

ARIES AT DAWN

By William Amerman

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Chapter 1

You never expected justice from a company, did you?

**They neither have a soul to lose, nor a body to kick.
- Sydney Smith (1771-1845; English writer,
clergyman)**

“So. Marianne will cover wrap-up for all areas today.” Jeff grinned down at her. “She’s been doing great on her memorization tests, right Marianne?”

Marianne grunted once, hunched over in her chair. Bobby leaned casually against the office wall in an appallingly obvious effort to see up her shorts. Bobby was his best loader and Jeff tried not to notice.

Instead, he focused motivation out into the room like pumping dry ice through a fog machine. Beamed his special 4:15am smile down at their slack, pale faces from his perch on the M7 office planning desk.

A tough crowd. Eight University students. Walking dead from lack of sleep. An awful job he asked them to do. Well, ok. Maybe not awful in the sense of jumping on a grenade to save your platoon buddies, or hacking Russian coal out of a wall 500 feet below a leaky, gas-ridden lake. But no one was exploring the depths of humanity here, either. It was hours before dawn and it was all about boxes. Boxes and the trucks that would soon be stuffed with these boxes.

“And that’s it. Oh wait. Before we get out there —”

A horn blared into life, signifying a building-wide conveyor startup. 250 feet away, twenty unloaders had just scrambled up ladders like chimpanzees after fruit to dive into the huge feeder trucks parked out back of the building. Unload frenzy.

“Travis has challenged us in a friendly package car loading competition,” he said, hurrying. “His slide vs. our slide. Whichever slide has highest numbers at the end of this week goes out for beer and pizza after work on Friday. Unified picks up the tab.” He let that hang for a moment. Thought he detected the smallest gleam of interest from his group. He basked motionless in that rare glimmer for seconds.

“So let’s get out there and kick ass today!” he shouted, jarringly loud in the small office, once again embarrassed at the level of enthusiasm he was paid

to exhibit for the act of loading boxes from a metal slide into package cars.

All his pre-loaders except Bobby sleepily pushed themselves up into a walking position. Bobby took one last sidelong look at Marianne, an expression on his face like a man leaving his family to sail to the New World, then hit the door like something shot out of a mobile missile launcher. Jeff watched them shuffle out, dismayed again at why he was so successful at motivating Bobby but none of the others.

“Uh Jeff?” a voice to his right.

Sympathy and apprehension hit him at the same time. Simon was his pickoff guy.

“Man, I’m not sure I should have come back today,” Simon said. Jeff noticed Simon was breathing shallowly. Almost panting. Already a faint sheen of sweat on his pale face. Oh god no.

“You’ll be fine,” Jeff said. He ducked his head out of the office to see if packages had made it out to their slide. Not yet. But any second. The first 75 seconds of package flow each morning was like a tidal wave because the goddamned unloaders wanted to get a head start on their numbers and “primed” the belts for 5 minutes before official startup. Jeff usually made Bobby stand up in the pick-off spot with Simon for the first five minutes to help him handle the first wave. No sign of Bobby up there now, though. Goddamnit, if he was out there chatting up Marianne. . . .

“I don’t know what it is,” Simon panted, crouching a bit. “But I’ve got to go every 30 minutes . . . some sort of weird biological alarm clock.”

“Go?”

"You know. GO. Still got that nausea, too. Jesus do you think it might be dysentery? Can you get that shit just from eating Tex-Mex food?"

"Ah," Jeff said. He wished he could just say—in fact he almost said but didn't, 'you're right buddy. You've been sick for a week because while you were out at the lake last week some ferocious amoeba probably crawled up your ass and fathered 30 generations. Get yourself to bed and stay there until you feel better.' But he couldn't. The Business did not slow down for illness and The Business needed the services of Jeff's pickoff this morning.

So Jeff searched his brain for empathetic, medically sound, non-potentially-litigious advice. Something caring and helpful but something for which he wouldn't get sued in four months.

"Drink plenty of water," he managed and glanced out the window again. Gratified to see Bobby high up in the pickoff slot, ripping off a quick set of pull-ups from a support beam as he waited for the first boxes. Jeff's stomach twitched nervously. Bobby was hugely enthusiastic but criminally unskilled in the art of sorting; slam-plucking boxes from the mass river of flowing boxes, z-reading the address label, then diverting them left or right to the small belts where they finally would slide down to the individual loader areas. Jeff suspected Bobby sorted based on box size rather than address label. Which did not endear him to his fellow loaders who invariably got buried in an avalanche of boxes that were not theirs.

A huge metallic crash told Jeff the first wave of boxes just transferred onto their local "Metro 7" conveyor. Sounded like some of those massive monitor boxes. They would hit Bobby in the pickoff

position in about 20 seconds. He turned back to Simon. "Look. I'll jump up there to relieve you every 30 minutes or so and you can, ahem, go reset that alarm clock and get some water. Ok?"

Simon sat there huddled over his stomach not looking at him. Jeff felt like a bastard and swallowed rising panic. Looked out again to see Marianne, always hardest hit by Bobby's 'sorting' crimes, striding menacingly down the catwalk back towards the office. She'd obviously noticed the situation.

The only reason Simon was even here was that Jeff had left 5 phone messages yesterday, called his girlfriend and then when that didn't work, his mother back in Kansas, then finally got through to him about six in the evening. He'd talked with him for 45 minutes, pleading shamelessly, threatening vaguely, and in the end openly begging for Simon to come back to work.

For the three days Simon had been out sick, Jeff acted as pickoff for his slide. As a result they had five union grievances filed, Jeff completed none of his paperwork, and worse yet, slide productivity numbers were off by probably 30% because, as Bobby put it, Jeff sucked bright red dog's ass at being a pickoff. Which torpedoed loader morale.

Marianne and the rest of them had to sort the mis-routed boxes and stack them, then run them down the catwalk to the proper area. During those last three mornings, Jeff would sometimes glance back over his shoulder and see them scurrying back and forth, massive mounds of boxes clutched and anchored with their chins, and feel a warm sheen of shame flow up his scalp at his ineptitude. Not to mention dread for the manager's daily post-preload

meeting where his slide numbers would doubtlessly be circled in bright colors.

"Ok buddy? Please?" Jeff asked again, trying to keep his voice from cracking.

Simon sighed. Lifted himself gingerly to his feet. "Goddamn I hate this shit. Whatever," he muttered.

Jeff restrained himself from trying to hug his pickoff and clapped him gruffly on the shoulder. "That's the spirit!" He watched Simon shuffle weakly off out of the office towards Bobby. Marianne hugged Simon and kissed his cheek then turned around and walked back with him, helping him climb up on the slide. Jeff gratefully started on his backlogged paperwork.

Forty-five minutes later Jeff was negotiating the loan of Bobby to Travis' slide at the end of the day. Made trickier by the bet he had with Travis. He cocked his head. An enraged cry echoed through the building. Like someone about to open fire with a weapon. "Oh shit," he said to Travis. "Gotta run."

He jogged back to his slide. Hopped onto the catwalk. Worked his way through his loaders, darting in and out of their open package cars. Marianne's area. Yes indeed a crisis. Huge flat-screen monitor boxes backed all the way up the slide and the sub-feeder belt almost to the pickoff. A truly staggering amount of boxes. Bobby stood on Marianne's sub-feeder belt up to his waist in boxes, trying to clear the blockage and keep himself from getting sucked under the diverter at the same time.

"Bobby!" Jeff called. Bobby looked up, tripped and fell, crushing a number of \$1,000+ boxes. Oh hell. Jeff looked for Marianne but

couldn't find her. In addition to the unbelievable pile out on the metal slide, monitor boxes were stacked on the catwalk twice as tall as his head. Inside the cars and outside the rear doors of the cars. Like some sort of bizarre tribal island scene where the natives had erected totems to the gods then fled when those gods turned angry – as they obviously had. He heard a scuffle in the last car on the slide.

“Marianne?” he called.

No response.

High up the slide a box flipped over the general mass, bounded over the massed pile and jumped *over* the wire that held load charts for the car. Jeff ducked and scrabbled under the slide onto the send-back conveyor. The box slammed into the back of one of the package cars with a muffled thud of crunched glass. Jeff emerged from under the slide in time to see a hand snake out of the last package car and steady one of the monitor stacks on the catwalk. It did not fall.

He tried to catch his breath. “When did this start?” he asked the hand.

“–fuck me,” Marianne’s muffled voice replied.

Jeff startled as he eased around the monitor stack to the back doors of Marianne’s last package car. “I, uh, I don’t think you got what I said.”

“Fuck me, Jeff,” Marianne’s voice floated out. “My area, you idiot. I said you always want to – screw it, never mind.”

“Hey, I know. It looks pretty bad. Don’t worry. We’ll get it clean,” Jeff said.

No response.

He turned. Bobby had cleared the jam and mercifully there didn’t seem to be any more monitor

boxes pouring down the slide. Jeff reached for the radio at his belt. "Hey Jose," he said. "This is Jeff on M-7 for Jose. We need an extra package car." No answer. Goddamn. "Bobby," he called. "Help keep her diverter clear. I'm going to the mechanic's depot to get another truck."

Bobby nodded, kicking a box out of his way. Jeff winced but didn't correct him. The last thing he needed was to uninspire his best loader. Even though he would probably cost the company thousands in damaged goods claim. But those were someone else's numbers, not Jeff's. He slipped between two parked package cars. Took off running for the mechanic's depot.

Not that Jeff advocated brutalizing the packages. But you worked and sweated and hustled the goddamned things so many hours on end that sometimes it got the best of you. So many boxes. A sea of boxes. Until one time you looked up and tried to grab one from the pile. You pulled and it wouldn't come free. Your sweaty hands slipped off the corners of the cardboard. You tried again. Reached over. Yanking. Your eyes about to explode. Twisting for leverage. Letting loose a wild scream as you forced your hands underneath and ripped fresh scratches in your skin. Gave one last tremendous pull that felt like it tore that vestigial tail right out of your spine, but got the box out along with its neighbors and you whipped your body around in some sort of torqued-out Saturday Night Fever disco move that launched the fucker twenty feet back into a package car so hard it flew past everything else and slammed into the back of the driver's seat. And it felt good. Renewed the spirit. Level set with the rest of the boxes that **you** were in

charge. Was probably no good for the damage claims but sometimes the soul needed room to abuse.

Jeff approached the mechanic's area and gave a quick look around for a likely candidate. Unified did not keep spare package cars. The only equipment back here would be damaged in some way. He needed something not too damaged. And big. Spotted one. Ran over and hopped in the driver's seat. Reached down for the tag dangling from the steering wheel.

"Drive shaft replacement" read the grease-smudged card. Ok. Not this one. He got out and slid into the next one, feeling the car dip sickeningly under his weight as he got in. Didn't even bother to read the card. Growing worried that he would not be able to find a car. What was he going to do with all those boxes?

He slid over into the next car. Read the card. "Oil change." YES! He flipped the key in the ignition. It roared alive. Blue exhaust smoke clouding out the back. He jammed it into gear. One of the mechanics came running over.

"Hey! You can't just take that."

"Watch me," Jeff shouted as he gunned it out of the mechanic's bay, tires squeaking on the polished concrete. He hoped they hadn't already drained the oil out.

Back at his slide he parked it butt-back to the slide. Squeezed out of the driver's chair and jogged through the package car to open the load doors. He emerged onto the slide and was immediately almost run down by Bobby, swaying towards him with a huge load of monitor boxes. Bobby slid past Jeff and loaded the boxes in a stack up near the driver's seat. Jeff gave a quick scan of the slide and was heartened

to see Marianne loading the rest of her cars. Bobby ran out of the new package car for the closest stack of monitors and Jeff followed close behind.

Fifteen minutes later Jeff's hands, shirt and tie were filthy from loading boxes with Bobby. Sweat soaked his undershirt, dripped into his eyes. Breathing hard. But they had most of them loaded. Jeff turned to congratulate Bobby when a crash shook the metal chute from the P-2 conveyor to their M-7 conveyor.

"Go clean up your area," he told Bobby. Bobby darted off. Jeff hopped onto the slide. Tried not to step on any boxes. Climbed all the way to the top to see over the metal rails of the conveyor onto his pickoff conveyor. Yanked his hands out of the way just as what looked like a 19th century wooden wagon wheel came bounding out of the chute. He ducked with hands over his head, waiting for the thing to jump the metal guard rails. Something that might have been his cell phone slipped from his pocket, clattering down the slide. The wheel hit the guard rail with a clang and collapsed back onto the pickoff conveyor. Goddamn. He regained his feet on the treacherously slippery slide. Where was his phone?

"Exception!" he shouted towards his pickoff station about 150 feet away. He peered through the gloom but did not see Simon in the pickoff. He stared for a long moment. Where was his pickoff? Then he remembered. "Oh no," he muttered. He'd forgotten all about climbing up to relieve him every thirty minutes. How long had it been? He looked at his watch as he worked his way, hand over hand on the pickoff conveyor rails to keep from slipping on

the steep slide, towards the pickoff slot. Maybe an hour?

Bobby had beaten him up to the pickoff and was standing on the ladder, but not moving up into the slot. Still no sign of Simon. Probably off in the bathroom.

“Get in there!” Jeff shouted at him, motioning with one hand. The entire contents of the conveyor flowed unsorted and unchecked in a solid wall towards the end of the pickoff conveyor. Goddamn why wasn’t Bobby moving?

“Bobby? What the hell are you doing?”

Bobby turned and gave Jeff a half open-mouthed look and wordlessly climbed back down from the pickoff slot to the slide below.

What the living hell was that? Jeff watched him go. Who was down there in the last loading station today? Who was just about to receive every unsorted box in an enema tidal wave of boxes? Oh no. Sesh, Jeff remembered.

Sesh was Jeff’s quiet-spoken, polite to a degree that stretched credulity, preloader on a family visa from India. Sesh had memorized all his loading configurations – over 2000 address ranges – in 5 days, taking home the charts every morning. Sesh’s parents had kept his little sisters out of school for that week to quiz him 10 hours a day. Sesh and his family needed this job. Jeff looked down to where Sesh continued to build his meticulous package stacks and load his 3 package cars like a surgeon in a particularly efficient operating room. Unaware that he was about to be flooded with a Biblical amount of boxes.

Jeff swung over to the pickoff slot to climb in and start sorting the packages. Almost stepped on

Simon's arm. "Don't come near me!" Simon barked at Jeff.

Jeff stopped. Confused.

Simon was hunkered semi-squatting against the far side of the pickoff slot. He held his arms around his knees, rocking small motions back and forth.

"You asshole!" Simon hissed. Then silence except for slide hum.

Jeff thought he heard a whimper. "Hey I'm sorry," he said, easing up into the slot. Which is when the smell hit him. Oh Jesus no. He swung back out of the pickoff slot. "Why didn't you call me?"

Simon was panting. "Big boxes. All those *fucking boxes.*"

"Yeah I know," Jeff said, guilt slashing through him. "But I would have helped you."

"I had it covered. Sorted. Then the last couple. Hell. I reached across the belt for one of those goddamn bull sperm barrels. Lost control. Of everything. Shit. Sorry man."

They heard Sesh call out from the end of the slide. Jeff looked down to the end of the slide. Sesh stood with both hands on his head, classic sky-is-falling pose, watching roughly 500 boxes smash into, around and over the metal diverters for his meticulously arranged area. Jeff sighed inwardly and turned back to Simon. The words "get yourself cleaned up and be back here at your station in 10 minutes" almost crossed his lips. He cleared his throat. Simon's right hand wiped sweat away from his cheek and that was it. Humanity won out over Unified training. Humanity actually battered Unified training.

“Hey, get the hell out of here, Simon,” Jeff said. “Go home. I’ll take it from here.”

Simon looked up at Jeff with a weird look on his face and Jeff realized Simon was mistaking Jeff’s repugnance with himself for disgust at the bodily faux pas Simon had wrought on Jeff’s pickoff station.

Before he could say anything he felt the pickoff ladder shake beneath him. He looked down. Bobby had returned. Like a StormTrooper clad in full-body bio-hazard gear from the Haz-mat closet; as if prepared to step out onto the surface of the earth’s moon. Bobby looked up at him. Jeff stared down wordlessly. His chest paralyzed. He had never been so close to crying openly at work, in front of other men. He closed his eyes and whispered hoarsely down the ladder, “what are you doing Bobby?”

There came no response except a soft cool sucking sound from the haz-mat suit’s mechanical respirator.

Jeff opened his eyes and saw Bobby was carrying rolls of paper towels and industrial cleaner. Behind them all, the boxes continued to flow past, unsorted like cars on a busy highway. Down at the end of the slide Sesh was running in and out of his package cars like a jerky 1920’s movie played at double speed.

Jeff was overwhelmed. No way to deal with this. He cringed at the thought of all his incomplete paperwork. He wanted to run off and hide in a closet. Fatigue grabbed at him. His eyes burned from months of too little sleep. People shouting anger all up and down his slide; a troop of angry baboons juiced towards murder by too little sleep. Bobby stared off to the distance through his haz-mat mask at Sesh’s area.

It suddenly hit Jeff. He was the only one who could fix this. Never mind the horrible salary. The horrible hours. The horrible way management treated him and in turn expected him to treat his employees. He was in charge. If he didn't act, this mess would still be here when the drivers got here. Hell, this mess might be here *forever*. The only way to deal with this was head on. "Simon. Get up. Get out of here. Bobby'll clean up the mess. Go punch out and go home."

Jeff jumped up into the pickoff slot. Ignored the smell. Started sorting. Rough feel of cardboard pumped action into him. "Bobby, after you clean this up get back to your area and stay there. I don't want you helping Sesh and if Travis tries to get you today you slap him until he weeps."

Bobby squeezed in behind him and helped Simon to his feet.

"Marianne!" Jeff shouted over his shoulder, sorting madly. "Marianne get over here!"

Simon climbed down from the pickoff slot, held himself stiffly and walked off for the restrooms over the M-7 office.

"What, Jeff?" Marianne called, exasperated from the bottom of the ladder.

"I need you to help out Sesh," Jeff answered. "Get down there."

"I can't," Marianne called back. "My own area is still blown out."

"I said get down there and help Sesh," Jeff ordered. He looked down for a second to make eye contact. Saw the indignance in her eyes. "Go," he ordered.

She stayed where she was. Jeff continued sorting.

“You may either go down the slide to help Sesh,” he called, “or you can go down the slide to punch out, go home and don’t come back.” He didn’t bother to watch if she went or not. His hands blurred in front of him, sorting left and right. All his mornings were general variations on the same theme; catastrophes experienced and recovered through forceful and creative responses. All in all this one wasn’t particularly bad, though. Which was a sad thought in a way.

Chapter 2

He cut the headlights. Rolled the truck through darkness to the far end of the highway rest-stop. Wind gusted out of the night into a line of pine trees on his right. He sat still in his truck, thinking, then tugged up the sleeve of his rain parka. Checked the luminescent watch face. The second hand seemed connected directly to his pulse. Like winding up a spring.

He exhaled shakily and snapped a half-smoked cigarette out the window. Kept his foot on the brake but shifted the truck into first gear to be ready. A fresh breeze blew in a spatter of rain. Fat drops rang on the hood. The darkness turning freshly alive with falling movement. Like nature gave a twitch of sympathy for the bastard driving toward him somewhere out there. He was not religious but he knew people who were. You would not have to be very devout to say a prayer at this moment, he thought. Instead he reached for another cigarette. A prayer for the lungs. He couldn't find his lighter though.

A distant flash sliced through the dark and interrupted his primitive search for fire. The light reflected off the interior of his truck, rounded the highway turn and resolved quickly into a slash of

headlights. The mammoth shape of an eighteen wheeler boomed past, dragging a double set of trailers behind it. Intensity radiated from the rig. The rain fell harder and as he watched all that rolling steel, doubt took a good healthy grip on his soul.

What had seemed a promising idea on a phone call 8 hours earlier this evening, had seemed a reasonable idea 3 hours earlier on the drive out, and had seemed like, well, a workable idea 5 minutes ago, now held all the potential of a failed physics equation. Ah, yes. *Inertia*. Ha, cough, ha. Yes. With a capital "I" and rolling on a whole screaming bunch of Goodyear radial re-treads.

Grimacing in the face of this lopsided equation he lifted his feet off the brake and clutch. Gunned it out of the rest-stop exit and took a sharp left onto the shell-paved emergency vehicle cross-over. Rolled through grit up onto smooth wet hissing blacktop, completing the U-turn 1000 yards or so behind the tractor-trailer rig. Take it easy. Troll along in third. Let him get up to the traffic light. Timing would be everything. Ok. Back up to speed. With his lips he pulled another cigarette from the pack. Glanced down on the seat beside him for the missing lighter but saw only the dead white shape of his previous unlit cigarette. Quite out of his mind, he realized. On the seat where the lighter should have been, gun metal gleamed black, freshly oiled in the red reflection of his dash lights. The sight made his stomach cramp.

He gave up again on the Zippo, reached over and popped in the truck's cigarette lighter. Eyes fixed straight ahead at fast-approaching tail lights in the distance that glowed in the dark like the eyes of a waiting dragon.

Twenty-five seconds later the highway traffic light flipped from red to green, waving on its wire in the wind. The big semi coasted through the intersection without stopping, wet brown fiberglass skin glistening faint green from the traffic light. The windshield wipers scraped another filmy smear across his vision. Impossible black weather beat against the glass. Thunder crashed bouncing through the rain.

Passed wholly under the traffic light David Floyd wondered what had caused them to go green on their own. Normally they defaulted red on the highway side. The town one mile up the road intended that drivers get used to slow speed for the 4 crossroads that constituted its presence on either side of the highway for half a mile.

He debated pulling over. The safety of himself and the rig against the urgency of the two long gray trailers riding behind him. Two trailers at 100 percent. 2,800 packages crammed floor to ceiling, front to back. A wind gust pounded cold rain through his open window, hit the full trailers behind him and jerked the steering wheel like the tail of a snake in his hands. As he corrected steering, he imagined swinging into the Austin trailer yard 30 minutes or so late.

The group of people who would be standing on the concrete tarmac waiting for him. Rain or no rain. A mixture of ties and shorts, supervisors and poor college student box humpers pulling in 8 or 10 bucks an hour. That didn't bother him. The supervisors were an over-caffeinated clan of excitable cheerleading monkeys. The haggard state

of the box humpers, so mangy and sweaty by 7am that sometimes their boots squished as they scampered into the back of fresh trailers, filled his tired heart with happiness. Seemed like one final justice before they graduated and became white-collar assholes who would forever look down on the honest race of truck drivers.

No, it would be the eyes of his fellow drivers that would burn the most. At this time of the morning guys would be finished with their paperwork. Already changed out of their driving uniforms. Most would have already headed home, but a lazy few would still be standing at the windows of the dispatch control tower, sipping coin-machine coffee out of paper cups. Chewing over fishing, women, boats. Watching Floyd pull in late. Amused at the sight of the goddamned non-unionized Austin trailer-yard driver, Claxton, standing with his skinny white legs poking down from his filthy blue shorts. Waiting beside the elevated row of phones where Floyd would have to give over control of his rig to the guy.

Because the union had caved on the last contract and if you were over 30 minutes late back to the yard you had to give up your rig when you hit the yard gates and called in to the dispatch tower. Even the drivers who despised Claxton as traitor to the union cause had to admit he could pop trailers on and off Unload doors twice as fast as any regular driver.

Still Claxton almost never had a chance to take a rig at the gate. Drivers didn't mind so much if Claxton took trailers they already parked in the yard themselves. That was just efficiency. But drivers would risk their trucks, cargo and sometimes fellow

highway travelers to keep from giving up control of their rig at the gate. To give up your rig before you had parked the trailers yourself was like letting some guy bring home the girl you'd brought to the dance.

It also didn't help that Claxton dressed out of an old Cheech and Chong movie. Long stringy hair in a bandanna. Weird Middle Eastern music crackling in the background of the radio calls from his cab. The whole package of the man an overt offence to the right-wing, gun-loving driver corps, who funny enough still voted over 90% Democrat because of the union thing.

The windows started to fog again. The defrost not helping. The wipers were just rhythmic decoration. The mechanic who had signed off on both repairs last night was the focus of a vast hatred blooming in David Floyd's chest.

He shifted, swallowed frustration and reached out to wipe at the front window with the same dirty glove he had used to hitch up the back trailer to the dolly 4 hours ago in the San Angelo trailer yard. He managed to open a crescent slice of visibility that he could see through if he hunched down. He bent his aching, numb and road-weary spine to peer through the small clear patch of windshield. Settled in like a unionized hunchback, he one-handed the top off the thermos beside him and took a shot of cold coffee. Resolved to think warm thoughts. Started by planning the mechanic's bludgeoning.

Far behind, pale glow headlights popped up on the crest of a hill then disappeared behind the next. He finished the cold coffee and reminded his road-weary mind to keep it in one lane for the next couple of miles. Checked the watch. Another hour

and a half and he'd be in bed. He might even forget the complaint against the mechanic. Too much paperwork at this time of the morning.

Dorothy Cobb turned the school bus off the highway down another unpaved road. The bus bucked. A branch scraped her side window like nails on chalkboard. She hadn't seen the hole in the road. The bus jerked back out into the middle of the two lanes. She pulled over fifty feet later. Her hands shook as she pulled the door lever.

"Hello Tamara." She forced herself to greet calmly the children tramping mud and leaves into her bus. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Hello Nathan," she said and received the normal obvious stare. "Please sit in the back row today. I don't want you even talking to Bradly today." Nathan nodded sullenly. Shuffled in and sat next to Bradly.

She pulled the door lever shut and tried not to compare her own children to the unruly, hopelessly rural children she gathered each morning in her bus. All children were the product of their environments. All God's children. And as long as they rode in her bus they were her children.

David Floyd leaned over the big steering wheel and checked the sky again. Rain had resumed, slashing horizontally against his windshield. He flicked on the dome light and checked his watch. The sun had supposedly been over the horizon for five minutes. He sighed. It would be like this the rest of the way in. Headlights

emerged behind him at the peak of the hill he had just topped.

"Damn," he breathed, watching in the rearview mirror. "Crazy Texas bastards."

The lights disappeared again as he passed the crest of the next hill. Floyd steered down the incline, glancing from the road to the side view mirror, watching. The headlights appeared quickly. They seemed to hang in the air at the top of the hill, yellow globes against the backdrop of splattered gray clouds, then they dropped. Streaked down at him.

He steered halfway onto the shoulder and flashed his brake lights as a precaution to the idiot. The headlights screamed up and past. A dark shape behind the steering wheel. Gravel from the shoulder sprayed the underside of Floyd's truck cab and he watched the quick switch from teardrop yellow headlights to shadowy steel body of a light import truck. The glowing orange point of a cigarette tip, then red tail-lights shot past like an airplane down a runway. It cruised down the slant into the valley between the hills then rose up the next hill like a Japanese import ghost pulled into the sky.

"Goddamn. Over a hundred," he muttered, swinging back off the shoulder up into the right lane, feeling the bump travel front to rear under his tires. Something vaguely familiar about the passenger truck. He didn't really care how fast the natives drove as long as they kept to their own side of the road.

Driving the hours after bars closed and men traded barstools for driver's seats--not thinking much of the difference between the two--had taught him not to be too proud about giving them both lanes if they wanted them.

Dorothy noticed the dirt road had been recently sprinkled with shell. The shell made the water run more or less to the sides and left most of the road manageable. It also made the sides quagmires and Dorothy Cobb kept her eyes firmly on the road. She had made all but the last of her scheduled stops. The last stop was still a couple hundred yards away, after the dirt road intersected the highway again. She looked up in the mirror, cocked to keep an eye on her children.

Like moths hatching from sluggish larvae the children had discarded their sleepy shells. Her own children were so well-behaved that she had little practice in disciplinary action. She cringed as one of the little boys threw his lunch pail across three rows of seats. Another boy caught it and sent it flying back.

She was about to call back a lecture concerning proper school bus conduct when the steering wheel went soft in her hands. Horrified, she looked down from the mirror. Outside visibility was barely five feet but it was obvious the right front wheel was digging into the deep mud on the right side of the road. Her breath caught in her lungs. She was running off the road!

She braked hard and spun the weightless steering wheel back to the left. Startled cries came from the back of the bus then screams of delight as the children crowded to the windows and saw the mud.

The right wheel dug against the side of the shell for another five feet before it popped back onto the road. The bus lurched up like a tank. The

children groaned. Accidents were much more exciting. Mrs. Cobb's hand shook as she held it firmly up in the aisle. Had a tire popped? How would she ever change a tire on something this big?

"Sit down you little beasts!" she screamed. Shame bloomed on her cheeks and she hoped they hadn't heard her. "Sit down right now you children!" She continued, still resisting the sudden urge to stop the bus, walk back down the aisle and slap every last one of them right into Saturday. Especially that insolent Nathan Daniels who stared at nothing but her chest when going in or out of her bus. She checked. He was creeping back up the aisle of the bus, fist cocked, towards the unsuspecting head of Bradly.

"Nathan! Back to your seat!" She watched as he actually obeyed her. Ok. Two deep breaths and a conscious relaxation of her shoulders. Calm down. They couldn't help how they were raised and she resumed feeling ashamed at how she was representing educated, non-rural people to the children.

"It's simply not safe, children," she called back in a forced milder tone. "It's simply not safe," she repeated to herself and slowed down for a careful turn onto the highway then the long simple straight shot to the school.

The man in the import passenger truck took a deep breath and tapped his brakes. Then he downshifted to third, to second. Came to a stop and executed a neat three point turn-around in the middle of the highway, wishing like hell he'd

thought of a better way to do this. In fact, was he really doing this?

His truck sat unnaturally still, facing the wrong way on a road built for incessant motion. Idling. Rain drummed on the roof. And he waited. Waited for a tractor-trailer rig to pop out of the rain. Directly at him? Maybe a little like Nolan Ryan's catchers felt through the years, watching him huge and glaring up there on the mound. Knowing that whatever smoke the big Texan was going to bring, he'd have to put himself, body, soul and jockstrap, in front of it. He thought of the chances. Death, mutilation, disfigurement, terror. All words they might use in the papers tomorrow to describe the next few moments.

Maybe the guy in the rig would be looking out his window. Maybe messing with his radio. No assurances at all he would see the headlights facing out at him like pathetic twin fireflies in this storm. At least not in time to steer clear of him.

He put a nervous finger on the high beam switch. Checked his gas gauge. Maybe he should lean out and get off a few shots with the pistol at first sight of the rig? Take out the windshield? Wake the bastard right up with a few safety-glass fragments imbedded in his cheek? Reinforce that turning instinct.

With his right hand he tightened the seatbelt up from across his lap over the shoulder. Debated silently the wisdom of that for a second. Yeah, that's what you want to do. Strap yourself in tight when expecting fifty tons of steel to roll over you. Did they have the jaws of life out here? Or would some rusted-out wrecker from Bastrop show up in an old Armadillo tank-top with a crowbar?

He looked up and tried not to think, feeling worse and worse about things with every passing moment. Slow-moving red lights suddenly appeared at the top of the hill. Red? he thought.

Floyd drove almost blindly up the next hill. The valley on the other side cupped a maelstrom. Like driving into the solid surface of a lake perched up on its side. Lightning cracked close-by and a strong wind blew the rain in sheets across the road. Hail pellets cracked into the metal and glass of his truck cab. Visibility less than ten feet with the broken wipers and he decided that load or no load, overtime or not, obscene locker pin-ups and piss-poor record be damned, he was getting off the highway. Hell, Claxton could come and get the trailers from out here for all he cared now.

A flash of high beamed headlights suddenly poked at him through the sloshing sheets of rain in the right lane. *His lane.* His heart lodged in his chest like an iron spike. Owing that his intention had been to get off the road anyway his reaction was almost immediate.

He slammed down the clutch and jammed the shifter into a low gear position. Remembered to stay clear of the brakes. He popped the clutch. Felt the first sick loss of traction. Too low of a gear. Oh God. Don't roll over. Don't roll over. He stepped on the clutch again. Steering wheel hard right with an instinctive mirror glance to check the trailer line behind him. Got it into another gear. The right front wheel bounced off onto the rough shoulder and the trailers started to rock and slide sideways on the pavement. Still too low of a gear ratio. The sudden

torque of the lower gear had caused the wheels to lock up. Screw it. He stomped both feet on the brakes. Gravity, friction and several different lines of inertia battled over control of the rig.

He glanced down below the driver's door where he should be sliding into the stalled truck, but the idiot was backing out of his crash line. The left corner of Floyd's rig flicked almost about half a millimeter into the driver's side door of the asshole, then he was past him and the spine-wrenching jerk as the trailers finally followed the tractor onto the shoulder. He quick-checked the mirrors again and saw the bump had actually moved the trailers more in line with the cab. A gleam of red on his right vision periphery. He looked back up to where he should have been looking all along and threw the steering wheel back to the left, useless, his screams loud, alien to his own ears in the truck cab.

Dorothy Cobb exhaled relief and activated the flashing red caution lights as she turned from the shell road onto the shoulder of the highway. The last four children would be waiting fifty yards down, halfway to the bottom of the large hill. She wanted them to see her approaching through the heavy rain. She wasn't supposed to turn on the lights until stopped but she had little patience this morning after the tire incident.

Rain whipped crazily across the front of the bus and she slowed to crawling speed. After ten yards, she stopped the bus, keeping an eye on the side mirror for traffic as she pulled open the door. Four wet children trudged in out of the dark and up the steps.

When the children were settled in the back, she switched off the red flashing lights and started the bus down the shoulder. Then, the strangest thing. Headlights were pointing at her, barely visible in the distance. Stopped on her side of the highway. She shook her head. Rural people with no respect for the law. Probably heading back for his missed turn-off. She decided to hurry past it on the shoulder.

Two seconds later, glancing into the side view mirror, she saw different headlights. Behind her. Approaching. She flicked on her red loading lights. The headlights resolved into a sliding tractor trailer rig breaking through the rain and pounding hail. It was swerving to miss the passenger truck. She sucked in a breath. "My God," she heard the whisper from her lips. With nightmare speed the only three vehicles on the highway moved together like three magnets.

Out of some misplaced instinct she slammed a sneakered foot hard on the brake pedal but this only added to the disparity of speed between the two vehicles. The right front of the sliding tractor crashed into the rear of her bus, riding up the rear bumper. Crushing.

Mrs. Cobb felt her foot back off the brake pedal as the truck impacted and the bus accelerated and moved out from under her. The bodies in the bus were still moving at about ten miles per hour while the bus and its seats almost instantly accelerated out from underneath them to forty-five. This meant Mrs. Cobb's head hit the head-rest at about thirty-five miles per hour; like being dropped on her head from a height of fifty-six feet. The head socked against the vinyl headrest then rebounded,

pulling her body halfway over the steering wheel, the head into the windshield. A bulge accompanied by a bright red splatter mark splintered the shatter-proof glass. At this point, though, all drivers were superfluous to the equation.

Floyd, still conscious, watched as the back rows of the bus disappeared under the wheels of his tractor. All controls in front of him useless. His body felt about to explode from the adrenaline dump. Legs twitched uncontrollably under the steering wheel. The trailers finally rolled. The wheels came off the road and pulled the bus and tractor over onto their sides. The whole tangled mess slid off the shoulder. Hissed into the wet grass, trailing broken pieces of metal, plastic and white friction smoke. An endless slide. No sense of slowing down until right at the end.

Everything finally came to a stop some one hundred and ninety feet later. Like applause, the hail intensified its metallic beating.

The passenger truck, further up the highway, stopped reversing. Gears clicked and tires spun briefly for traction. It drove quickly back up the road to stop where the trailers and bus had left the shoulder. Hazards lights flicked active.

The driver reached onto the seat beside him with a shaking hand. Shouldered out into the rain. Ran on stiff legs from the truck. The wreckage was not visible from the highway so he followed the scraped furrows dug in the grass where it looked like an enterprising and desperate Russian had tried to land an Aeroflot Tupolev without landing gear.

Five steps down and he saw the first packages. God. Boxes everywhere. Crumpled, crushed and muddy. Already the cardboard splotted dark from the rain. His mind twisting, frozen in shock. Where had the school bus come from? Of all things to roll down the highway. He reached the main wreckage in ten seconds, taking care not to slip in the mud where the grass had been scraped clear. He stopped, looking at the school bus as though he had never seen one. Something wearing brown hush-puppies lay half in and half out of one of the school bus windows. Not moving. Indecision punctuated by pain creased his face and he looked away from it. His eyes closed and he breathed raggedly, standing very still in the rain. His left hand clenched into a fist, rainwater ran over white knuckles. The rain and hail beat tight against twisted metal. He opened his eyes and started for the bus. Then his face hardened. He stopped, turned to the big semi cab.

It was on its side, driver's side up. The cab had disengaged from the bus somewhere near the end of the long slide. The windshield of the cab was missing. He stepped over to it and leaned in. The hood warmed his left shoulder. Floyd hung from his lap belt, legs trapped under the crushed steering wheel. He reached up and felt for a pulse on Floyd's neck. Then he reached down and began to rummage through the mess of papers lying against the passenger door.

He found what he was looking for and stuffed the bright yellow, heavily taped envelope under his parka. He stood back, steadying himself with one hand against the hood. One hand went

beneath his parka and brought out the pistol. He pressed it against David Floyd's temple.

His finger tightened on the curved steel trigger. He stopped. Looked at the face he was about to destroy. With a sudden metallic creak the truck shifted on the slope and the bullet exploded beside Floyd's head into the passenger seat. The spent cartridge clicked off somewhere in the cab and the shooter slipped as the hood of the trailer nudged him like a playful dog, sending him sliding into the wet grass ten feet further down the embankment. He got halfway to his feet quickly like a crab righting itself and crouched there for a moment. All that mass perched just over his head. The next whisper of an angel sending it down onto him. A scream pierced the blowing rain.

It probably came from the wreckage of the bus but with all the wind the terrible sound swirled around him and seemed to surround him. He eased out of the truck's potential fall line. His parka heavy with mud. He waited for the scream to break off, weighing the chances, feeling for the odds of another chance at Floyd. He couldn't afford witnesses. Weighed that need against not thinking he could stand contributing more butchery to this scene than he already unintentionally had.

New voices, startled, like wild animals in pain, joined into the original scream. Wet small moans that sent shivers over his forearms.

He eased around the upended truck and trailers, taking care not to touch the truck and staying out of sight of the bus. He finally cleared the last trailer. Followed the spilled mass of packages. Clutched the yellow, taped envelope tight under his parka and jogged back up the slippery path to the highway. His hands were dirty, his

throat swollen and sore. He tucked the filthy parka under the spare tire in the bed of the truck then got into the cab. Despite the incredible urge to flee, he sat still. How much of his humanity was he leaving back there in the mud of human and mechanical wreckage? What kind of human drove away from children in pain? He banished all thoughts. Started the truck. He drove away.