

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 99

RIGHT OF PASSAGE

حق عبور

CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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First edition, 2026

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This is a work of fiction. The ship, her owners, her cargo and her crew, the woman in Maine and the woman she delivers to, and every person, vessel, company and incident in these pages are invented. No character corresponds to any real person, living or dead.

ISBN 979-8-952790-98-8

Typeset in DejaVu Serif.

ROYA PUBLICATIONS

287.65 +12.3% 431.90
3,906.17 -8.4% 1,278.56
+22.7% 184.03 7,561.92 -3.1% 920.44
0.618 143.27 +5.9% 2,416.38 11.4% 365.72 -17.6%
8,230.11 +26.3% 69.04 0.382 1,905.66 -4.8% 273.19
56.7% 328.91 +9.1% 4,713.05 12.8% 0.786 641.23 +3.4% 198.62
1,026.44 -6.9% 37.15 +18.2% 9,442.31 0.500 276.08 -11.3% 652.77 41.9%
3.1416 209.36 +7.6% 1,188.53 -2.4% 524.91 0.236 7,903.12 +6.8% 319.04 -9.7%
618.24 +4.1% 2,731.66 38.6% 94.27 -5.2% 0.707 463.19 +13.9% 8,661.73 -12.1% 197.08
15.8% 322.46 -3.6% 5,217.90 +2.9% 0.618 136.44 27.3% 914.62 -8.5% 3,480.11 +6.1% 0.382 -3.382
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THE FLEET THAT WAS REPORTED
BEFORE THE WAR, ABOUT A HUNDRED SHIPS A DAY
OFFICIALS SAID THIRTY A NIGHT
THE TRACKING FIRMS MEASURED TWELVE

SYNOPSIS

A tanker lies at anchor outside a strait, loaded, with nowhere to take her cargo. To cross two miles of water her master needs permission from two governments who each claim it and will not say the other's name, and insurance from a committee in a city he has never seen, which can stop him in seven days without leaving its desk.

At the far end of that pipe, a woman loads a fuel truck in the dark and decides which houses get filled this week.

The news says thirty ships a night are getting through. From the bridge wing, in the dark, the master counts twelve.

Between those two numbers sits everything this book is about: who is told, who is priced, who decides, and who finds out.

Nobody in it does anything wrong.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This book starts with a piece of paperwork.

On 16 Esfand 1365 (7 March 1987), a fleet of Kuwaiti oil tankers became American. Nothing about the ships changed. Same hulls, same cargoes, same crews. They changed flags.

They did it because of a rule. A warship may escort merchant ships from its own country. It may not escort anyone else's. Change the flag, and the escort becomes legal.

That escort became Operation Earnest Will, from Mordad 1366 to Mehr 1367 (July 1987 to September 1988). It was the largest naval convoy operation since the Second World War. On the first day of the first convoy, the lead tanker hit a mine. The operation ran for another fourteen months.

That is where this book comes from. It is the moment the flow of oil through this strait became something to be arranged, announced and argued over by people who do not live beside it.

WHAT IS DOCUMENTED

Two counts. In Shahrivar 1405 (September 2026), officials described the Strait of Hormuz as carrying about thirty escorted transits a night. Over the same weeks, the private firms that track ships for a living — Kpler, Lloyd's List Intelligence — measured about twelve a day. Before the war it had been roughly a hundred.

People have offered reasons for the gap. Small craft counted in one tally and not the other. Naval supply ships. Vessels sailing with their transponders switched off. Government sensors nobody outside a government can see.

None of these has been shown to close the gap. **I do not endorse any figure in this book, including the low one.** What can be said is simple: two counts were in circulation, they disagreed by a factor of two or three, and only one of them was on the radio.

Two permissions. Iran says vessels must be pre-approved and use designated channels, and that the strait is under its control. The

United States escorts shipping and says it has operational control. Both statements are made in public. They cannot both be the whole truth. Neither side discusses the other.

The insurance is real and works the way the book describes it.

A ship carries two kinds of cover. One is for the sea — fire, collision, grounding. The other is for war, and it is bought passage by passage, as a percentage of what the ship is worth. In quiet times that percentage is a fraction of one per cent. In a bad month it has run to several per cent, quoted fresh and sometimes requoted daily.

A body in London called the Joint War Committee publishes the list of waters it considers dangerous. It is not a government. It commands nothing. The owner must give notice before entering. The cover can be cancelled by either side on seven days' notice. And a ship with no war cover does not sail.

That is the quietest fact in this book and I think it is the most important. A committee that has never seen this water can stop a ship in it more completely than any navy, in a week, without raising its voice.

One more thing about insurance, because the book turns on it. When a cargo is insured, the buyer and the underwriter agree a figure at the start and write it into the policy. If the cargo is lost, that is the figure that gets paid. Not what the oil is worth on the day it burns — what was agreed months earlier, in an office, in a calmer market.

So the payout is priced off the world as it was described at the time. The replacement barrels have to be bought in the world as it actually is. In a rising market that gap is a real loss, and it is why nobody holding a cargo wants it destroyed.

Not everyone agrees about what stopped the ships. The Lloyd's Market Association, which speaks for the London insurance market, has said publicly that cover stayed available throughout, that

appetite to write it stayed high, and that vessels were not moving because masters and owners judged the risk too great — not because they could not get insured. Owners have said the opposite: that the rates and the notice requirements are what held them. Governments said the flow was maintained. The tracking firms said twelve.

Four accounts. Each one is defensible. Each one serves the person giving it, in a way that is perfectly legitimate. None has been reconciled with the others.

Also documented: the large-scale interference with satellite positioning in the Gulf, which puts ships on screens where they are not and produces transits that never happened. And the seafarers — the United Nations called it unprecedented — more than twenty thousand of them held at sea across the region. Not killed. Stopped. While everybody involved behaved correctly.

The interludes are true. The 23rd Headquarters Special Troops were raised on 30 Dey 1322 (20 January 1944): a little over a thousand men, inflatable tanks, fake radio traffic, and speakers on half-tracks that could be heard about two and a half miles away. They ran more than twenty deceptions. The largest, in Esfand 1323 (March 1945), drew German forces to the wrong bank of the Rhine. Three of them were killed. The work stayed secret for about fifty years, so the men who came home could tell nobody what they had done — including the families of the three who did not.

WHAT IS INVENTED

Everyone.

The ship, her owners, her cargo, her crew. The woman in Maine and the woman she delivers to. The thing that comes out of the dark at the end.

No vessel here is a real vessel. No incident is a real incident. No seafarer is one of the men actually held in that water — some are in

litigation, and all of them are entitled not to turn up in somebody's novel.

Nothing anyone sees at night in these pages has an explanation, and I have not supplied one.

No person in this book is a real person.

THE GAME, AND WHO IS NOT IN IT

It would be easier if this were a conspiracy. It is not one.

It is a game, in the plain sense: everybody is doing what makes sense for themselves, and nobody has to speak to anybody for the result to arrive.

Go round the table.

The producer sells the oil at the loading berth and is paid there. The delay costs him nothing. It quietly helps him, because oil stuck at anchor makes the oil he sells next month worth more.

The trader who owns the cargo is not waiting for a delivery. He is holding a thing that goes up in price. Every week it does not arrive, it is worth more, and the rent on the waiting ship is small beside that. His best move is to do nothing. Doing nothing is legal, and it is what he is paid for.

The underwriter has to be right about the danger or he is ruined by it. So he works out what that water is really like, and puts a number on it. Then he sells that number to the few hundred people who pay him for it, because it is a price and not a news bulletin.

The government says the flow is being maintained. No government has ever announced the opposite about anything. And under its own definitions the statement is true.

The shipowner loses money steadily and can do nothing about it. He is one ship in a queue. Nobody has ever needed his agreement for anything.

Now look for the person who would gain by correcting the number

on the radio.

There isn't one. Every seat either profits from the gap or is too weak to close it. That is all it takes. No meeting. No instruction. Not one dishonest person anywhere in it.

That is why this book has no villain. I went looking for the chair a villain would sit in, and there isn't one.

AND THE PERSON WHO IS NOT AT THE TABLE

Everyone above is working with information. They hold, they wait, they hedge, they reprice, they move.

The woman at the far end of the pipe does none of that, because she cannot.

She gets one thing: a price. It arrives with no explanation and leaves the same way. She cannot wait, because it is February. She cannot switch to something else, because there is nothing else. She cannot protect herself, because the credit that would have let her do that was withdrawn by people being sensible. There is nobody to appeal to and nowhere to appeal.

What she has instead is the choosing.

Not one person in that chain decides which households go cold. She does. At a kitchen table, at half past nine at night, with a pencil, alone, working off a number nobody has explained to her.

The less you are told, the more you have to decide. The people who know the most make commercial choices. The person who knows nothing makes the moral ones.

And she will never find out whether she got it right. That is not being kept from her. It simply does not exist — in the same way that the true count of the ships existed nowhere except a notebook, now sitting in a list of documents in a city she has never been to.

ONE FINDING

Nobody in this book does anything wrong.

The underwriter prices the danger honestly, because being wrong would ruin him. The official announces a figure he can defend. The trader holds a legal cargo in a rising market and is under no obligation to hurry. The captain keeps an accurate log. The woman in Maine decides, every week, which houses get filled.

Every one of them is competent, tired, and doing their job properly. And at the end of it men are dead and an old woman spent February in a cold house.

Wars produce announcements the way they produce smoke. They always have. The announcements cannot be checked while the war is running, which is the point of making them then.

The shape is what matters. **The number that reached the people paying for this was free, repeated every hour, and wrong. The number that was right cost money, went to a few hundred subscribers, and was called a premium.**

Nobody hid anything. One was priced and one was not, and only the priced one was accurate.

As I write, the strait is neither closed nor open. The announcements continue. The measured counts continue to disagree with them. Nobody has reconciled the two, and nothing suggests anybody intends to.

CHEW Z

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I. THE LANES

They raise the unit in the winter, and it takes a little over a thousand men.

They are recruited out of art schools and advertising studios and radio stations. Scene painters. Designers. Men who did window displays for department stores and men who cut gramophone records for a living and men who can sit at a key and send in another man's hand. Almost none of them has fired anything.

Their equipment arrives in crates and weighs nothing. Tanks that two men can carry and four men can inflate. Guns of the right silhouette that will not fire. Trucks that are frames and canvas. A set of speakers the size of a wardrobe, mounted on a half-track, that can be heard two and a half miles off on a still night, and a library of recordings made at a proving ground — bridging equipment, engines, the particular grind of a column moving at night — spliced together on wire so that a single half-track can be an armoured division arriving.

And the radio. That is the part the rest of the army never understands. A division leaving a position takes its radio traffic with it, and a position with no traffic is an empty position, so the traffic has to stay. Men sit in a truck for three weeks learning one operator's fist — the way he hesitates on a particular letter, the way he runs two words together when he is tired — until they can be him, and then the division goes, and he goes with it, and they stay behind and go on being him for as long as they are told to.

The hardest thing to teach is how badly to hide.

The instinct of every man given a camouflage net is to hide the thing completely, and a thing hidden completely is a thing nobody photographs. So they are taught to leave a corner of a tank showing. A track mark that runs to a hedge and stops. A tent line slightly too regular. Enough for a good observer to find, and to be pleased with himself for finding, and to report.

The work is not to be invisible. The work is to be seen, by the right people, in the right amount, and to be believed.

Everything about it is classified from the first day. The men are told that they may not describe what they do, to anyone, ever, including afterwards, including to each other outside the unit, and that this does not end when the war ends.

They agree to it without much thought, because everybody agrees to that sort of thing in a war, and because at the time nobody imagines that ever means what it turns out to mean.

1.

WAR RISK 0.9% · PUMP \$3.28

4 Esfand

There are two Straits of Hormuz and I have spent my working life going back and forth between them.

The first one is on the chart. It is an orderly place. There is a traffic separation scheme running through it. That means two marked lanes, one in and one out, with a buffer between them. The whole arrangement is about two miles wide. Both lanes are drawn in a fine purple line that somebody in a hydrographic office ruled very carefully. You join at one end and you leave at the other and you do not overtake and you do not cross. It is the most closely regulated water I have ever worked and there is nothing difficult about it at all.

The second one is out of the window.

It is a gap between hills. On the right as you go out there is a wall of bare rock coming down into the sea in a row of fjords, dry as a brick, and on the left there is my own country with its islands strung out in front of it. On a clear night you can see the lights of two countries at once and nobody on either shore is thinking about you.

The chart says the lanes are the sea. The window says the sea is a gap between two pieces of land belonging to people who have opinions about it.

Both of those are true at the same time, every day, and the only skill this job has ever required of me is the ability to hold both of them in my head without letting either one go.

I should say the thing about the lanes, because it surprises people who do not do this work and it has surprised every cadet I have ever had.

Both lanes run through Oman.

They do not run down the middle. They do not run through Iranian water. The scheme keeps the deep-draught traffic north of the Musandam peninsula. Musandam is Omani. So every laden tanker leaving this Gulf goes out through the waters of a country that has never had a quarrel with anybody.

I am Iranian. My father was Iranian and his mother is buried an hour inland from where I was born. The strait is named after a city that stood on our coast. And the road through it does not run through us, and never has, and I have made that passage several hundred times and it has never once been my water underneath me.

I say this to every third officer in their first week, and every one of them says some version of the same thing, which is *that is not fair*, and I tell every one of them the same thing back. The chart is not about fairness. The chart is about where the water is deep.

This week the ship's position has been jumping.

It began on the twenty-eighth and it has happened four times since, and it goes like this: the position on the screen leaves the sea, crosses the coastline, and settles about twelve miles inland, somewhere in the hills behind Bandar Abbas, at a place where there is no water and never has been. It sits there for a while. Then it comes back.

The first time, Behnam came and got me. He is nineteen days aboard and he thought the equipment was broken, and he was embarrassed to be asking, and he apologised twice before he told me.

I went up and looked at it and told him it was interference and that it has been happening in this Gulf for some years now and that there is nothing to be done about it.

"Do we report it?"

"To whom?"

He did not have an answer to that and neither do I. It is not a defect. Nothing is broken. Everyone out here knows it happens, the way everyone knows about the current at the eastern end, and it has become a condition of the place rather than an event in it.

What I told him — and I think this was the only useful thing I have said to him so far — is that a screen is a claim about where you are, and that a claim is not the same as a fact, and that the correction for it is very old and requires no equipment.

You look out of the window.

That is the whole of it. There is a hill; the hill is where it has been for four thousand years; if the hill is abeam and the screen says you are inside the hill, the screen is wrong. It takes four seconds. It has never once failed me.

I have been doing it so long I had stopped noticing that I do it.

2.

WAR RISK 0.9% · PUMP \$3.31

February 23

The route ran two hundred and some miles on a bad week and Dale Brissette had been driving it for nine years and her father for thirty before that.

Four hundred and six houses on the book. Not all of them every winter — some went to a neighbour's kid with a truck, some went to propane, some died and the house stood empty and the pipes went and that was that. She reckoned on four hundred live accounts and she could have named most of them without the book, along with which ones had a dog, which ones had a fill pipe you could not see under the snow after the second week of January, and which ones would come out to the truck to talk.

Mrs. Pelletier came out to the truck to talk.

She was eighty-one and she lived alone at the end of a road that the

town plough turned around in, in the house she had been brought to as a bride. She wore a cardigan indoors and had worn one indoors for as long as Dale had known her. Her thermostat was set at sixty-two and had been set at sixty-two since her husband died, and when Dale had once said something about it — carefully, as a joke — Mrs. Pelletier had said that sixty-two was a perfectly comfortable temperature and that people nowadays kept their houses like greenhouses.

She came down the steps to the truck holding the rail. There were three steps and she took them one at a time with both feet on each, and Dale had watched her do it twice a winter for nine years and had watched it get slower, and had never once offered her an arm, because you did not do that to Mrs. Pelletier.

Two hundred and eighty gallons. Dale ran the hose out and set it and they talked about the town budget and about a cousin in Madawaska, and when it clicked off Dale wound in and wrote the ticket and Mrs. Pelletier said, "Now, that's on the pre-buy," and Dale said yes it was.

The pre-buy needs explaining because most people outside the trade have never heard of it and it is the thing this whole story runs on at her end.

Home heating oil is bought in the winter and it costs whatever it costs in the winter, which nobody can know in advance. So a dealer offers a bargain every summer. You tell me in July how many gallons you expect to burn. You pay for them now, at July's price. Whatever happens between now and April, that is your price.

For the customer it is certainty. Mrs. Pelletier was not a gambler. She had lived through winters where the price ran away in February and she had no intention of sitting in her kitchen in the dark of the year wondering what a gallon was costing her that week. She bought the pre-buy every year, the same way she had her chimney swept every year, and she had done it so long that she

no longer thought of it as a decision.

For the dealer it is an obligation. Dale had four hundred thousand gallons of other people's winter sold at a fixed price before the summer was out, and she had to deliver every gallon of it whatever it cost her to buy. So she hedged. Not cleverly. She bought contracts through the terminal that moved when the market moved, enough to cover most of what she had sold. It is what her father did and what everybody in the trade does. It works perfectly well as long as nothing very large happens.

That February she was four cents underwater on the position.

Four cents a gallon across what she had sold is not a disaster. It is a bad month. It is the kind of number that puts a person at the kitchen table at ten at night with a pencil, and she had been at the kitchen table at ten at night with a pencil for about two weeks, and she had said nothing about it to anybody, including her sister, because there was nothing to say yet.

Four cents.

She has thought about that figure a great deal since.

3.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 6.5% · PUMP \$3.74

19 Esfand

The war reached this ship at nine minutes past two in the afternoon, in an email from a broker in London, and I want to record that I read it standing up with a cup of tea in my other hand because I assumed it was about the fuel bills.

Additional premium for the Arabian Gulf / Strait of Hormuz revised with immediate effect to 6.50% of insured value per transit. Rate subject to revision without notice. Owners to note requirement of 48 hours notice of entry. Cover cancellable by either party on 7 days notice.

That was the whole message. There was no covering sentence and

nobody had written *as you will be aware*. It did not need one. To the man who sent it, it was a rate change, and he had probably sent forty of them that afternoon.

Two days earlier the same line had been nine tenths of one per cent.

Behnam saw my face and asked what it was, and I gave him the message to read, and he read it and handed it back and said the thing that cadets say, which is: "What does that mean?"

So I explained it, and I am going to write the explanation down here because I have given it four times since and each time it has come out shorter and worse.

A ship carries two kinds of insurance on her hull. The ordinary one covers the sea — fire, collision, grounding, machinery, everything that the sea has been doing to ships since there were ships. It is not cheap but it is not dramatic, and it runs for the year, and you do not think about it.

The second one covers war. Not only war: mines, seizure, detention, hostile acts, the things that happen to a ship because of what men are doing to each other rather than because of what water does. And it is priced differently. It is priced by the passage, at a percentage of what the ship is worth, and the percentage is set by underwriters who reprice whenever they judge the danger has changed.

That percentage is called an additional premium. When the strait is quiet it is a fraction of one per cent and the office pays it the way you pay a small bill.

At six and a half per cent of the value of this ship, one two-hour passage through that gap costs more than the ship earns in a month.

"For two hours?"

"For two hours."

"Then we do not go."

I told him that was not our decision and that it had never been our decision, and that the charterer would decide, and the owner would decide, and that what we would receive was an instruction.

But he had put his finger on it, and I should have told him so. Nobody had closed the strait. Nobody had announced anything. A number in an office had gone from nine tenths of one to six and a half in an afternoon. The sea was exactly as wet as it had been on the Tuesday. And from that moment, whether this ship moved was not a question about the sea at all.

The rest of that week was the discharge port.

We sailed loaded for Sikka. On the Sunday it became Jamnagar. On the Tuesday it became Sikka again, and on the Thursday the office asked me for a distance and time to Fujairah, which is outside the strait entirely and would mean not going through at all, and on the Friday it was Sikka once more with an instruction to await further.

Four changes in six days. I remember being irritated by it, and I remember what I thought, which was: *these people do not know what they are doing.*

I have thought about that since. Every one of those changes was a cargo being sold to somebody else. Somebody knew exactly what he was doing on all four occasions, and he was quicker than I was, and none of it had anything to do with where the oil needed to go.

4.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 6.5% · PUMP \$4.02

March 12

Dennis at the terminal had known her father. That mattered and it was also the reason it took him three days to tell her, and both of those things are the same fact.

She had gone down for the Wednesday load and he came out of the

office before she was hooked up, which he never did, and stood there with his hands in his coat while she finished, and then said could she come in a minute.

The terms were changing. Effective Monday she would be on cash. Load and pay, same day, no seven days, no thirty. Nothing to do with her, nothing to do with what she owed, which was nothing and which he said twice. It was coming down from above him and it was going out to everybody on the same sheet.

"What happened?"

And Dennis, who is not a philosopher and was standing there in a coat wanting the conversation to be over, said the truest thing anybody said to her that year.

"Nothing happened. The number moved."

What it meant was this.

A fuel dealer does not own the fuel she sells. She buys a load, delivers it over a few days, collects from the customers, and pays the terminal out of what comes in. The gap between paying for the load and being paid for the load is the whole of the business, and it is covered by a line of credit at the bank, secured against the fuel in the truck and the money owed by the customers.

On cash terms that gap closes. She had to have the full price of a load in the account on the morning she took it, before a single gallon went into a single tank.

She called the bank on the Thursday. The man there was pleasant and knew her and was sorry. They were reviewing exposures across the sector. Fuel inventory was being looked at differently than it had been. Her line would not be increased, and it might be reviewed. He used the word *volatility* four times. He did not at any point say that she had done anything wrong, because she had not.

So that was two doors closing in one week, neither of them because of anything she had done, both of them polite, both of them in a

voice that suggested the person speaking was also being told what to do by somebody further up who was not in the room.

She sat in the truck outside the bank for a while afterwards.

She drove north that afternoon with the radio on.

They were on the Gulf at the top of the hour. There had been strikes and there had been a response and there were ships of several navies in the area. Shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, the man said, was continuing, with approximately thirty transits a night being maintained under escort.

Thirty a night.

She did not know what the number had been before. She had no idea whether thirty was a lot. What she heard in it was the word *maintained*, and the word *escort*, and the general shape of a thing that was under control and being handled by serious people with equipment, and she felt the small physical loosening in the chest that you feel when someone competent takes over.

It is going to be all right, she thought. It is bad but it is being managed, and it will come back down.

And she turned off at the Caswell road and did the afternoon's houses, and Mrs. Pelletier was not on that day's list, and the number stayed on the radio every hour, and she believed it, because it was the only thing anybody ever told her.

5.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 6.7% · PUMP \$4.09

22 Esfand

We tried to go through on the twenty-second and we did not go through, and it took me most of a day afterwards to be able to say clearly why not.

To make that passage now, a ship needs two permissions.

The first comes from our side. Vessels are to be pre-approved and

are to use designated channels, and approval is applied for by the agent, in advance, with the ship's particulars and her intended movement. This is stated publicly and it is stated as a matter of control: that water is administered from the shore, and passage through it is a thing that is granted.

The second comes from the navy that is out there. Transits are escorted. A ship joins an assembly at a stated position at a stated time. She checks in on a working channel. She goes through in company with a warship. This too is stated publicly, and it too is stated as control: the traffic is being kept moving, and it is being kept moving by them.

Both statements are made in the open, in the same week, about the same two miles of water.

They are not compatible. They cannot both be the whole truth about who decides whether my ship moves. And neither authority will discuss the other, or acknowledge in writing that the other is involved, or tell me what to do if their instructions conflict — because to answer that question is to admit that there is somebody else to conflict with.

So it falls to me. The master. One man on a bridge with two pieces of paper that do not know about each other, for a passage of two hours.

The agent had the clearance by the Saturday. The office had the escort slot by the Sunday, for a window beginning at 0400 on the twenty-second.

The clearance was for a window that closed at 0300.

I raised it with the agent, who was apologetic and said he would ask. I raised it with the office, who were brisk and said the slot was the slot. Between the two of them there is no telephone, no liaison officer, no shared form, no person whose job it is. There is an agent in Bandar Abbas and a broker in London and a master in between,

and the two windows were an hour apart, and nobody at either end regarded that as their problem, because from each end the arrangement is perfectly orderly.

I took her up anyway. I will be honest about why: because we had a cargo, because the office wanted the ship moving, and because I had a superstition that if we were physically there at the assembly something would be worked out. Thirty-one years and I still had that in me.

We got under way at 0215. At 0340 we were at the assembly position with four others and I made the check-in call and gave the six answers.

At 0352 we were instructed to hold. At 0431 the escort went through with three of the five and we were not one of the three. At 0450 I was told, politely and by a young voice, that our clearance was not current and that we should stand off and re-apply.

I asked which clearance.

There was a pause of about four seconds, which I have thought about since, because I do not believe the young man had been told there were two.

"Your clearance, Captain."

We came back and we anchored and the chief shut the engine down at 0640 and that was the first day of it, although of course I did not know it was the first day of anything. I wrote the movement up in the deck log — under way, assembly, instructed to hold, returned to anchorage — and it took four lines.

Behnam wanted to know whose fault it was.

That is the question everybody asks and I did not have an answer for him then and I have a worse one now, which is that nobody refused us. Nothing was denied. Two organisations each did exactly what they had published they would do. The two things they published cannot both be satisfied by one ship on one night. And

there is no office anywhere in the world whose job it is to notice that.

I wrote it down.

6.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 6.7% · PUMP \$4.14

March 16

The letter came on a Monday and it was two paragraphs long and it did not have a person's name on it anywhere except the printed one at the bottom.

Following a review of sector exposures, the advance rate applied to fuel inventory was being revised. Her facility would be adjusted accordingly with effect from the end of the month. They valued her business and looked forward to continuing to support it.

What that meant in money was that her line went from a hundred and forty thousand to about seventy-five.

The thing a bank lends a fuel dealer against is the fuel.

Not the truck, not the house, not the nine years of turning up. The fuel in the tank and the money the customers owe. Those are the two things on the schedule, and against them the bank will advance a percentage, and the percentage is the whole business. At eighty cents on the dollar of inventory she could carry three loads and a month of receivables and sleep. At forty she could carry one load and could not.

Nothing about her had changed. The tank was the same tank. The customers were the same customers, in the same houses, and every one of them had paid her, because they always did — you do not stiff the person who brings the oil.

What had changed was that the price of what was in the tank had begun to move by more in a week than her margin on it in a year, and that made it an unreliable thing to lend against. A lender does

not ask whether the borrower is honest. A lender asks what he can sell the collateral for on a bad Tuesday, and the answer had stopped being knowable.

So fuel stopped being collateral. It was still fuel. It was still worth more than it had ever been worth, which was the joke and she got it. It simply could no longer be counted on, and a thing that cannot be counted on is not security, whatever it is worth.

She read the letter twice and then she got up and did the dishes, because she had found by then that she could not sit still with a piece of paper in the house.

Her father had run this business through the bad winters and had never once been on cash terms and had never once had a facility reviewed. She thought about that for a while and then made herself stop, because it was not a useful thought and because it was not true in the way she was using it — he had had his own troubles and she had been nine and had not been told about them.

She stood at the sink and worked out what she could actually do.

She could not buy forward. That took money she no longer had access to.

She could not raise her price to the pre-buy customers. That is what a pre-buy is; the price was the promise and there were two hundred and some of them holding it.

She could not stop delivering. People would be cold.

What she could do was buy smaller loads more often. That cost more per gallon and more in driving. She could stretch the deliveries, which meant partial fills. And partial fills meant that somewhere in the next few weeks there would be a week when what was in the truck was less than what the list asked for.

She did the arithmetic twice and got the same answer both times and then dried her hands.

She did not call anybody. There was nobody the call went to. The

bank had done a correct and ordinary thing, the terminal had done a correct and ordinary thing, and the only person in the chain whose situation had become impossible was the one at the end of it who had to knock on the doors.

7.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 6.9% · PUMP \$4.16

26 Esfand

On the fourth day at anchor Behnam lost his temper, which I had been waiting for.

We were on the starboard bridge wing after dark. You could see the whole anchorage from there — sixty, seventy ships lying at their cables with their deck lights on, all of them full, all of them waiting, and beyond them the black gap in the hills where the strait is.

"We are Iranian," he said. "You are Iranian. That is our water. And we are sitting here holding a piece of paper from Tehran and a piece of paper from a navy that says Tehran does not decide, and we still cannot go through."

"Yes."

"It is *ours*."

I let it sit for a bit. Then I asked him whether he knew why the strait has that name.

It is named after a city, and the city is not there any more.

The first Hormuz was not on the island at all. It stood on the mainland, near Minab, which is an hour and a half from where I was born and where my mother's family are still buried. If you drive out that way now you will find date palms and a river and some ruins nobody has properly dug up.

About a thousand years ago a family came across from Oman and settled there and worked out the only thing anybody has ever needed to work out about this place: **everything has to come**

past. There is no other door out of this Gulf. So they built a town at the door and charged for the door.

That is the beginning of the business, and it has never once stopped.

They did well out of it. There is an old saying about the place from those centuries, and it has survived because it is true: *if all the world were a golden ring, Hormuz would be the jewel in it.*

Then, seven hundred years ago, the mainland became dangerous — armies moving about the way armies do — and the whole town picked itself up and went out to an island a few miles offshore, and the island took the name with it. That island is still out there. You can see it from Bandar Abbas on a clear day. There is nothing on it now but red soil and a Portuguese fort.

"Portuguese," Behnam said.

"I was coming to that."

The Portuguese arrived about five hundred years ago, with cannon on ships, which nobody in this sea had seen used that way before. They took the island and they kept it for a hundred and fifteen years.

And what they did while they held it is the part I want you to understand, because you will recognise it.

They did not close the sea. They sold a piece of paper.

It was called a *cartaz*, and it was a licence. Any merchant ship trading in these waters had to buy one. It was not expensive — that was the clever part. It was cheap, and it was sold to you as protection, against pirates and against the other powers, which is exactly what you would be told today.

If you had it, you sailed.

If you did not have it, you did not sail — and if you sailed anyway, they took your cargo, or they sank you.

They ran that arrangement for about two hundred and fifty years across this whole ocean. And as they got weaker, and could actually protect nobody from anything, the licence did not go away. It became the point. By the end they were not a navy selling protection. They were a bureau selling permission, and the permission still worked, because everybody had agreed that it did.

"So how did it end?" Behnam said.

"It ended four hundred years ago. Our shah came down here and took it back."

He looked pleased for about four seconds, which is how long it took him to remember he was talking to me.

The shah could not do it alone. He had an army and no fleet, and you cannot take an island with an army. So he made an arrangement with an English trading company, which had ships, and between them they put a siege on the fortress that ran from February to late April. The garrison mutinied. The fort surrendered the following day. The Portuguese went off to Muscat and tried three more times over the next few years and never got it back.

And that is where people usually stop telling it, because it is the good ending. Foreign power expelled. Island returned. Our water again.

Here are the terms.

In exchange for the ships, the English company received **a share of the customs dues** at Hormuz, and the spoils, and a way into the silk trade. And the shah paid half the cost of victualling their fleet.

Do you see it?

Nobody abolished the toll. The toll was the whole reason to go. What changed was **who stood at the door and collected it**, and the new arrangement had a foreign company standing there too, holding a percentage, by written agreement, as its fee for the loan

of the guns.

And the customs house was moved off the island to a fishing village on the mainland, and the village was renamed after the shah who did the deal.

That village is Bandar Abbas. It is where I was born. My father worked there. The city I come from exists because of the day we took the door back and immediately gave away part of what came through it.

Behnam did not say anything for a while.

I told him the rest quickly, because the rest is just the same shape at different speeds. The Dutch and the English spent the next hundred and fifty years elbowing each other over the same water. Then the British ran this Gulf for well over a century through treaties they signed with every small ruler on the far shore, with Persia mostly not in the room for conversations about the sea it sat on. Then they left, about seventy-five years ago, and we moved onto the three islands within days, and everybody has been arguing about that ever since.

"So when was it ours?" he said. "Actually ours. Just ours."

I have thought about that question more since than I did at the time.

The honest answer is that in a thousand years there has never been a period of any length when the traffic through that gap was not somebody's income, and when the somebody was not at least partly a stranger. An Arab family from Oman. A Portuguese crown. An English company. A British empire. And now a committee of men in London who have never been here, who publish a list of the waters they consider dangerous, and whose piece of paper I cannot sail without.

It is the same piece of paper. It has been the same piece of paper for five hundred years. They have only changed what it is called

and where you post the money.

"Then nothing has changed at all," Behnam said.

"One thing has." I nodded down the deck, at the ship, at the dark.

"It used to cost you your cargo. Now it costs you your time."

He thought that was better. He was twenty-two.

I wrote it down.

8.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 6.9% · PUMP \$4.31

March 20

The load that came out of the terminal on the Thursday was forty-two hundred gallons, and the list for Thursday and Friday wanted a little over five thousand.

She had known that on the Wednesday night. She had done the list at the table and got to the bottom of it and found she was eight hundred gallons short, and she had gone back to the top and done it again in case she had added it wrong, and she had not.

Eight hundred gallons is three houses in March.

She is going to be asked about this, later, by her sister, in the summer, in an argument that is not really about this. And what she will say is that there was no system. That is not what her sister wants to hear and it is true.

Here is what she actually did, at the kitchen table, at half past nine at night.

She went down the list and took off anybody with a second heat. There were four houses with wood stoves that she knew were used and not ornamental, and one with a pellet stove, and one with a heat pump that was no use below zero but was some use above it. That got her most of the way.

Then she looked at what was left and thought about age, and about

stairs, and about who lived alone, and about which houses had somebody nearby — a son on the same road, a daughter in Presque Isle — and about which did not.

And then she thought about who would call her.

She is not proud of that one and she put it in when she told her sister, which is to her credit. There were people on that list who would telephone at eight in the morning and ask where their oil was, and people who would not telephone at all, and she knew exactly which were which, and the knowledge sat there in front of her while she was choosing, and she cannot now say that it did not weigh anything.

She took off the Levasseurs on the Van Buren road, because they had a good wood stove and four cords cut and Rick's brother two miles away.

That was the whole of it. One name, a pencil line through it, and the list came out to forty-two hundred.

She did not call them.

She has been asked about that too. The answer she gives is that there was nothing to say, and that is the true answer and it is not the whole one. If she had called, she would have had to tell them why, and the why was not *the terminal put me on cash* or *the bank halved my line* — the why, if you followed it all the way down, was a war seven thousand miles away that she could not have explained to Rick Levasseur on the telephone at seven in the morning because she could not explain it to herself.

So she did not call, and she drove past the end of their road on the Thursday with four thousand two hundred gallons behind her, and the mailbox went by on the right, and she did the Caswell road instead.

They were fine. They burned wood for nine days and Rick said afterwards that they had not even noticed, which she does not

believe and has never said so.

It was the first house. There is nothing else to say about it except that it was the first, and that she remembers the pencil going through the name, and that by the end of the summer she was doing forty names a week and it took her twenty minutes and she had stopped being able to remember individual ones.

That is the part she talks about now, when she talks about it. Not the cold. Not the money.

That she got good at it.

II. THE ANCHORAGE

The sound trucks go out at dusk and they set up two miles short of where the army is supposed to be.

Each speaker weighs a quarter of a ton and sits on a half-track, and on a still night what comes out of it can be heard for two and a half miles, which has been measured carefully, because a deception that is too loud is as useless as one that is too quiet. Everything is measured. There is a man whose job is the weather, because sound carries differently over wet ground, and there is a man whose job is the order of the programme.

The programme is on wire spools, recorded at a proving ground by engineers who spent months learning what equipment sounds like from a distance. Bridging pontoons coming off a lorry. Tank engines at idle. Tracks on a metalled road, and then the same tracks on mud. Men shouting the things men shout when they are moving in the dark and are tired.

It is mixed, spool to spool, the way a record is mixed, so that an officer listening from a hillside four thousand yards away hears an armoured division arriving over the course of an hour and a half and never hears a repeat.

It has to be built for a listener who is good at his job. A bad deception is one that fools a fool.

And in a truck behind the line there is a man sitting at a key.

He has spent three weeks with a wire recording of another operator's transmissions. Not the messages — the messages are nothing, the messages are weather and rations and returns. What he has been learning is the hand. Every operator has one. The particular length of his dashes. The half-beat he leaves before a difficult letter. The way, at the end of a long shift, he runs two words together.

The operator he has been studying is a real man in a real division, and the division is going to move tomorrow night, fifty miles, in silence.

If the traffic stops when the division leaves, the position is empty and everybody on the other side knows it within a day.

So the division goes, and its radio stays, and this man sits in the truck and is him. He sends the weather. He sends the rations and the returns. He makes the same half-beat pause before the same letter, because he has practised it, and when he is tired he runs the two words together, because that is what the other man does when he is tired and it would look wrong if he did not.

He does this for nine days.

Somewhere fifty miles away the real operator sits in a new position with his key unplugged, and is not allowed to send, and has been told only that he is not allowed to send.

Neither of them is ever told how it went.

9.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 7.8% · PUMP \$4.63

11 Farvardin

A ship at anchor is not a ship at rest. She is a ship doing all the same work for no reason.

The engine is on notice. The generators run. Someone is on watch on the bridge at every hour of the day and night, because a ship at her cable can drag, and because there are a hundred others around her doing the same thing, and the space between them is smaller than it looks.

Nothing is going anywhere. Everything must still be ready to go at four hours' notice.

The heat came in Farvardin and after that it did not leave.

It is not the temperature. The temperature is bearable and we are all used to it. It is the water in the air. By the middle of the morning the steel is wet. Not damp — wet, running, so that a handprint stays on a bulkhead for a minute after you take your hand away. Paper goes soft. Bread goes over in a day. The men who work on deck work in it and come in with their overalls black to the waist and hang them up and they are not dry in the morning.

Below, the air conditioning does what it can. It takes the water out of the air in the accommodation and puts it in a tray, and the tray fills in about four hours, and one of the cadets empties it, and that is the most reliable event of the day.

You stop wanting to eat. Everyone does. The cook makes rice and the rice comes back, and then he makes the same rice with a fried egg on it and it goes, and nobody can explain why.

The launch comes twice a week, weather permitting.

It brings fresh water, which we make ourselves but not enough of. It brings stores. It brings mail, which is mostly paperwork for me

and small parcels for the crew, and which is the only thing that happens on this ship that people come up on deck to watch.

It will not take a person off. I have written about that already.

The launch is our whole connection to a shore we can see. It comes from a jetty about five miles away. The men who run it are young and bored and shout up at our deck in three languages and leave in under twenty minutes, and for those twenty minutes this ship is a different place, and then it is not.

I want to describe the sleep, because I think it explains more about that year than the paperwork does.

At sea a master sleeps in pieces. You are called for anything — traffic, a change of weather, a light you were not expecting — and you learn, over thirty years, to go down hard for two hours and come up completely awake. That is a skill and I was proud of it.

At anchor there is nothing to be called for, and the skill does not switch off.

So I would go down at ten and be awake at midnight. Down again at one, awake at three. Down at four, awake at six, and up. Every night, for months, my body preparing for events that were not coming, because it had spent thirty years learning that they would.

I was never tired in the way a man is tired after work. I was tired the way a room is tired when the radio has been left on in it.

Behnam did the only sensible thing anybody aboard did that spring, which was that he made a routine and kept to it.

Breakfast. Deck work until the heat. Two hours of study. Sleep in the afternoon. An hour of some game on his telephone. Supper. The bridge wing after dark, every night, with or without me.

I asked him once why he was so strict about it.

He said that if he did not decide what the day was, the day would be nothing, and that a person cannot have four hundred days of

nothing.

He was twenty-two. I had been doing this since before he was born. I wrote it down.

10.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 7.8% · PUMP \$4.71

April 9

The first half load came out of the terminal on the ninth of April and it changed what the job was.

Up to then the job had been driving. You got a load, you went round, you came back, you got another. The list was the order you did the houses in. That was all a list was.

A half load makes the list into something else.

If the truck holds what the houses need, the list is a route. If the truck holds less than the houses need, the list is a decision about people, made in advance, by one person, at a table.

Nobody told her that. There is no training for it. She worked it out on a Wednesday night with a pencil, the way she worked out everything that year.

She built rules, because rules are what you build when you do not want to be the one choosing.

Anybody under a quarter tank gets filled first. Anybody with a baby in the house gets filled. Anybody over seventy-five gets filled. Anybody with a wood stove they actually use can wait a week. Anybody who has family on the road can wait a week.

The rules worked for about three weeks. Then the loads got smaller again and she found that the rules now cut across each other — a woman of eighty with a wood stove, a young family with a full tank and no money — and there is no rule for that, and she had to decide, and she decided.

After that she stopped pretending it was rules.

What she actually did, most weeks, was partials.

Instead of two hundred and eighty gallons to one house, a hundred and fifty each to two. Nobody goes cold. Nobody gets enough. Everybody comes back onto the list sooner, so the list gets longer, so the next week is worse.

She understood by the end of April that partials were not a solution. They were a way of moving the problem forward one week at a time, and every week she moved it forward it got bigger.

She did it anyway, for five months, because the alternative was to tell somebody they were getting nothing.

There is a thing she has never said out loud and she will say it here.

She got better at it.

The first week it took her two hours and she did not sleep. By June it was forty minutes. By August it was twenty, and she could do it with the radio on, and she noticed one night in September that she had done the whole list without once picturing a face.

That frightened her more than the money did. She has thought about it since and she thinks she understands it now. It is not that she stopped caring. It is that a person cannot hold four hundred houses in their head at once and still be able to put a pencil line through one of them, so something in her had quietly arranged for the houses to stop being houses while she was working.

It came back afterwards. It always came back. She would be halfway down the Caswell road the next morning and it would arrive all at once.

11.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 8.1% · PUMP \$5.02

3 Ordibehesht

On the sixteenth day at anchor the cargo was sold for the third time, and a new envelope came out on the launch with the fresh water and the mail.

Behnam brought it up to me. He had been doing the filing for a month by then, because a cadet who is not being taught navigation must be taught paperwork, and there was no navigation to teach. He had it open and he was frowning at it in the way he frowned at everything that month.

"Captain. Is this right?"

He put his finger on the declared value of the cargo.

I am going to explain what he was looking at, because it took me a long time to understand it properly myself, and because nothing else in this account matters as much.

The oil in my tanks was not mine and was not the owner's. It belonged to whoever had last bought it, and that had now been three people, none of whom I had met, none of whom had ever seen the ship. Each time it changed hands the new owner insured it, and to insure a cargo you must agree what it is worth.

That is the first thing to understand, and it is stranger than it sounds. **Cargo is insured at an agreed value.** You and the underwriter write a number on the policy at the start, and if the cargo is lost, that is the number that is paid. Not what it turns out to be worth on the day. Not what anybody could sell it for afterwards. The number you agreed, months before, in an office.

So a price gets fixed in advance, and then everybody stops thinking about it.

"Where does the number come from?" Behnam asked.

"The market price. Plus freight, plus the insurance itself, and then a

margin on top."

"And where does the market price come from?"

And that is the question. He did not know he had asked it. He was twenty-two and tidying a file.

The market price of oil is not a measurement of how much oil exists. It is a measurement of what people *believe* about how much oil exists. And that month, what people believed came from one place, which was the announcement, which said that thirty ships a night were coming through this strait.

I was sitting four miles from the strait. I had been watching it for sixteen days.

So the number on the paper in Behnam's hand was the price of a working doorway. It was calculated, correctly, by careful people, off a world where the oil was flowing. The value of my cargo had been fixed by a description of a place I could see out of the window.

Now the other half, and this is where it becomes something I still think about.

In the same envelope was a second number. The war-risk premium. Eight point one per cent of the value of the ship, for the passage, for that week.

"Who decides that one?" Behnam said.

"Underwriters. In London, mostly."

"Off what?"

"Off the water."

He looked up.

I told him what an underwriter actually is, because people think it is a clerk and it is not. An underwriter is a person whose entire living depends on being correct about how dangerous something is. If he says a passage is safer than it is, he sells cover too cheaply,

and when the ships start burning he pays out more than he took in and he is finished. If he says it is more dangerous than it is, somebody down the corridor quotes lower and takes all his business.

He cannot afford to believe an announcement. He cannot afford to be reassured. He has to look at the water and say what is actually there, in a number, to two decimal places, every week.

So there were two numbers in that envelope, written by two sets of serious professionals, and they described two different oceans.

The value said: the strait is open, the oil is moving, this cargo is worth what a cargo is worth in an ordinary difficult year.

The premium said: **this is one of the most dangerous stretches of water on the surface of the earth and getting worse.**

Both correct. Both honest. Neither one wrong.

"They don't agree," Behnam said slowly.

"No."

"Then somebody is lying."

"Nobody is lying. They are answering different questions." I put my finger on the value. "This one is answering: what does the world think is happening." I moved it to the premium. "This one is answering: what is happening."

I want to set out plainly who wanted what, because for a long time I assumed somebody was arranging it, and nobody was.

The government announcing thirty wanted to look as though it held the door. No administration in history has said *we have lost control of the most important stretch of water on earth*. You say the flow is being maintained, you count generously, and you are not lying, exactly, because you have chosen definitions under which it is true.

The man who owned my cargo wanted the price to go up, and it

was going up, and he was in no hurry at all. Every week the oil stayed in my tanks it was worth more. He did not need anybody to conspire with him. He needed only for the world to believe things were better than they were, so that the price climbed gently instead of all at once, and he could stay in a while longer.

The underwriter wanted to be right. That is the whole of his interest. It is not a virtue — he is protecting his own money. But it means that in the entire chain, from the wellhead to a petrol station in Ohio, **the only party with a direct financial reason to state the true condition of this strait was the man selling insurance against it.**

My owner, in Piraeus, was paying for the real war and being paid for the announced one, and was being quietly crushed between the two, and was not important enough for anybody to notice.

And my crew. Twenty-three men. Filipino, Indian, Ukrainian, Iranian. Not one of them held a position in anything. They could not profit from the truth and they could not profit from the lie. They were simply the part of the arrangement that had to be fed and kept alive, and they were in the only place where both numbers applied at once.

Behnam thought about it for a while. Then he said the thing that I have never got out of my head.

"So the true number does exist."

"Yes."

"Somebody writes it down every week."

"Yes. And he is right, and he is more right than anything you will hear on a radio."

"Then why doesn't anybody know it?"

"Because it is not news," I said. "It is a price. He sends it to shipowners and to nobody else, because that is who pays him for

it."

The most accurate statement anybody made about that strait, in all those months, was made every Wednesday by a man who had never seen it, to a few hundred people who were buying something, and it was commercially confidential, and it was filed, and it was true.

I signed the paper. Behnam put it in the folder. We went back on deck, and the lights of the ships that were allowed through went by in the dark, and I counted them, because by then I had started counting them.

12.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 8.2% · PUMP \$5.09

May 6

The thermostat was at fifty-eight when Dale came in with the ticket, and Mrs. Pelletier saw her see it.

"It's May," she said.

It was May. It had been thirty-one degrees on the Tuesday night and there had been ice in the bird bath on the Wednesday morning, and May in Aroostook County is not a month in which you stop heating a house, and both of them knew it, and Mrs. Pelletier said it was May in the tone of a woman closing a subject.

"I'm perfectly comfortable," she said. "I've a cardigan and I've the quilt in the evening. My mother heated one room in the whole house and there were six of us."

Dale said something about the weather turning.

What she did not say was that she had knocked, waited, knocked again, and had been about nine seconds from letting herself in, and that in those nine seconds she had thought about the three steps and the rail, and that the thought had been specific.

What she also did not say was that the two hundred gallons on the ticket were two hundred and not two hundred and eighty because

of a decision Dale had made at her kitchen table at half past nine the previous night, and that the difference was not a supply problem or a delivery problem but a choice with Mrs. Pelletier's name in it.

She had been going to say it. She had rehearsed a version in the truck, something about how she was stretching loads and everyone was on partials and it was nothing to worry about.

She did not say it, in the end, for a reason she has never been able to defend, which is that Mrs. Pelletier would have asked whether other people were getting full loads, and Dale would have had to answer.

The thing that had begun to frighten her that spring was not the price. It was that she had stopped being the only one doing this.

The school district went first. Three bus routes cancelled in the first week of May — the long ones, the ones that ran out to the north and picked up nine or ten kids between them over forty miles. The letter that went to the families said *route consolidation* and *transportation budget pressures*, and it was true, and the actual sentence underneath it was that diesel had gone from what it had been to what it now was and the line in the budget was the line in the budget.

Some of those kids got a ride. Some of them had a parent working. There was a woman on the Caswell road who took four of them in her car and would not take money for it.

Then the plough contractor. He had the town's roads and three private contracts and he had run that outfit for twenty years, and in the middle of May he parked two of his four trucks and let a man go, because he had priced the winter's work the previous summer at the previous summer's fuel and he could not get out of it.

He had done exactly what Mrs. Pelletier had done. He had bought his winter at a fixed price to be safe, and the thing he had been

protecting himself against had happened on the other side of the trade from where he expected it, and being careful had turned out to be the mechanism.

Dale heard about the trucks at the counter in the store and stood there holding a carton of milk.

She went out to the truck and sat.

She had spent three months believing that this was her problem — her terminal, her bank, her list, her four hundred houses, her kitchen table. It had not once occurred to her that every other person in the county with a tank and a contract was sitting at their own table doing their own version of the same arithmetic on the same evening.

Nobody had told her. There was no reason anybody would. The school district does not telephone the fuel dealer. The plough contractor does not telephone anybody.

Each of them had been given the same single piece of information — a number, arriving without explanation — and each of them had done a careful, reasonable, private thing about it, and the careful private things were adding up into something that had a shape, and there was nobody anywhere whose job it was to look at the shape.

That was in May. In August three of those kids' families moved out of the county, which had nothing to do with the buses and had something to do with the buses.

13.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 8.4% · PUMP \$5.18

19 Ordibehesht

Eleazar Domingo stopped coming out of his cabin in the third week of Ordibehesht.

He is an able seaman, thirty-four, eight years with this owner and two contracts with me. A quiet man, good hands, plays cards badly

and takes it well. He had been on deck every day of the anchorage doing the work there is to do on a ship that is not going anywhere, which is chipping and painting and greasing the same things twice.

Then he did not come out for a watch, and the bosun went down, and he said he was not well. The next day the same. On the third day I went down myself.

He was sitting on the edge of his bunk fully dressed with his boots on. The cabin was clean. He stood up when I came in. He answered everything I asked him, correctly and politely, and he said he was not ill and that he was sorry and that he would come up tomorrow.

He did not come up tomorrow.

There is a procedure for a sick man on a ship and it does not work here.

If a man is ill, you land him. You go into a port, or you take him off by launch to a port, and the agent has an ambulance and a doctor and the man is somebody else's responsibility by the afternoon.

To land a man from this anchorage, this ship must enter a port. To enter a port, this ship must move. To move, this ship needs both permissions and a rate and an instruction from an owner who is not going to spend six figures of war premium on a passage that discharges nothing.

So there is a launch that brings water and mail, and it will not take a person, and there is a hospital I can see the lights of on a clear night, and between the two of them there is no route.

I spoke to the office. The office spoke to the correspondent. The correspondent asked, reasonably, whether the man was in danger, and I said no. He asked whether it was a medical emergency, and I said I did not think so. He asked what the diagnosis was, and I said that I am a master and not a doctor and that there was no diagnosis.

He said that without one there was nothing he could do, and he was

right, and he was kind about it, and that was the end of the conversation.

Which left the log.

Every day a man does not work, something goes in the deck log. That is not optional. It is the ship's record and it is read afterwards by people I will never meet.

Sick is a claim I am not qualified to make and cannot support.

Refused duty is a different word altogether. It follows a man. It goes in his discharge book and into his file with the manning agent and it is there in eight years when somebody is deciding between him and another able seaman who has nothing in his file, and he will never know that is why.

Unfit for duty is what I wrote. Every day, for the whole of it, without a cause, which is a thing a log will take and which I knew at the time was a small act of dishonesty in his favour.

I have thought about that more since than it deserves, given what came later. But it was the first time that year I understood that a record is not a neutral object. Somebody decides what goes in it. The decision is made by whoever is holding the pen, usually quickly, usually tired, and after that the thing is simply true, because it is written and nothing else is.

I have not written down what I actually thought, and I am going to, once, here, where it is mine.

My mother's people are from Minab, inland from Bandar Abbas, and when I was a boy I was taken to a thing in a courtyard that I was not supposed to be at. There were drums, and there was a man conducting it who is called the *bābā zār* [BAA-baa ZAAR], and there was a woman on the floor in the middle who was not herself.

What they say down there is that there are winds. They have said it along that whole coast for as long as anyone can account for. They

learned it from sailors. The words they use in it are not all Persian — there is Arabic in it, and Swahili, and things from the Indian ports. *Zār* [ZAAR]. They come off the sea and they get into a person, and once one is in, the person is not ill and is not mad, and you do not argue with it and you do not drive it out. You find out what it wants. You play for it until it is willing to be in there quietly, and then the person lives the rest of their life with it, and everybody in the village knows which wind it is.

I do not believe any of this.

I want that on the page plainly, because of where the rest of this account goes: I am a licensed master, I hold the certificates, I have never in my life made a decision on a ship on any basis but the instruments and the window.

But I sat in that cabin with a man who was not ill and was not mad and who stood up politely and said he was sorry, and what I thought, before I could stop it, was that something had got into him out here.

I did not say it to him. I did not say it to Behnam. I certainly did not put it in the log.

I wrote *unfit for duty* and the date, and I closed the book, and I went up.

14.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 8.6% · PUMP \$5.24

28 Ordibehesht

The cargo was sold again on the twenty-fourth. That made five owners since we loaded.

Behnam had stopped asking about it by then. It arrives as a one-line message, the name on the paperwork changes, nothing on this ship moves, and a man I will never meet has made or lost money.

What came with it this time was a letter from Piraeus, and it was

the first letter I had ever had from that office that was not an instruction.

I should explain demurrage before I explain the letter. It is a simple thing with an ugly name.

When you charter a ship, you are allowed a set number of days to load her and unload her. Keep her longer than that and you pay the owner rent for every extra day.

That rent is demurrage. That is all it is.

It is agreed in advance, and it is not small. It is also not nearly enough.

Because while the ship sits, the owner is still paying. War premium on any attempted passage. Fuel for the generators. Wages and food for twenty-three men. Insurance, stores, class, the launch. And he is not earning the thing an owner actually earns from, which is the next voyage, because his ship is not available to do one.

So demurrage covers part of what waiting costs him and none of what waiting costs him in the voyages he cannot take. On paper he is being compensated. In the bank he is going backwards.

The letter said, in about four hundred words and in the English of a man who learned it at sea, that the company had three ships and now had two working, that the charterer was disputing the demurrage on the grounds that the delay was not theirs, that the claim would be pursued and would take time, and that he wished the crew to know that wages would be paid on the day they had always been paid.

Then it said that he was sorry.

I have had letters from owners for thirty years. Nobody apologises. There is nothing to apologise for — a delay in a strait is not the owner's doing, and saying sorry in writing is the kind of thing a lawyer tells you not to do.

He said it anyway, to a master he has met twice.

Here is his position, as plainly as I can put it, because I have thought about him more than he would believe.

He pays for the war that is actually out here. The premium he is quoted is set by people who look at this water and price what they see. That number is honest and it is enormous.

He is paid for the war that is announced. The rates he can charge, the value of his ship, what the charterer thinks is reasonable, the patience of his bank — all of that sits on the public picture, which says the strait is working and thirty ships a night are getting through.

One side of his books is priced off the sea. The other is priced off the radio. And the gap between them comes out of him.

He is not a large company. He is not on anybody's list. There is no meeting in any capital at which his situation is raised, and if his three ships became none, the announced figure would not change by one, and the price of oil would not move, and nobody in this arrangement would have done anything wrong.

I put the letter in the drawer with the others. Then I took it out again in Mordad and read it a second time, and it read differently by then.

III. THE COUNT

The last operation is the biggest and it is done at a river.

An army has to cross. The crossing will take days and it cannot be hidden, so the work is not to hide it. The work is to make the other side certain it is happening somewhere else.

The unit is given a stretch of bank thirty miles from the real one.

They put a thousand men into it and make them look like tens of thousands. Rubber tanks under nets, badly. Track marks running down to the water and stopping. Tents in the right patterns, cookhouse smoke at the right hours, headlights at night moving the way headlights move when something heavy is arriving.

The speakers run for several nights: engines, bridging gear, the sound of a column that does not exist.

The radio traffic is thickened until it is the traffic of a corps. Men who are not there send to men who are not there, in the hands of operators who are somewhere else entirely.

And they leave things to be found. A truck marked for a division that is not within fifty miles. Signposts at a crossroads with the wrong arrows on them, put up by men in the wrong shoulder patches, who walk into a village and are seen and are careless about being seen.

It works.

Forces move to meet them. Guns are laid on that stretch of bank. For several days the attention of an army is fixed on a place where there is nothing but canvas and a gramophone.

Thirty miles away the real crossing goes over against less than it would have faced, and men who would have died on that bank do not die on it, and none of them ever know why, because nobody is told, then or afterwards.

The operation is judged, later, to have been among the most successful of its kind ever attempted.

Nobody on that bank is told so at the time. Nobody on the real bank is told anything at all.

15.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 8.9% · PUMP \$5.44

8 Khordad

The chief had number three fuel pump in pieces on the deckplates by nine in the evening.

It had been misbehaving since the anchorage and we had a clear window — no notice of entry lodged, nothing expected before the weekend — so he took it down after supper and the engine went cold behind him. That is a thing that has to be written in four places and told to everybody aboard. A ship with her engine open cannot answer. She cannot move for any reason, for anybody, until it is back together.

So we were a building that night. A building with a light on it.

I mention this because it is why I was on the bridge wing at two in the morning with nothing to do, and because of what came of it much later.

At about ten past two I went out for the air. There is no air. You go out anyway.

The anchorage was as it always is after midnight: seventy or eighty ships lying at their cables with their deck lights on, a few with a man moving about on them, most with nobody. Flat black water. The gap between the headlands about four miles off, and in it, every so often, the lights of something going through.

At seventeen minutes past two a laden tanker came down the outbound lane.

I put the glasses on her because I always do. She was big — three hundred metres at least, riding deep, so full. Deck lights the whole length of her. Accommodation lit from the boat deck to the bridge. A steaming light and a masthead light correctly spaced, sidelights correct, making about twelve knots and holding the lane properly.

An entirely ordinary ship, doing an entirely ordinary thing,

beautifully lit.

The radar had nothing.

I want to be careful about this, because it is the beginning of everything that follows and I have had a long time to take it apart.

I checked the set. Both sets. I checked the range and the gain and the sea clutter and the rain clutter, and I put it on the six-mile scale and then the twelve, and I had the headlands, and I had the two ships nearest me, and I had a small craft to the south that was probably the launch's cousin.

Where the tanker was, there was nothing at all.

No return on either set. Nothing on the identification display, which should give me her name and her heading and her destination before I have finished looking at her. Nothing on any channel. I called her twice, on the working channel and then on the calling channel, giving her position and heading and asking her to confirm, and there was no answer, and no other ship in that anchorage came up to say they had seen her either.

She went out through the gap and the lights got smaller and went round the corner and that was that.

Behnam had the watch and he had been standing beside me for most of it.

"Do you see her?"

"Yes."

"Where is she on the screen?"

He looked for a long time, longer than I had, because he is twenty-two and does not yet believe that equipment can simply not have something on it. Then he said no, and then he said something about interference, because he had heard me say it in Esfand about the position jumping.

It is not the same thing. Interference moves you on a chart. It does

not put a ship in the water with three hundred lights on it.

I did not say that. I said it had probably been a failure of the set, and that I would have it looked at, and that he should log the time.

I did not log the time.

I went down to my cabin and got the notebook I keep for the things that have no place in the ship's record — sea state I disagree with, a bearing I want to check later, a man I am worried about — and I wrote:

0217. Outbound. Laden tanker, approx 320 m, accommodation aft lit throughout, deck lights full length, no return, no traffic. Bearing 076. In company, two others astern.

Two others astern. I had not registered that until the pen was moving.

Then I sat for a while.

There is nothing to do with a thing like that except put it somewhere. I put it there. I did not tell the office, because there is no line on any form for it. I did not tell Behnam any more than I had, because he is young and this is his second ship.

I wrote it down, and I went to bed at half past three, and the engine went back together at six.

16.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 8.9% · PUMP \$5.52

June 2

The ambulance service went to one vehicle in the first week of June.

It had run two. One was a spare, which sounds like a luxury and is not. A spare is what covers the forty minutes when the first one is on the road to Presque Isle with somebody in the back of it, and the forty minutes back, and the twenty minutes of cleaning and

restocking before it can go out again. Nearly two hours, on a service that covers six towns.

The service is volunteer, mostly. It is funded by the towns, partly by donation, and it runs on fuel and on insurance, and both of those had gone up, and the towns had already set their budgets in March.

So they parked the second one. The board minutes say *fleet reduction pending review*. The chairman told the paper that coverage would be maintained, and he believed it, and there was no reason for him not to.

Dale heard about it from a woman at the counter of the store, in the flat way the county tells itself things, and she said what you say, which is that it was a shame.

Then she got in the truck and sat for a moment, because she had worked out something she did not want to have worked out.

She could ration oil. That is an appalling thing to be able to say, and she had been doing it for two months, and the reason she could do it is that a house does not go cold all at once. There is a day or two of warning in it. A partial fill buys a week. It is a terrible system but it is a system, and she runs it, and nobody has died of it.

You cannot ration an ambulance.

There is no half. There is no partial. It is either there in nine minutes or it is there in fifty, and the difference between those two numbers is not a difference in comfort.

Nobody decided this either.

The fuel price went up because of something that happened seven thousand miles away. The towns' budgets were set before it went up. The service used the money it had. When the money ran short it did the only sensible thing available, which was to stop running a vehicle that was not carrying anybody at that moment.

Every step of that is correct.

Dale went through the whole chain in her head on the road out to Caswell, the way she now went through everything, and got to the end of it and found what she always found. Nobody to be angry with. A price, arriving from somewhere, and then a lot of careful people making small reasonable choices, and at the bottom of all of it a woman on a kitchen floor somewhere in the next six months waiting an extra half hour.

She thought: *that is a real person and she does not exist yet.*

Then she did the afternoon's houses.

Her sister asked her that summer why she had got so strange about the news.

Dale had stopped listening to the part about the Gulf. She listened to the price and the weather and turned it off. Her sister thought this was avoidance and said so.

It was not avoidance. It was that she had begun to hear the bulletins differently. They gave her a figure about ships, every hour, from a place she could not picture, and told her it was under control.

And she had four hundred houses and an ambulance service and a school district and a plough contractor in front of her, and not one of those was in any bulletin, and all of them were the same story.

She did not have the words for that then. What she had was the feeling that the radio and the county were describing two different months, and that only one of them was happening to her.

17.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.0% · PUMP \$5.60

24 Khordad

There were four more in the ten days after the eighth, and then two in one night, and by the twenty-fourth I had stopped thinking of them as a fault in the equipment.

They are not all the same ship. That was the first thing I established, because it was the thing I most wanted to be true — one ship, one repeated error, one explanation. They are different lengths. Some are laden and some are in ballast and ride high. Two have had deck cranes and the rest have not. One was a gas carrier, which you cannot mistake for anything else.

They are all correct. That is the part that is difficult to convey. A man who has spent his life looking at ships at night knows within two seconds when something is wrong with one. There is never anything wrong with these. The lights are right. The spacing of the lights is right. The bow wave is right for the speed, and the speed is right for the lane.

They simply are not on anything that records ships.

I did three things about it, in this order, and the order is the most honest account I can give of what I was doing with myself.

First I looked for the fault. I had both radars checked by the electrician against a target I could see. I ran the identification display against ships I could confirm on the radio. Everything worked. Everything has gone on working since.

Then I looked for somebody else who had seen them. That is harder than it sounds, and I was careful, because of how the question makes a man look. I asked two masters I know on ships in this anchorage, in the way you ask a thing you are pretending to be idly curious about. One had seen nothing. The other went quiet for a second, and then said the sets out here are useless, and changed the subject. I have never known what to do with that second.

Then I opened the second column.

That was a decision and I made it deliberately, so I will set it out.

Until the twenty-fourth I had been writing all of it into one list. Ships through the strait, with a note beside some of them saying *no*

return.

The trouble with one list is that it is an argument.

A list that says *these thirty things happened and nine of them were impossible* is not a document about ships. It is a document about the man who wrote it. Anybody reading it — the office, a surveyor, my own wife — would not see thirty sightings. They would see a master who had begun writing down impossible ships. And they would be right to.

So I ruled the page in two.

On the left, ships I can account for: radar, identification, a name, a voice on the radio. On the right, ships I saw and cannot account for. Time, bearing, heading, length, lights. Nothing else. No note. No query. No opinion.

Two columns is a record. One column is a symptom.

That is not a clever distinction. It is the oldest rule in keeping any log: put down what you saw and keep yourself out of it. I had been doing it for thirty-one years without once having to think about why.

Behnam saw the ruled page about a week later and asked what the right-hand side was.

I told him the truth. It is the ships that are not on the instruments.

He looked at it for a while. Then he asked whether I thought they were there.

That is a better question than anyone else asked me that year, including me.

I said I no longer knew what *there* meant, and that I had decided some time ago it was not my business to know. What I could do was write down what was in front of me, accurately, and leave the explaining to somebody whose job it was.

He said, "Whose job is it?"

I wrote it down.

18.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.2% · PUMP \$5.66

3 Tir

We went through on the third of Tir, nineteen weeks after we anchored.

The instruction came at ten in the morning and it was four lines long. Clearance granted for the window beginning 0100. Escort slot allocated in the same window. Notice of entry lodged. Proceed.

Both permissions, for the same two hours, for the first time.

I read it twice and then I went and stood in the chartroom for a minute on my own, which is not a thing I do.

Then it is all work, and the work is the same work it has always been, and that is the strangest part of the whole day.

Engine on standby from eighteen hundred. Steering gear tested and the test logged. Both anchors cleared. Bridge equipment checked against the list on the bulkhead, item by item, the way it is checked before any departure anywhere in the world. Deck lit. Gangway secured. A briefing at nine for all hands: what the passage is, how long it takes, where everybody will be, what happens if we are told to turn round.

Nobody mentioned what else could happen. There is a form of words for it and everyone aboard knows it and nobody uses it.

At twenty-three hundred the cook sent hot food up to the bridge, unasked, which he had not done once in nineteen weeks.

0040. Anchor aweigh. She came up heavy and dirty and took four minutes to wash.

0058. Pilot aboard by launch. A small quiet man of about fifty who

has done this passage perhaps nine hundred times and who shook my hand and said good evening, Captain, and then said nothing that was not about the ship for the next two hours.

0115. In the assembly area. Five of us. Three tankers, a bulk carrier, one box ship riding high with half her slots empty. All lit. All real — I checked, and I am not going to apologise for checking.

0131. Check-in on the working channel. Name, flag, tonnage, cargo, destination, position. The six answers. A voice reads them back and gives us number four in the order and a speed to hold.

0144. The escort came down the outside of the column, close enough to see men on her deck, and took station ahead. Grey, low, no lights but what she must show.

0202. Under way in order. Revolutions for twelve knots.

0217. In the lane.

And then for two hours nothing happens, which is what I had not prepared for.

I had been braced since ten that morning. The whole ship had. Twenty-three men doing ordinary jobs with their shoulders up.

The strait at two in the morning is a wide dark road. Hills on both sides, black against a sky that is not quite black. The lights of the ship ahead. The lights of the ship behind. Water so flat the reflections do not break.

Behnam was on the starboard side with the glasses and did not put them down once.

At 0310 we were abeam the narrows and I thought, this is the two miles, this is the thing the world moves its oil through, and it is a gap between two hills and you could swim it if you were young and stupid.

At 0352 the escort peeled off and wished us a good passage.

At 0404 we were clear of the eastern end and into the Gulf of Oman

and the pilot's launch came alongside and he shook my hand again and said good luck, Captain, and went down the ladder.

That was it.

Nineteen weeks of anchorage, nine changes of destination, a war premium that would buy a small building, two governments, one failed attempt in Esfand, and the passage itself took two hours and six minutes and was easier than a night in the Malacca Strait on an ordinary Tuesday.

Behnam came and stood next to me somewhere past five, when it was getting light, and neither of us said anything for a while.

Then he said: "That was nothing."

"No."

"Then why could we not do it in Esfand?"

I have had a long time to think of a good answer to that and I still do not have one. Nothing about the water changed between Esfand and Tir. What changed was a rate, and a clearance, and a slot, and the willingness of two organisations to have their windows overlap on one particular night.

The sea let us through in Esfand. The sea has always let us through.

I wrote it down.

19.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.3% · PUMP \$5.70

16 Tir

The message came at 1340 on the fifth, while we were nine hours short of Sikka.

I will set it out exactly, because I have looked at it a great many times since.

Cargo resold. Discharge port now Ruwais. Owners instruct return

through strait at earliest available window. Await clearance and escort slot. Acknowledge.

Ruwais is inside the Gulf.

We had spent nineteen weeks getting out, and two hours and six minutes going through, and a premium of nearly a tenth of the value of this ship, and the oil was now to be delivered to a place we had been sitting four miles from since Esfand.

Behnam read it over my shoulder, which he does not usually do, and said a word in Persian that I will not write.

Then he said: "This is a mistake. Send it back."

It was not a mistake. I checked, because he was owed that. The buyer was a real buyer, the port was a real port, and the resale had gone through at a price I was not shown but can work out roughly from what came after.

The man who bought our cargo wanted it inside the Gulf. He had every right to want that. He had bought oil, and where it goes is his affair, and nothing in any contract anywhere obliges a cargo to travel in the direction it happens to be pointing.

I want to be careful not to make this sound like cruelty, because it was not. It was not even carelessness.

Nobody who made that decision knew that this ship had been at anchor since Esfand. Nobody who made it knew the name of anyone aboard her. To the man who bought the cargo, we are a line on a screen with a position and a date and a rate, and the position said we were east of the strait, and the destination he wanted was west of it, and that is a two-hour passage and a known cost that he had priced before he pressed anything.

He is not required to think about the two hours. He has paid for them.

So we came about, and we lay off Fujairah for eight days waiting

for a westbound clearance and a slot that overlapped it, and on the fourteenth we went back through the way we had come, and on the fifteenth we anchored again in the same anchorage, three cables from where we had been.

I could see the ship that had been next to us since Ordibehesht. She had not moved either.

Nineteen weeks of waiting. Two hours out. Eight days off Fujairah. Two hours back. And a position on the chart within a mile of where we started.

The cook made rice.

I put it in the deck log in the usual form, which took nine lines, and then I sat with the notebook for a while and could not think of anything to write in it that was a fact.

In the end I wrote: *5 Tir. Cargo resold. Return ordered. Nobody has done anything wrong.*

I remember thinking that it was a stupid thing to write in a notebook, and that I would be embarrassed by it later.

I have read it since. It is the only sentence in the whole book that I would not change.

20.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.3% · PUMP \$5.70

July 9

The first week of July was wet and it did not get above fifty, and on the Thursday of it Mrs. Pelletier was taken to Presque Isle by ambulance with a core temperature of ninety-two degrees.

Dale heard on the Friday from the woman at the store, which is how she heard everything.

The thing nobody outside the county understands, and the thing Dale had to explain three times that summer, is that Mrs. Pelletier

had oil in her tank.

She had a hundred and forty gallons. Dale had put it there in June.

What had happened is that she had turned the furnace off in the second week of June, the way people do when the weather turns, and then she had not turned it back on.

Not because she had forgotten. Because she had spent the winter watching what a gallon cost, and she had sat at her own table with her own pencil, and she had decided that the tank in the yard was for the winter that was coming, and that a person who puts the heat on in June is a person who will be short in February.

She was being careful. She was being exactly as careful as everybody else in this story.

The doctors call it hypothermia and people hear that word and picture snow.

It does not need snow. An old person sitting still in a house at fifty-five degrees, in wet weather, not eating much because cooking costs something too, will lose heat faster than they make it, and it is slow, and the worst part is that it does not feel like cold. It feels like being tired. You sit down. You stop wanting to get up. You are not in pain and nothing hurts and it is very quiet.

A neighbour called in on the Thursday about something else entirely and found her in the chair.

Three days in hospital. Fluids, warming, observation, and home on the Sunday, cross about the fuss.

Her son drove up from Bangor and stayed a week.

Dale saw his car outside the house twice. On the second time she stopped, because the truck was full and the house was on the list, and he came out to her and they stood in the yard.

He was pleasant. He asked how she was. He said his mother had been lucky. He said the doctor had said it could have gone the

other way.

He did not say one word to Dale about the oil.

He did not accuse her. He did not ask her why the tank was at a hundred and forty gallons in July when it had been at two hundred and eighty every July for nine years. He did not ask her what a partial fill was. He did not ask her anything at all, and he was perfectly friendly, and after about four minutes he said he had better get back in.

She has thought about that for the rest of the year and she thinks about it still.

If he had shouted at her she could have told him. She had the whole thing ready — the terminal, the bank, the list, the arithmetic, the fact that his mother was one of four hundred. She could have said: *I have been giving your mother less than she needs since April and I have never once told her why.*

Nobody asked. So she said nothing.

That is the part she cannot get past.

Not that she rationed an old woman's heat. She can defend that; she has had to. Somebody had to be short and she made the least bad list she could make, and if she had filled Mrs. Pelletier in full, some other house would have had the pencil line through it, and that house might have had a baby in it.

What she cannot get past is that there was never a moment when anybody required her to say it out loud.

The system had no step in it where she was asked. Not the terminal, not the bank, not the customers, not the son in the yard. She could have carried the whole thing quietly to the end of her life and no document anywhere would have disagreed with her.

She drove out to Caswell and did the afternoon.

21.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.3% · PUMP \$5.70

19 Tir

After we came back from Fujairah they changed.

I do not know a better word than that and I have tried several. They did not become more frequent. They did not come closer. What happened is that I started being able to read them.

Until Tir they had been lights and a silhouette and a length I estimated. From the middle of Tir I could see the names on their bows.

I want to state the ordinary objections before anybody else does, because I made all of them myself.

The ranges are wrong. At four miles, at night, with the naked eye or with glasses, you do not read a name off a bow. You cannot. The lettering is a metre high and the light on it is nothing and the air over that water at two in the morning will not carry it.

I know that. I have been doing this since before some of these ships were laid down.

I read them anyway.

On the nineteenth there were three.

The second one was the *Bushire Star*.

I sailed in her as second mate a long time ago, twenty-eight years now, on the Karachi run when I was learning what I was doing. I know the shape of her accommodation block because I slept under it for fourteen months. I know she had a kink in her rail on the port side aft, forward of number four, where something had been into her before my time and the repair was never fair.

She has the kink.

She was broken up at Chittagong years ago. I know that too,

because a man I trained with sent me a photograph of her on the beach with her bow up on the sand and her name still on it, and I have that photograph in a drawer in a house in Bandar Abbas.

She went down the outbound lane at twelve knots, laden, correct, on no instrument aboard this ship.

And there are men on their decks.

That began at about the same time. The first ones had been empty — lit, moving, nobody on them. Now, on most of them, there are men standing along the rail and along the raised walkway down the middle of the deck.

They are spaced evenly. They are not working. On a ship under way in a traffic separation scheme at night there is nobody on deck at all, and if there is, he is doing something, and he is moving.

These are standing still and facing outward, and there are too many of them. Thirty. Forty. No ship in this trade carries forty men and no ship anywhere puts them all on deck at once.

They do not look at us. I have watched carefully for that and I would put it in the second column if it happened, and it has not happened.

I am not going to offer an explanation. I do not have one and I have stopped auditioning them.

I know what I saw in a courtyard at Minab as a boy, and I know what my mother's people would say about a man who begins reading names off bows at four miles. I do not believe it. I have written that down once already and I am not going to keep writing it.

I also know what a doctor would say, and what the office would say, and what I would say myself about another master who told me this.

What I have is a page ruled in two, and a right-hand column, and a

rule about what goes in it.

19 Tir. 0206. Outbound, laden, approx 240 m. Deck lights full length. Name on bow, read as BUSHIRE STAR. Kink in rail port side aft. Est. thirty to forty persons standing on main deck, not working, facing outboard. No return. No traffic. Bearing 074.

I did not write that I sailed in her. That is about me.

I wrote it down.

22.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.4% · PUMP \$5.71

July 12

She had the dream for the first time on the night of the ninth and she did not tell anybody about it for four months.

There was nothing frightening in it. That is worth saying at the start, because of where it ends up.

She was above water.

Not flying, and not on anything. Just above it, at about the height of a roof, and the water went out in every direction further than a person can see, and it was black and completely flat.

There were ships on it.

They were very large and they did not move. They were spaced out across the whole of it, further than she could follow, and every one of them was lit — a line of small lights running the full length of each, and more lights up at the back where the windows were, so that each ship looked from above like a town seen from a hill at night.

The lights lay down on the water underneath them in long straight lines that did not break up, because there was no movement anywhere to break them.

She counted them for a while. She remembers doing that and she

remembers that she could not.

There were men on the decks.

Standing in rows. Along the edges and along a raised walkway down the middle of each ship. Evenly spaced, facing outward, not doing anything.

They did not look at her.

She understood — in the way you understand things in a dream, without being told and without asking — that they had been standing there a long time. That nothing was going to happen to them. And that the nothing was the whole of it.

She was not afraid of them. She was not afraid at all. What she felt, and what she could not get rid of the next day, was the specific embarrassment of being somewhere you have not been invited and cannot be seen.

And there was a sound.

It came from above and behind her and it was very large. She could not tell how far away it was. It had the quality of a loudspeaker at a fairground — close and hollow at once, as if the sky were not far off but was made of something.

It was steady and it did not stop and it did not change.

She could not make out a word of it. She listened for what felt like a long time. She was sure of one thing only, which is that it was a voice, and that it was not shouting, and that it was going on the way a voice goes on when it is reading something it has read before.

Not one man on any deck looked up.

She woke at ten to four.

She lay there for a bit and then got up, because there was no point, and made coffee in the dark and sat at the table with the list she

had done the night before.

It was an ordinary list. Nine houses, two partials, one she had taken off and put back on and taken off again.

She thought about the dream while she looked at it and then she stopped thinking about it, the way you do, and she loaded at five.

She did not tell her sister. She did not tell Dennis. There was nothing in it — nobody had chased her, nothing had happened, nobody had been hurt.

She had no words for what was actually wrong with it, which was that it was the quietest thing she had ever been inside, and that everybody in it was waiting, and that something enormous overhead was talking about it to somebody else.

23.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.4% · PUMP \$5.71

22 Tir

By the middle of that month I had two columns, and I want to explain how they came to be two, because I did not decide it. It happened the way most things on a ship happen, which is that a problem is put somewhere until there is time for it, and then there is never time for it, and the place you put it becomes a system.

The first column was the one I had kept since the second week at anchor. Ships through the strait. Time, bearing, heading, length as I judged it, laden or in ballast, and a mark if I could put a name to her. Ordinary work. Any second mate could have kept it and most would have kept it better.

The second column began on the night I have already described, and it held the ships that were there in every way except the ways that can be written down.

I was careful with it. I think that is the only thing I did in those months that I am still satisfied with. I wrote the time. I wrote the

bearing. I wrote the heading and the estimated length and whether the accommodation was lit and how many deck lights I could count along the rail, and if there was a name on the bow I wrote the name. I did not write what I thought about any of it. I did not write *strange* or *impossible* or *again*. A column with a feeling in it is not a column.

Behnam asked me once what the second column was for.

"So that it is not in the first one," I said.

He thought that was a joke. It was the most serious answer I gave anybody that year.

On the twenty-second I totalled them.

There was no reason for that date. The mail had come, the cargo had not been sold that week, the cook had gone quiet with the rest of us, and I had a clear hour before midnight with nothing in it. So I went back through the book a week at a time and added the columns and wrote the totals in the margin.

The first column ran between nine and fifteen a night, which averaged out at twelve.

The second column ran between fifteen and twenty-two, which averaged out at eighteen.

I sat with those two figures for a while. Then I turned on the set for the hour bulletin, because I had the habit by then, and I listened to a man in a studio somewhere read out that traffic through the Strait of Hormuz was being maintained at approximately thirty transits a night.

I am going to set this out slowly, because it took me most of the night and I had all the pieces in front of me.

For four months I had believed I was listening to an exaggeration. That was the shape I had put it in, and it was a comfortable shape, because an exaggeration has an author. Somebody adds to a

number. Somebody decides how much to add. You can be angry at that person even if you never find out who he is, and I had been quietly angry at him since Esfand.

Twelve and eighteen is thirty.

Not near thirty. Not thirty if you are generous with your definitions, not thirty if you count the small craft or the bunker barges or the naval auxiliaries, not thirty under a formula somebody could defend at a hearing.

Thirty.

The number on the radio was exact. It had been exact all along. It was exact because it included the ships in my second column — the ones with no radar return, no traffic on any working channel, no wake, and no business being where they were. Whatever was putting those ships in front of me at night was the same thing that was putting them in the count, or the count was putting them in front of me, and I could not tell which and I am not going to pretend now that I can.

What I could tell was this. For four months I had been looking for the place where the lie entered the system. There was no such place. The number was not inflated. The number was correct. The ships were the lie, and the number was only doing what a number does.

I did not sleep. At about four I went out on the wing and there were three of them in the lane, well spaced, making a good twelve knots by eye, deck lights the whole length, the near one with her accommodation lit right up to the bridge as if there were a full watch on her and a cook awake. The radar had the headlands and the tanker at anchor two cables off my quarter and nothing else at all.

I counted them and went back in and put three marks in the second column and wrote the time.

Behnam came up at six with tea. He looked at the margin and the two totals and the sum I had done underneath, because I had written the sum out, and he was slow at some things and very quick at others.

"That is the number they say."

"Yes."

He looked at it for a while longer.

"Then they are not lying," he said.

"No."

"Then what are they doing?"

"Counting," I said.

I wrote it down.

IV. GENERAL AVERAGE

It ends in the spring, the way these things end, which is that a truck comes for the equipment.

The tanks are deflated and folded. Rubber is worth something and canvas is worth something and the rest is burned. The speakers go back into store. The wire spools — the engines, the bridging gear, the column moving at night — are wiped, because nobody has decided what they are and it is simpler to have nothing than to have something undecided.

Then the men are sat down and told the rules again, in detail, and asked to sign.

They may not say what unit they served in. They may not say where they were. They may not describe the equipment, or the method, or any operation, to anyone, including a wife, including another man who was there, once they are outside the room.

This is not for the duration. There is no date on it. Somebody will say when.

They sign, because everybody signs, and they go home.

What happens then takes about fifty years and there is no way to make it dramatic.

They get jobs. Several of them go into advertising, which is not as funny as it sounds. They have children. They sit at tables at Christmas while other men describe what they did, and they say that they were in signals, or that they were in engineers, or that they did not see much.

Their children grow up believing that their father had a quiet war.

Some of them try, once, in their forties, to say something about it and cannot find a sentence that is both true and permitted, and stop, and do not try again.

The three who were killed are buried with everyone else.

Their families are told that they were killed. They are not told where, or how, or what the work was, or that the work succeeded. The letters say what such letters say. One of the families spends a long time trying to

find out and is answered politely each time by people who do not know the answer either.

When the papers are finally opened, most of them are dead.

The ones who are left are old men. They are invited to a room and thanked. Somebody makes a speech about how difficult it is to explain what they did, and the speech is right, because it takes about twenty minutes and most of the room does not follow it.

Afterwards one of them is asked by a young person what it was like to keep a secret for fifty years.

He says that it was not like anything. He says you do not keep it every day. You keep it about four times a year, when somebody asks you a direct question, and the rest of the time you simply live as a man who did not do very much.

Then he says the thing that is worth writing down.

He says that the hardest part was never the lying. The hardest part was that the work only counted if nobody knew it had happened, so a man could not be proud of it and also be any good at it, and that after a while he stopped being able to tell whether he had done something remarkable or nothing at all.

24.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.6% · PUMP \$5.94

COUNTED · 12

2 Mordad

I should explain the three figures at the head of these pages, because they are not mine and I have never chosen them.

The first is the reported transit figure. It comes off the hourly bulletin and it has been thirty since the second week of the war.

The second is the war-risk rate. That comes from the office by telex, usually on a Wednesday, sometimes twice in a day when the underwriters are nervous, and it is the one number in my life that has never once repeated itself.

The third is the price of a gallon of petrol at a filling station in America.

I want to sit on that one for a moment. I am four miles from the strait. There are twenty-three men on this ship and something over twenty thousand of us held in this region altogether, in hulls, at cables, not going anywhere, and none of that is in any bulletin I have ever heard. It is not suppressed. Nobody has decided to keep it from anyone. It is simply not the kind of thing the news is made of, because nothing is happening to us, and what is happening to a man filling his car is a price, and a price is a fact with a number in it and can be read out in four seconds.

So those are the three. A count I now know to be wrong in a way that does not make it inaccurate. A rate that is correct and is not published. And the retail cost of a tank of fuel in a country I have never been to, which is the only human consequence of this war that gets a figure of its own.

I did not put them at the head of the page out of any feeling about them. I put them there because they are what the office asks for on the daily, and because a page with a heading is easier to find than a page without one, and because for thirty-one years I have started

every log entry with what I was given before I write what I saw.

Last night I added a fourth.

It is my own total. Column one, the ships I can account for. Twelve.

That is all it is. I write it under the other three and then I write the date and then I go on with the entry the way I always have. It took me a week to decide to do it and about four seconds to do, and when it was done nothing in the world was different, and I sat and looked at the four lines for longer than I want to admit.

I do not know who I am writing it for. The office wants three numbers and will go on wanting three. Nobody is coming to read the fourth.

It is going in anyway. It is the only one of the four I know to be true, and it is the only one of the four that nobody asked for, and I have started to think those two facts are the same fact.

25.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.6% · PUMP \$6.02

COUNTED · 12

9 Mordad

The cargo was sold for the ninth time on the seventh, and that was the week I finally understood what I was doing out here.

I had been thinking of the waiting as a failure. That is the natural way to think of it and I held it for five months. Somewhere there is a door, the door is stuck, and everyone on both sides of it is working to get it open, and I am one of the people inconvenienced while they work. That is a perfectly reasonable picture of the world and I would still be carrying it around if Behnam had not asked me, in the way he asks things, what the cargo had been worth in Esfand.

I looked it up. Then I looked up what it was worth that morning.

Here is the thing I had not let myself see, and I am going to set it

out the way I set out the insurance, because it is the same shape and it is worse.

A cargo of crude oil is not a delivery. It is a position. The man who owns the oil in my tanks does not want it; he has no refinery, no tank farm, no customer waiting with a hose. He owns a number that goes up and down, and the oil is only the reason the number is allowed to exist.

While the strait is difficult, that number goes up. Not because anybody is hoarding — there is no need to hoard. It goes up because less oil is getting out than the world expected, and everybody who needs oil next month is bidding for the oil that is already outside. Mine is inside. But it is *sold*, and it is sold forward and onward and along, and every one of those nine sales was at a higher figure than the one before it.

So consider the position of the man who owns it this week.

He can have it delivered. To do that he has to get it through the strait. That costs a war-risk premium of nearly a tenth of the value of the ship. It needs two governments to agree on the same two hours. And it might not work. We have already tried once and come back.

Or he can do nothing at all. In which case he pays demurrage — the daily rent I have already described — which comes to a few tens of thousands a day. The price of what is in her tanks has been moving by rather more than that most weeks since Khordad.

Nobody has to explain this to him. Nobody has to instruct him. He does not need to speak to a single other person in the chain. He is a man in a rising market, holding something he is under no obligation to move. The sensible thing is to do nothing. So he does nothing. Doing nothing is legal, and it is what he would be criticised for failing to do.

The ship is not delayed. The ship is being used. She is a warehouse that happens to float, and the men in her are what it costs to keep

the warehouse warm.

I want to be careful here, because when I first understood it I sat up half the night building a conspiracy, and the conspiracy was not there.

Nobody ordered this. There is no meeting. There is no instruction anywhere that says *keep the tankers at anchor*. If you went looking for the man who did this you would find, at every step, somebody doing the ordinary competent thing.

The government says the flow is being maintained, because no government in the history of the world has announced that it has lost the most important stretch of water on earth.

The underwriter prices the danger correctly, because being wrong would ruin him.

The trader holds a legal cargo in a rising market, because selling into a rise before you have to is how a trader stops being a trader.

The charterer argues about who pays the demurrage, because that is what the contract is for.

My owner, who is small and is being ground between the premium and the delay, cannot force anything, because he is one ship in a queue of ships and nobody has ever needed his agreement for anything.

Every one of them is behaving correctly. And the thing all that correct behaviour adds up to is a hundred ships lying at their cables in the heat with their crews aboard, indefinitely, for reasons that have no author.

That is what I got wrong for five months. I kept looking for the fault. There is no fault. **A delay that makes money does not get fixed, and it does not have to be arranged — it only has to be nobody's job to end.**

Behnam asked me whether that meant the war was making the

price or the price was making the war.

I told him I did not know and that anyone who told him they did was selling him something. That is still my answer. I am a master of a tanker and I know what I can see from the wing, and the rest of it is a long way above my head and always has been.

But I told him the other part, because he is young and he should know it early.

Whatever it is, we are not in it. We are not a party. Nobody in this arrangement is our opponent and nobody is our advocate, and there is no line anywhere in it where a crew appears. We are the running cost. Running costs do not get consulted, and they do not get compensated, and when the thing finally moves they do not get mentioned, because nothing happened to us.

He said that was a bleak way to put it.

I said it was an accurate way to put it, and that I had stopped being able to tell those apart some weeks ago.

I wrote it down.

26.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.7% · PUMP \$6.11

August 2

The dream came back on the Tuesday, and it was longer.

She had it the first time in July and had put it down to the hours. She was loading at five, out on the route by six, and doing the list at night at the kitchen table with the calculator and the pencil, and the summer had gone by without her noticing it was summer. People dream badly when they are doing that. Her father had driven this route for thirty years and had slept, by his own account, about four hours a night for all of them, and had dreamed about the truck.

But she did not dream about the truck.

She dreamed about water.

It was flat. That was the part she could never get anyone to understand later, on the two occasions she tried — not rough, not stormy, nothing you would put in a film. It was black and flat and enormous and it did not move at all, and the light on it came from somewhere behind her that she never turned round to find.

The ships were on it. Not moving either. They were very large and there were a great many of them, more than she could count and further out than she could see, and they were lit right along their sides the way a small town is lit when you come at it down a hill at night, and the lights lay on the water underneath them without breaking up.

And there were men standing on the decks.

In rows. Along the rails and along the raised walkway down the middle, spaced out evenly, facing outward. Not working. Not calling to anyone, not waving, not looking at her. Just standing there in the way that people stand when they have been told to wait and have been waiting for a long time and have stopped expecting to be told anything else.

There were hundreds of them. On every ship. She understood in the dream, the way you understand things in dreams without being given any reason, that they had been there a long time and that nothing was going to happen to them and that this was the worst part.

The new part, the August part, was the sound.

She had heard it the first time and had not been able to put it anywhere. It came from above and behind and it was very large and very slightly wrong, the way a loudspeaker at a fairground is wrong, close and hollow at the same time, as if the sky were not far away but was made of something.

This time she could hear that it was a voice.

She could not make out a single word of it. She listened for what felt like a long time and she was certain about two things: that it was speaking, calmly, in the measured way of a man reading something he has read before; and that what it was reading was numbers.

None of the men on the decks looked up.

That was what she took out of the dream with her and what stayed all day. Not the ships, not the water, not the sound. The fact that not one of them looked up. They had heard it before. It was not for them and they knew it was not for them and they had stopped hearing it the way you stop hearing a refrigerator.

Near the end — and this is the piece she has never told anybody, including her sister, including the doctor she thought about calling and did not — one of the men was not standing with the rest. He was further forward, on his own, at the rail of the nearest ship, and he had a book open on the rail in front of him and he was writing in it.

He had his back to her. She never saw his face. He was not writing quickly. He was writing the way a person writes when he is putting down something he has already looked at carefully, and he did not look up either, and he was the only one of them doing anything at all.

She woke at ten to four and did not go back to sleep. She loaded at five. Mrs. Pelletier was on the list and got a hundred and fifty gallons, which was all Dale could give her, and the two of them talked about the weather coming.

She thought about telling Dennis at the terminal, because Dennis would have laughed and that would have been the end of it.

Then she thought about how it would sound. *I dreamed about ships.* And about a man writing in a book. And a voice in the sky reading numbers that nobody was listening to.

She did not say anything. There was nothing in it that could be said to anybody, and there was nothing in it that was hers, and she had four hundred houses and a list and a September coming.

27.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.8% · PUMP \$6.18

COUNTED · 12

14 Mordad

The document that finished me came out of a dispute about demurrage, and I want that on the record, because nobody sent it to me and nobody meant me to have it.

My owner was arguing with the charterer about who was paying for the waiting. That argument had been running since Ordibehesht and it turned, as these arguments do, on which days the ship could have moved and did not. To show that we could not have moved, the office needed the official transit record: the list, published week by week, of every vessel recorded as passing through the strait, with times and directions. If our name was absent on a given night, the office could say we were held. If our name was there, we had no case.

So they sent it down to me, sixty pages of it covering four months, and asked me to check it against my deck log and confirm the dates.

That is the whole of how I got it. Not courage. Not a source. A clerk in Piraeus attaching a file because he wanted his demurrage.

I did the work properly. It took two days. I had the deck log on my left and the record on my right and I went night by night, and for most of the period the two agreed, in the sense that both of them said nothing had happened.

Then I came to the eighth of Khordad.

On the eighth we had the main engine opened up. The number

three fuel pump had been misbehaving since the anchorage and we had a window with no notice of entry pending, so the chief took it down after supper and had it in pieces by nine. That is in the engine log in his handwriting, and in my deck log in mine, and in the movement book, and on the night orders, because a ship with her engine open is a ship that cannot answer and everyone aboard has to know it. We were cold from about half past eight until past six the following morning. A tug could not have moved us in under two hours.

The record has the *Kastelli* transiting outbound at 0217 that night, in the escorted group, lane two.

Laden. Correct tonnage. Correct call sign. Correct flag. Escorted, in company, at a speed consistent with the group, with a time of clearing the eastern end that is exactly what it should be for a ship of her length leaving at that hour.

Everything in that entry is true about my ship except the part where she moved.

I went back to it several times over the next day looking for the mistake, because there is always a mistake and it is usually mine. A transposed date. A ship of the same name — there is more than one *Kastelli* afloat and I checked. A clerical carry-over from the week before. I looked for all of it and did not find any of it.

Then I did the thing I had been avoiding since the previous afternoon, which was to open my own notebook to the eighth of Khordad and read the second column.

It is there.

0217. Outbound. Laden tanker, approx 320 m, accommodation aft lit throughout, deck lights full length, no return, no traffic. Bearing 076. In company, two others astern.

I had been on the starboard wing at two seventeen in the morning with the book open against the rail, and I had watched a ship I

could not account for go down the lane in the dark, and I had done what I do, which is that I had noted her length and her lights and her bearing and the fact that she was carrying.

I had written down my own ship.

For four months I had thought of myself as the man at the window. The one who was not in it. There is a comfort in that which I did not know I was drawing on until it went.

I was in it. The *Kastelli* is in the count. She has been in the count since at least Khordad, and there is no reason at all to think the eighth is the only night, and when I went looking I found five more before Tir and stopped looking, because the number had stopped being the point.

Somewhere a figure is compiled every night, and my ship is one of the ships it is compiled from, and she is compiled from nothing. She lies here at her cable with twenty-three men aboard her, paying demurrage, her engine cold, her master keeping an accurate log, and every so often she goes through the strait without us.

At two seventeen on the eighth of Khordad I had been standing forty feet above the water with a pen in my hand, watching her go, and I had written her down.

28.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.8% · PUMP \$6.24

COUNTED · 12

15 Mordad

I spent the next night working out who to give it to, and I want to set that out in the order I did it, because the order is the whole of what I learned.

The office. The natural first thought. They are my owner, they employ me, and they have been bleeding since Esfand. But consider what I would be sending them. A sixty-page official record they

already have, a deck log they already have, and a claim that the two contradict each other on six nights. The office would go to the record, because the record is the document the charterer's lawyers will use, and the record says we moved. Which leaves them holding a demurrage claim built on a log that an official document contradicts. I would not be giving them a weapon. I would be giving them a defect, and the defect would have my name on it.

The underwriters. I thought about this one for a long time, because they are the only party in the whole arrangement with a reason to want the truth. And they would take it seriously. They would take it so seriously that they would put the rate up. A strait where the traffic figure cannot be relied on is a more dangerous strait than one where it can. And the correct response of a careful man to new information about danger is to price it. That is not corruption. That is the job. I would hand a truth to the only honest party in the chain and the result would be that my owner pays more and my ship waits longer.

The tracking firms. They already know. Their number is twelve. Their number has been twelve for months and has been published to their subscribers for months and nothing has come of it. I would not be telling them anything. I would be offering to be their witness, and their number does not need a witness; it needs a customer.

A newspaper. I do not know anybody at a newspaper. I have thought since about what I would have had to send one, and it is this: the unwitnessed handwriting of a foreign master, employed by an interested owner, describing ships that leave no trace, and asserting that his own vessel appears in an official record on nights when he says she did not move. I can hear how that sounds. I could hear it that night.

And that is where it closed.

To show that the fleet is phantom, I have to produce the record and

the log side by side. The record is not mine; it is published, it is official, it is what everybody else's figures are built on, and nobody has to believe me for it to be believed. The log is mine. It is in my hand, kept by me, signed by me, in a ship where I decide what goes in it.

Put the two documents in front of anyone. One of them is wrong. One of them was written by an institution and one of them was written by a man with a reason. There is no version of that room where the man is the safe thing to believe.

So the log that proves the record is false is also the log that makes me the only person who could have falsified anything. The moment I use it, I am not the witness. I am the defect. And the notebook — the second column, the only accurate account of that water that exists anywhere, four months of it, times and bearings and lengths and lights — the notebook is worth less than nothing, because a notebook is exactly what a man produces when he has nothing.

There is no document anywhere in this that is both true and mine.

I understand that this is a small thing next to what has happened to other people this year. Nobody has hurt me. I am fed, I am paid, my crew are alive, and I have a bed. What I have lost is narrower than that and I am aware it sounds like self-pity to name it, so I will name it once and leave it. For thirty-one years the thing I have been good at is keeping an accurate account of what is in front of me. It turns out that an accurate account is not a kind of evidence. It is a kind of habit. The two look identical from the inside and they are not related.

Behnam found me still at it at four. He did not ask. He put the tea down and took the record off the chart table and squared it up and put it back, because he has started tidying around me the way you tidy around someone who is ill.

"Do we tell anyone?" he said.

"Who."

He stood there for a while working through the same list I had worked through, and I watched him arrive where I had arrived, and I did not help him.

"Oh," he said.

Then he went below.

I wrote it down, which is the only thing I have ever known how to do with a fact. I am clear that it is not the same as doing something about it. I have been clear about that for some time now.

It has never once stopped me.

29.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.8% · PUMP \$6.31

COUNTED · 12

4 Shahrivar

Orders came down at fourteen hundred. Channel clearance confirmed for the window beginning 0200, escort slot allocated, notice of entry lodged by the office forty-eight hours ago without telling me, which means they have been working on this for two days and let me find out with the rest of the ship.

Discharge port Sikka. It has been Sikka before and it has been three other places since. I am not making any arrangements in my head until we are through and clear.

Cargo unchanged. Nine owners since Esfand and none of them has ever been aboard.

I am writing this on the wing in pieces, the way I have written everything since Farvardin, a line when there is a line to write. If it reads badly that is why. I have never once gone back and tidied an entry and I am not going to start on a transit.

After supper. All hands briefed. Steaming watches from midnight. Chief has the engine on standby from 2300 and confirms number

three pump behaving since Khordad.

2140. Behnam came up and asked whether he should keep the second column tonight while I have the con.

I told him no.

I want to put down why, because he took it badly and did not say so, and he has earned better than the answer I gave him, which was two words. The second column is not a duty. It is not part of the ship's record and it never has been; it is a private thing I do with a pen, and if I were to hand it to him tonight it would become a thing this ship does, and then it would be in the handover, and then one day it would be in a file with my name on it and his. I have thought about what that file would be worth and I have written it down already. It is worth nothing to us and it is worth something to somebody else and I do not know who, and until I do he is not going anywhere near it.

So: no. Badly said. I will say it better tomorrow.

0148. Pilot aboard. Gulf swell slight, visibility good, no moon worth the name.

0203. In the assembly. Four ahead of us, two astern. All laden, all lit, all real — I checked, which tells you what the last five months have done to me.

0219. VHF check-in on the working channel. Name, flag, tonnage, cargo, destination, the same six answers I have given to two different authorities all year, the same six answers in the same order, and tonight for the first time both of them are listening at once and neither of them will say the other's name.

0231. Under way. Revolutions for twelve knots.

0244. In the lane.

It is very ordinary.

That is the thing I want on the page while I still have the hour. The

first time we went through, in Tir, I was braced the whole two hours and could not have told you for what. Tonight I am not braced at all. Five months of anchorage, nine sales, a hundred ships behind us at their cables, and the passage itself is a wide dark road with hills on both sides and a line of sternlights in front, and the whole thing is going to take two hours, and nothing about it is difficult. It was never difficult. It has never once been the sea.

Behnam is on the starboard side with the glasses. He has not put them down since we entered the lane and he has not said anything, and I think he expected something to happen by now.

Minab is forty miles off my port bow and I cannot see it and there is nothing there to see. My mother's people are in the ground an hour's drive inland from the light I would see if I could see it.

0402. Abeam the narrows. Escort in station. Nothing on any channel.

I would like to record that I know the number in tonight's bulletin is thirty, and that after tonight there will be a true entry in it, and that it will be indistinguishable from the other twenty-nine.

0416. Outbound in the far lane. Laden tanker, approx 300 m, accommodation aft lit throughout, deck lights full length, no ret

30.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 10.6% · PUMP \$6.44

9 Shahrivar

They have put me in a room in Bandar Abbas with a bed and a window and a man outside who is not a guard, and they have given me back my phone and my passport and a bag of clothes that are not mine, and they have asked me four times to write down what happened and I have written it down four times and it is the same each time because it is what happened.

I was on the starboard side with the glasses.

I do not remember the sound. I have said that four times and each

time somebody has waited to see whether I will remember it if they wait, and I do not. There was the lane and the sternlights and the cold on my hands from the rail, and then I was on the deck below the wing with my face wet and the glasses gone and the whole ship leaning the way she should not lean, and the lights along the catwalk were going out in order from forward to aft, which I know now was the cabling and which at the time I thought was somebody switching them off.

Forward of the manifold there is nothing. That is the simplest way I can put it and it is the way I put it to them.

Fourteen of us were taken off. The escort had a boat alongside in under nine minutes, which everybody who has spoken to me has said twice, and I understand that it is meant as a comfort and I understand that it is true.

Four were brought out of the water.

Five have not been recovered and will not be. The chief is one of those. He was where he always was.

They got the master out at about the second hour. He was on the wing when it happened and the wing is in the sea. I have been told he was conscious in the boat and I was not in that boat. He went ashore by helicopter at first light and he was in the hospital here through that day and he died the following afternoon.

The surveyor asked me whether he said anything about the passage. I said I did not know. The nurse who was with him told me, afterwards, that he asked twice whether the cargo had gone into the water, and that when she said she did not know he asked her to find out, and that nobody found out, and that he asked again in the evening.

That was the whole of it. He did not ask about the ship. He did not ask about us. He asked whether the oil was in the sea, because that is the thing a master is responsible for and he was still doing his job

in a bed in a town he was born in, and then he stopped.

The deck log was in the chartroom and the chartroom is aft and it is dry. His notebook was in his coat and his coat was on the back of the chair in the chartroom because he had been up on the wing where it is warm, and so it is dry too, and I found it on the second day when they let me back aboard the tug with the surveyor.

I gave it to them.

I want to be clear that I thought about it. I sat with it for about a minute with the surveyor waiting, and I opened it and looked at the last page and closed it. Then I gave it to them with the deck log and the movement book and the night orders, because that is what you do. There was an inquiry starting. Those are the ship's papers. A third officer does not walk off a casualty with a book in his coat; that is how you become the thing they are looking at.

They gave me a receipt. It is a printed form with numbered lines and someone filled in three of them by hand:

Deck log, one volume. Movement book, one volume. Personal notebook, one, master's.

I have the receipt. It is in the bag with the clothes that are not mine.

I have thought since that it is the only document anywhere in this that says the notebook exists, and that the reason it says so is that somebody had to account for having taken it off me.

I do not know what was in it.

That is not true. I know exactly what was in it, because I watched him write it for five months and because he told me what the second column was for, and I asked him once whether he was going to do anything with it and he looked at me as though I had asked him whether he was going to do anything with the barometer.

What I mean is that I do not know what it is worth. He knew. He

worked it out in Mordad and he did not tell me the answer, he let me work my way to it in the chartroom at four in the morning, and when I got there he did not help me and he did not say he was sorry, and I have been angry about that for about a week now.

Yesterday a man from the office came and was kind to me and told me that the inquiry will take months and that I am not to worry about it, and he asked whether there was anything I wanted to add to my statement.

I said no.

31.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 10.6% · PUMP \$6.40

27 Shahrivar

General average is declared on the nineteenth.

It is one of the oldest rules there is. When a voyage suffers a loss, the loss is not left where it falls. It is divided among everyone who had an interest in the voyage — the ship, the cargo, the freight, the fuel — in proportion to what each of them had at stake. That way no single party is ruined by an accident that was nobody's fault. An average adjuster is appointed to work out the shares. The practice is older than insurance, older than the flag on the stern, older by a long way than the country the ship was sailing out of.

The adjuster appointed is a firm in London with a room of its own and a file number, and the file is opened, and the file will be open for years.

The first question is which policy pays, and it is asked politely and it does not get answered.

The hull is insured twice over, as every ship is. There is a marine policy, which covers the sea — fire, collision, grounding, structural failure, the ordinary catastrophes of moving a large object through water. And there is a war policy, which covers the other thing, and

which is the one that costs a tenth of the ship's value for a two-hour passage.

They are different contracts, written by different underwriters, and each of them excludes what the other one covers. That is not an oversight. It is the entire architecture. A peril is either a war peril or a marine peril and it cannot be both, and which one it was decides who writes the cheque.

So the two sets of underwriters begin, courteously, to establish what struck the *Kastelli* at 0417 on the fourth of Shahrivar.

Nobody ever establishes it.

There is no claim of responsibility. There is no debris that survives the fire. The forward third of the vessel is in eighty metres of water in a traffic separation scheme that no salvage company will work in while the rate is where it is. The escort's sensor record exists and is not released. Two states are asked and both answer, and neither answer is an answer. A survey is commissioned, and the survey says that the damage is consistent with several causes and that it is not possible to distinguish between them from the available evidence, which is a true and careful sentence that decides nothing.

And because it decides nothing, the question of which policy responds cannot be settled, and until it is settled nothing is paid.

The owner is a man in Piraeus with four ships and now three. He has lost the hull, he has lost the earning, he is being pursued for the demurrage he claimed and did not get, and he is told that his claim is sound and will be met and that it cannot be met yet. He is not being cheated. Every person telling him this is correct. The file stays open.

Even the money waits.

Meanwhile the apportionment proceeds, because it can.

Contributory values are established for each interest. The hull, at its agreed figure. The cargo, at the agreed value declared in

Ordibehesht and priced off a working strait. The freight at risk. The fuel remaining in her tanks. Each is expressed as a percentage of the whole, and the percentages are carried to four decimal places, because an adjustment that rounds is an adjustment somebody will contest.

It is meticulous work and it is done by people who are good at it. The document that comes out of it is, in its way, admirable. It is a full and fair statement of everything of value that was aboard that ship. It sets out who bore what. It sets out what each party must pay, so that the loss rests equally on all of them and crushes none of them.

There were twenty-three men aboard.

They appear in the file. They appear in the casualty statement as a figure. They appear in a note about sending their belongings home. And they appear in the crew claims, which are a separate matter under separate rules, and which are, by the standards of these things, settled quickly.

But on the adjustment itself — the statement of contributory values, the document that takes everything the voyage was carrying and divides it fairly among all the interests in it — there is no line for them.

Not one that was refused. Not one that anybody argued about and struck out.

The form does not have the line. It never has. Nobody ever needed it, because a crew is not an interest in the voyage. A crew is what the voyage costs to run, and running costs are not adventured, and what is not adventured cannot be averaged.

The notebook is listed once in the inquiry's schedule of documents received, between the movement book and the night orders, as *personal notebook, one, master's*. It is not evidence of anything the inquiry is asking about. The inquiry is asking what struck the ship.

32.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 10.5% · PUMP \$6.29

31 Shahrivar

The loss is reported the same week.

A laden tanker is lost in the strait, with fatalities. It is on every bulletin for a day and a half. It is the largest single thing to have happened in that water since the war began, and it is reported accurately: the tonnage, the flag, the cargo, the number aboard, the number saved. Nobody gets anything wrong.

The underwriters reprice on the Wednesday. They have to. A casualty is not an opinion about danger, it is danger with a date on it, and a rate that does not move after one is a rate that will not be there next year. War risk for the passage goes to a figure it has not touched before.

The rate is the most-watched number in the trade, and when it moves, everything downstream of it moves. Freight goes up, because the premium is in the freight. The delivered cost of a barrel out of this Gulf goes up with the freight. And the price of crude, which is a measurement of what the world believes about how much oil is going to arrive, adjusts upward, because the world has just been shown something about the strait that it could not be told.

That is the sequence and there is nothing hidden in it. A ship is destroyed. The destruction proves the danger. The danger justifies the rate. The rate lifts the price. Every party in that chain acts correctly and at the correct moment, and the cargo still floating out there is worth more on the Wednesday than it was on the Tuesday, and the man who owns it did not want this and did not cause it and is better off.

And the transit figure for that week is thirty.

It is thirty because it has been thirty since the second week of the

war. But that week it is also thirty in the plain way. Among the vessels recorded as passing through the strait in the small hours of the fourth of Shahrivar there is a laden tanker of some three hundred metres. Correct tonnage. Correct call sign. Escorted, outbound in lane two at 0231, clearing the eastern end at the time a ship of her length should clear it.

She was there. For the first time in four months, every word of that entry is true.

There is no way to tell it apart from the others. It sits in the list in the same type as the ships that were not there. It will be counted in the same total. The total will be quoted the same way. In a year nobody looking at that week's figure will be able to say which of the thirty were real. The man who spent five months learning to tell the difference is inside the number, on the only night the number was honest about him, and he is inside it exactly as the ones he could not account for were inside it.

His own count, the true one, the five months of it, is in a building in a city he never visited, in a schedule of documents, described in four words.

Nobody has read it. There is no reason for anybody to read it. It does not bear on the question.

The question is what struck the ship.

33.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.7% · PUMP \$5.94

September 26

The price came down in the last week of September.

Not far. It had been up above six for most of August. It came off about forty cents over eight or nine days, in the unremarkable way prices come off, a cent or two at a time. You only noticed it on the Friday, when you were doing the week and the number in the column was smaller than the number above it.

Dale noticed it the way she had noticed everything that year, which was in the margin of the invoice book at the kitchen table at ten at night with the calculator.

She did not feel anything much about it. She had learned by then not to. It had gone up in February on a morning when nothing happened, and it had gone up again in April, and each time she had spent a week rearranging her whole life around the new figure and had got used to it, and then it had moved again. A number that does that to you three times stops being a number you have opinions about.

What it meant, practically, was that the load she took on the Monday cost her about nine hundred dollars less than the same load had cost in August, and that she could put four houses back on the list.

She did the list that night and put four houses back on it and it took her forty minutes to decide which four.

She listened to the radio while she did it because she always did.

The situation in the Gulf, the man said, was showing signs of improvement. Transits through the Strait of Hormuz were being maintained. There had been a serious incident in the strait earlier in the month involving a tanker, with loss of life, and the investigation was continuing. Markets had steadied in recent days on expectations of an easing in the regional outlook.

That was the whole of it, about twelve minutes in, between a school budget and the weather, and then the weather said a cold one coming in off the lake by Thursday.

Every word of it was true. She had no reason at all to doubt any of it and she did not doubt it, and if you had stopped her in the road the next morning and asked her what was happening in the Gulf she would have told you that it was getting better, and she would have said it in good faith, and she would have been repeating the

only information anybody had ever given her.

She thought, briefly, while she was writing out the four names, about the incident with the tanker. She thought: *those poor men*. She thought it the way you do, with real feeling, for about four seconds, and then she went back to the list, because the list was the thing in front of her and there were still four hundred houses on it that she could do something about.

Nobody told her why the price had come down. Nobody ever tells anybody that. The price is the only message the system sends to the far end of it, and the message is one number long, and it does not come with a reason.

It had gone up in February because something had happened that she was not told about.

It came down in September because something had happened that she was not told about.

She had made every decision she made that year — who got filled and who waited, which houses came off the list, the night she sat in the truck outside a house with her lights off and could not make herself go in and knock — off a single figure that arrived without explanation and left the same way.

She was not owed an explanation. That is not how any of it works and she had never expected one. What she would have said, if anybody had asked her that year and nobody did, is that she would have liked to know whether she had got it right. Not to be consulted. Just to know, afterwards, whether the choices had been the ones a person should have made.

Nobody was ever going to tell her that either.

She finished the list at half past ten, banked the stove, and went up.

34.

REPORTED 30 · WAR RISK 9.4% · PUMP \$5.71

September 30

Mrs. Pelletier's kitchen was warm.

That was the first thing, and Dale stood in it a moment longer than she needed to, in her coat, with the clipboard under her arm, because the last time she had been in that kitchen it had been fifty-eight degrees and Mrs. Pelletier had been sitting in it in a cardigan and a blanket saying she was perfectly comfortable.

Now the stove was going and there was a smell of something with cinnamon in it and the radio was on low on the shelf, and Mrs. Pelletier had a cardigan on but only the one.

"You'll have a coffee."

"I've got the Caswell road to do."

"You'll have a coffee."

So she had a coffee.

They talked about the hospital, briefly, in the way it gets talked about — she had been in three days, they had been very good to her, her son had driven up from Bangor and stayed a week and had been, in her account of it, more upset than the situation called for. She was well now. She had put on the weight back. She had had the chimney looked at by a man from Presque Isle who charged her nothing because he had known her husband.

She said, twice, that she had been perfectly comfortable that winter, and that people had made a great deal more of it than there was to make.

Dale did not say anything to that either time.

There is a version of Dale Brissette who says something. Who puts the cup down and says: you were in the hospital. You were in the hospital because you were frightened of the bill, and you were

frightened of the bill because of a number on a piece of paper, and I have been bringing you half of what you need since April and saying nothing about it, and I have thought about your house every night since.

She had that whole speech. She had been carrying it around since February and it had got longer and better all year.

She drank the coffee.

At the door Mrs. Pelletier said, "Now. Am I down for the pre-buy?"

Dale said she hadn't opened it up yet. It was early. She usually did the pre-buy in the spring.

"I like to get it done. I like it done and out of the way, and then I don't think about it." Mrs. Pelletier had her hand on the door frame. "Same as last year. Whatever it comes to."

"You don't want to wait and see what the price does?"

"No," she said. "It only goes up. Everybody knows that."

And she laughed, and Dale laughed, because it was funny, because it was the kind of thing she said, because the two of them had been having some version of this conversation at that door for nine years.

"All right."

"Put me down."

"I'll put you down."

In the truck Dale turned the engine over and let it run a minute and sat with the clipboard on her knee.

There was no reason for either of them to have known any of it. Not the anchorage, not the two permissions, not the committee in London, not the rate that was requoted on Wednesdays, not the twelve and the thirty, not the notebook or the receipt for it, not the file that would be open for years. None of that had ever been the

kind of thing that is sent to a kitchen in Aroostook County, and none of it ever would be, and if it had been, neither of them could have done one thing differently.

Next winter would be what it was. Mrs. Pelletier would be warm or she would not.

Dale found the page for the pre-buy and put the date at the top, because it was a new page and that is what you do with a new page.

Then she wrote her name down.

GLOSSARY

additional premium — The extra charge for taking a ship into water the insurers consider dangerous. It is quoted afresh for each passage, as a percentage of what the ship is worth, and it can change from week to week or from day to day.

agreed value — The figure the owner of a cargo and the insurer write into the policy at the start. If the cargo is lost, that is the sum paid — not what the cargo turns out to be worth on the day.

ballast — Seawater carried in a ship's tanks when she has no cargo, to keep her steady. A ship in ballast rides high.

bābā zār [BAA-baa ZAAR] — The man who conducts the *zār* rite. Literally the father of the wind.

Bandar Abbas [ban-dar ab-BAAS] — The main Iranian port on the Strait of Hormuz, and Farhad's birthplace. It grew from a fishing village after the customs house was moved there from the island of Hormuz, and it is named for the shah who ordered the move.

bosun — The senior deckhand on a ship, responsible for the crew who work on deck.

catwalk — A raised, railed walkway running the length of a tanker's deck above the pipework, so that the crew can move fore and aft without climbing over the cargo lines.

charterer — The party who hires a ship for a voyage. He does not own her; he buys her use for a stated time or a stated passage.

Chittagong [CHIT-a-gong] — The port in Bangladesh where much of the world's shipping is beached and broken up for scrap.

demurrage [de-MURR-idge] — Rent paid to a shipowner for every day a ship is held beyond the days allowed for loading and unloading.

Esfand · Farvardin · Ordibehesht · Khordad · Tir · Mordad · Shahrivar [es-FAND · far-var-DEEN · or-di-be-HESHT · khor-DAAD · TEER · mor-DAAD · shah-ri-VAR] — Months of the Solar Hijri calendar, which is the civil calendar of Iran. Esfand is the last

month of the year and ends at the spring equinox; Farvardin is the first. Farhad keeps his dates in this calendar and Dale keeps hers in the Western one, and the book does not convert between them.

forecastle [FOKE-sul] — The raised deck at a ship's bow, carrying the anchor gear.

Fujairah [foo-JAY-ra] — A port on the Gulf of Oman, outside the Strait of Hormuz, where ships wait when they cannot or will not go through.

general average — An old rule of the sea. When a voyage suffers a loss, the loss is shared out among everyone who had something at stake in it — the ship, the cargo, the freight, the fuel — in proportion to what each stood to lose, so that no single party is ruined by an accident that was nobody's fault. The specialist who works out the shares is an **average adjuster**.

held covered — A clause allowing insurance to remain in force through a change of circumstances, provided the owner gives prompt notice.

hull policy · war policy — The two contracts on a ship. The hull policy covers the sea: fire, collision, grounding, breakdown. The war policy covers everything done by people rather than by water. Each excludes what the other covers, which is why, after a loss, it matters enormously which one applies.

laden — Carrying cargo. A laden tanker sits low in the water; an empty one shows a wide band of hull.

manifold [MAN-i-fold] — The cluster of large pipes amidships on a tanker's deck, where the shore hoses are connected to load and discharge the cargo.

Minab [mee-NAAB] — A town inland from Bandar Abbas, near the site of the first city of Hormuz, and the home of Farhad's mother's family.

Musandam [moo-SAN-dam] — The mountainous peninsula,

belonging to Oman, that forms the southern side of the Strait of Hormuz. Both shipping lanes pass north of it, through Omani water.

notice of entry — The warning an owner must give his war-risk insurers before taking a ship into a listed area, with her voyage plan and expected times.

pre-buy — A contract common in the American home-heating-oil trade. A household tells its dealer in the summer how much oil it expects to burn that winter and pays for it at the summer price, and the price is then fixed whatever the market does.

Ruwais [roo-WACE] — A refinery port inside the Gulf, west of the strait.

Sikka [SIK-a] — An oil terminal on the west coast of India.

traffic separation scheme — A marked pair of shipping lanes, one inbound and one outbound, with a buffer between them, laid out to keep large vessels apart in narrow water. The scheme in the Strait of Hormuz is about two miles across.

ullage [UL-idge] — The empty space above the oil in a tank, and the hatches through which it is measured.

war risk — See *additional premium* and *hull policy · war policy*.

zār [ZAAR] — Along the southern coast of Iran, a wind that enters a person. The belief and the rite came with sailors from the African ports, and the words used in it are not all Persian: there is Arabic in them, and Swahili, and language from the ports of India. A *zār* is not treated as an illness and is not driven out. It is found out, played for, and lived with.

□□□□□□ [hagh-ob-OOR] — *Right of passage*. The two words together mean the fee or the right to pass through a place. Standing on its own, □□□ means *right*, in both senses the English word carries: what is owed, and what is just.



A tanker lies at anchor outside the Strait of Hormuz with a full cargo and nowhere to take it. To cross, her master needs clearance from two governments who each claim the water and deny the other exists, and insurance from a committee in London that can stop his ship in seven days without leaving its desk.

Six thousand eight hundred miles away a woman delivers heating oil to four hundred houses and can no longer afford to fill them all. Every week she decides who waits.

The news says thirty ships a night are getting through. From the bridge wing, in the dark, Farhad Nourbakhsh counts twelve. He writes it down, because writing it down is what he has done for thirty-one years, and because nobody has ever asked him for it.

Nobody in this book does anything wrong.

The lie had infrastructure. The truth had a notebook.

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