Mina, and it isn't fear, and it isn't the fact that in four years I could buy it in a fifteen-minute dose for the price of a phone contract and drive an hour later.

It's that somebody would have to come and get me.

Somebody would have to come out in a boat, on a flat morning in March, and find a forty-two-year-old man face down in six metres of clear water off an empty beach, and put their hand in his collar, and count, and be wrong about it for the rest of their life.

I've done that. I did it when I was thirty-two and I have not put it down since and I would not give it to anybody.

So I sit in the channel with the engine off, on the fifteenth of March, over six metres of green water with the sand visible at the bottom of it and nothing between me and the thing I want except a decision that has to be made again every single time.

And I start the engine.

And I go in.

GLOSSARY

Apam Napat [uh-PAAM nuh-PAAT] — Avestan, *child of the waters*.

An old Persian figure who lives at the bottom of the sea and holds the glory that men go down for.

Baleia [buh-LAY-uh] — Portuguese, *whale*. The bar in the old town, where Renny Shaw drinks tea in the back room with the notebook shut under his hand.

Khvarenah [khwuh-RE-nuh] — Avestan, *glory*. A light belonging to kings and to the world, which runs from the man who reaches for it and goes down into the water; the book's third part is named for it.

O teimoso [oo tay-MOH-zoo] — Portuguese, *the stubborn one*. What the narrator's mother called his brother, said the way a doctor says a diagnosis.

Samba [SAM-buh] — Portuguese, *a Brazilian dance*. The fine fast tremor that runs through the shoulders and jaw of a diver coming up from a brain that has been running low on oxygen, named after the dance because there was nothing else to call it. It means the lights are flickering; no samba, in an unconscious man, means they are off.

Cass Moura pulls men out of the worst water in Europe. Sixty-two seconds, impact to hand-on-body, four hundred and eleven times. It is the only decent thing he believes about himself.

The tow crews train under a retired navy diving medic, in a municipal pool, on Tuesday and Thursday nights. What looks like breath-hold conditioning is a ladder, and the rungs go past blackout. The riders are not learning to survive a hold-down. They are learning to stay in one long enough to look at something.

Forty-one people have come up and described the same structure, in the same position, in the same absence of fear.

Then a swell arrives with no precedent in the recorded history of the beach, and Cass finds out what his sixty-two seconds have been doing for nine years, and who has been paying for the pool.

The alarm is wired to the exhaust rather than the tank.

