

THE HUNGRY GODS GO TO THE
CHAIN-UP

N. Van Seters & Claude

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INTERLUDE I

ROAD CHANNEL · 0500-0700

COLDWATER BASE: All units, all units, this is Coldwater Base. Special corridor forecast is received and posted. Confirm receipt by unit.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One, received.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One, received. Is it the fifteen or the twenty?

COLDWATER BASE: Loader One, Coldwater Base. Fifteen to twenty over twelve hours, summit and approaches, onset after eighteen hundred.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One. So the twenty.

COLDWATER BASE: Loader One, Coldwater Base. Fifteen to twenty.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One. Copy the twenty.

COLDWATER BASE: All units, this is Coldwater Base. Callout list is active. Brine production commences zero six hundred at the Coldwater yard. Fuel all units to full before end of shift and confirm by unit.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. Fuelled.

COLDWATER BASE: Hand One, Coldwater Base. The shift has not started.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. Fuelled anyway.

COLDWATER BASE: Parts Room, Coldwater Base. Confirm cutting edges on hand, quantity eight.

PARTS ROOM: Coldwater Base, Parts Room. Quantity eleven.

COLDWATER BASE: Parts Room, Coldwater Base. Inventory shows eight.

PARTS ROOM: Coldwater Base, Parts Room. Inventory is behind.

COLDWATER BASE: All-Seeing, Coldwater Base. Radio check on station feeds, Box Canyon north and south, Zopkios north and south, summit, Great Bear north.

ALL-SEEING: Coldwater Base, All-Seeing. All feeds up. Pavement minus two and holding. Air minus four. Wind southwest fourteen.

COLDWATER BASE: All-Seeing, Coldwater Base. Received.

MERRITT BASE: Coldwater Base, Merritt Base on the shared channel.

Confirming we are on standby per protocol and awaiting your call, which you will not need to make.

COLDWATER BASE: Merritt Base, Coldwater Base. Received, with thanks.

MERRITT BASE: Coldwater Base, Merritt Base. It was not offered warmly.

COLDWATER BASE: Merritt Base, Coldwater Base. Received warmly regardless.

COLDWATER BASE: Yard, Coldwater Base. Who has the key to the sand shed.

YARD: Coldwater Base, Yard. Say again.

COLDWATER BASE: Yard, Coldwater Base. The sand shed. The key. Who is in possession.

YARD: Coldwater Base, Yard. Request you identify which sand shed, this designation being insufficiently specific under current procedure.

COLDWATER BASE: Yard, Coldwater Base. There is one sand shed.

YARD: Coldwater Base, Yard. Then I have the key to it.

COLDWATER BASE: All units, all units, this is Coldwater Base. Tow services staging at Zopkios by sixteen hundred. CVSE at Box Canyon. Chain-up signage activates when directed. Next general broadcast at twelve hundred. Coldwater Base out.

OPEN

THE FORECASTER · STORM MINUS 18 HOURS

The model run finished at 4:41 in the morning and I was awake for it, which tells you something about the profession, though I have never worked out exactly what.

Three models. The American one wanted twenty-six centimetres at the summit. The Canadian one wanted fourteen. The European one, which is the best dressed of the three and knows it, wanted nineteen and would not be talked out of it. Nineteen splits the difference so politely that you learn to distrust it, the model equivalent of a man agreeing with both sides of an argument at a dinner party. But the trigger for the corridor is fifteen to twenty over twelve hours, and all three were over the line, and when all three models clear the trigger you do not get to have a personality about it. You write the forecast.

I write a special forecast for one road. That is the job, or the part of the job that matters between November and April. Other meteorologists forecast for regions, for airsheds, for the agricultural southeast. I forecast for a strip of pavement one hundred and twenty kilometres long and the width of five lanes at its widest, and the strip has opinions. It rises from near sea level at Hope to 1,244 metres at the summit and it crosses more climate in an hour of driving than most provinces manage in a day.

The forecast has a distribution list, and the list is a social order: maintenance contractor first, ministry second, avalanche program third, then commercial vehicle enforcement, flagging, and the tow operators, in a sequence I did not design and would not dare reorder. Once, in my second winter, a software update alphabetized the list, and the phone calls I received that morning were as close as this industry comes to a constitutional crisis.

Lindqvist called at 5:10. The supervisor there is a man who increases his contact with me as the trigger approaches, which is what the protocol instructs him to do, and which he would do anyway, protocol or not, in the manner of a man checking that a ladder is held even after being assured that it is held.

“Onset,” he said. No greeting. In fairness it was 5:10.

“After eighteen hundred. Probably twenty-one hundred at the summit.”

“Probably.”

“That is a professional term,” I said. “It means I have three models and they are not speaking to each other.”

“Rate?”

“Two to four an hour once it establishes. There may be a band that does better.”

“Better,” he said.

“Worse,” I agreed. “There may be a band that does worse.”

He was quiet for a moment, and I could hear the yard behind him, a loader running somewhere, a door. “Freezing rain?”

“Not on this one. Snow to start, snow to finish. Temperature falls all the way through. Pavement goes through minus nine sometime overnight tomorrow, if the second wave comes in as modelled.”

People think forecasting is the practice of knowing the future. It is the opposite. It is the professional practice of not knowing, done carefully, with documentation. An amateur will tell you what tomorrow holds. I will tell you the range of tomorrows, their relative likelihoods, my confidence in each, and the hour at which I will next revise everything I have said. The models are not oracles. They are three colleagues with different educations shouting in a room, and my job is to write the minutes.

Here is the strange machinery at the centre of it. Everything the contractor is required to do after a storm hangs from the storm’s ending, and the ending has a legal definition: a weather event has ended after the last measurable precipitation. Measurable. A trace does not count. So somewhere in the next three days, a flake will fall that is the final flake, and no one will know it at the time, and then an interval will pass, and somewhere in an office the interval will harden into a fact,

and clocks will start. I am not forecasting snow. Everyone can forecast snow; look up. I am forecasting when the ending will have officially happened, which is a different and stranger question, and the honest answer on a multi-wave system is that the storm will end several times before it ends.

At 5:40 the production company called. Overlander Media. They make the television program about the road — the tow trucks, the winches, the men in toques looking at things that have gone over embankments. A researcher, very courteous, wanting the corridor forecast.

“It isn’t issued yet,” I said.

“Right,” she said. “But is it going to be a big one?”

“When it’s issued, you’ll have it. You’re on the list.” They are, too. Twelfth. It took two winters of correspondence.

“But between us.”

“There is no between us. There is a distribution list.”

She took it well. They always take it well; taking it well is most of that industry. They call before every event, and they always call before the forecast exists, as though the knowledge were a wheel of cheese I was keeping in a back room and might cut into early for a good customer. I mentioned this once to the supervisor at Lindqvist, the mystery of how the producers always seemed to know to call, and he said producers call every morning it looks grey in Vancouver, and are right by volume, the shotgun being the most reliable of all forecasting instruments.

I issued at 6:02. Fifteen to twenty centimetres over twelve hours, summit and approaches, onset after eighteen hundred, snowfall rates of two to four centimetres per hour, temperatures falling through the event, pavement temperatures expected to reach minus nine overnight on the second day. Two attachments. One apology for the hour, addressed to no one in particular, in the subject line, where I always put it.

Then I sat with my coffee and my three quarrelling colleagues and did the thing I do not put in any correspondence, which is to want. Every forecaster wants the same thing and none of us will say it at conferences. I do not want to be right. Right is not available; the atmosphere is a fluid and the fluid does not consult the minutes. What

I want is to be wrong by less than three hours. Onset within three hours of stated, rates within a band, the minus-nine crossing within my window. That is the ambition, and I would rather not examine it at 6:15 in the morning, before the first flake, with the road still dry and everyone on the distribution list reading my three tomorrows and choosing, as they must, to prepare for the worst-dressed one.

The European model, incidentally, revised at noon. Twenty-two.

No one likes the Europeans in this business. They are right too often, and too calm about it.

OPEN, WINTER CONDITIONS

THE PLOW OPERATOR · STORM HOUR 2

We were out ahead of it, which people find surprising when I tell them, as though the job were reactive, as though we sat in the yard listening for snow the way firemen listen for bells. The truth is the first pass of a storm happens on dry pavement. Anti-icing, they call it, which is the ministry's way of saying we paint the road with salt brine before anything falls, so that what falls has nothing to grip. Down the southbound lanes at forty, booms out, brine hissing, under a sky the colour of a nickel. A tourist passed me near Falls Lake and honked, gesturing at the clear road, the dry sky, the general absence of any justification for my existence. I get that honk every storm. I have come to think of it as the starter's pistol.

The snow established at nine in the evening, which put the forecast inside its window, and she would want to know that, the forecaster; they keep score over there in some private currency of hours. By eleven we were in the rhythm. Ninety minutes is the number. Slush and broken compact off all travelled lanes within ninety minutes on a Class A highway, which sounds generous until you do the arithmetic of a road that is one hundred and twenty kilometres long and receiving, on its worst stretch, four centimetres an hour. The rhythm is everything. You run your beat, you turn, you run it back, and if the cycle is holding you meet your own tracks still black. That is the scoreboard, all of it: the colour of the lane where you left it.

First cycle, black. Clean pass, wing carrying the berm well right, the truck ahead of me in echelon holding a line so exact I could have plowed blind off his tail lights.

I should say something about him, the echelon partner, because the shift assignments put us together most storms and I have never once had to speak to him off the channel. Best wing operator on the crew.

Big quiet unit, keeps his cab dark, runs his overlap tight to my lane so that the two of us clear five metres of pavement in one moving seam with maybe forty centimetres of grace between his steel and my line. Forty centimetres, at fifty kilometres an hour, in falling snow, for four hours. It is not that he never crowds me. It is that the question of him crowding me has never existed. Some men you work beside for years and build trust. With him there was nothing to build. The trust was sitting there complete the first night, like a house you inherit.

Second cycle, grey. The rate had come up. Near Box Canyon a Two Hills Transport unit ground past in the right lane, chains on, doing the smart slow crawl, a chrome mud flap with a rearing horse on it catching my low beam. Alberta plates. Going over the top into the teeth of it, some warehouse in Surrey pulling him west with delivery hours on the clock. I gave him room and he gave me a flash of his markers, which on this road at night is a full conversation, warmly conducted.

Third cycle, white. I came around at Larson Hill and met my own start point and it had not held. Snow standing on my lane, two centimetres and building, my last pass erased as though the erasing were the point of it, and here is the thing I would tell you about this work if you rode with me long enough to earn it: that moment is not a defeat, it is the job clarifying itself. Everything before that moment is maintenance. Everything after it is the storm and you, and the ninety-minute clock, and the arithmetic turning over. The plan does not fail. The plan just moves into the past tense while you are still executing it, and you keep executing it, because the alternative is worse arithmetic.

The blade, by the by, does not touch the road. People never believe this. The front plow rides on shoes, steel feet that hold the cutting edge just clear of the pavement, so what I leave behind is a skiff, a film, a whisper of snow — and the whisper is intentional, the pavement's protection and mine. The scraping, the true down-pressure scraping, belongs to the graders and the belly plows, and their hour comes in the cleanup phase, days from now, after the ending has officially happened. There is a hierarchy of steel in this business, and the storm decides nothing about it; the contract decided it years ago.

The contract also decided which lane matters. Four centimetres tolerance on the driving lane, eight on the passing lane. Somebody in

an office weighed the lanes and found one worth twice the other, and I understand the reasoning and have signed nothing agreeing to feel it. My passing lane goes out as clean as my driving lane. Every cycle, both lanes, one seam. The wing operator holds his overlap to make it so and has never asked why, and I have never said, and there is a real chance we are both doing it for the same unsayable reason, which is that the road does not know what class it is.

Around one in the morning a light stood off the Zopkios pullout that was not a vehicle working. Camera. The television people run a single operator in weather like this, one man or woman alone with a lens and a battery belt, and this one had the long glass out, filming the echelon as we came up the hill. I know what that footage looks like. I have seen the program. Two plows moving as one machine through the lit snow, and they will put music under it, and a narrator will use the word ballet.

It is not ballet. It is keeping the berm off the passing lane. The overlap exists so the seam between us does not leave a windrow down the centreline, and the precision is not grace, it is that a windrow at highway speed is a wall. But I have thought about it since, the one operator standing in the cold at one in the morning to film men who would rather not be filmed doing a thing correctly, and of the two of us I could not tell you who had the stranger night.

The channel stayed busy. The parts room had a small miracle before midnight — Hand Two called in a hydraulic fitting weeping on the wing ram, resigned to finishing the shift down a function, and the parts room came back with the fitting on hand, the exact fitting, boxed, on the shelf, requisitioned the previous Tuesday. Nobody remembered raising the requisition. The parts man read out the form number as proof against the general disbelief. Good inventory is like that, the yard says: it looks like foresight if you keep it up long enough. The crew's position is that the parts room has never once been caught without the part, and that this is either the finest stock management in the province or something the union should look into.

The Sons jokes started early this storm. Lindqvist and Sons is the name on my door, on my pay stub, on the performance report the ministry reads every month, and no one on either crew has ever met a

Lindqvist. The name plows nothing. The name signs things. So on the channel we work for the Sons, we suffer for the Sons, and when the callout list reached a man on holiday in Osoyoos, the general finding was that the Sons had willed it.

My daughter is due on the ninth. First one. Kamloops General. Her husband sent the yard a box of cigars three weeks early, which tells you everything about her husband, and the ninth is the day after tomorrow, and the second wave of this system is due the same night, and I have looked at both forecasts, hers and the corridor's, and have made no comment on the timing to anyone.

Fourth cycle. White again at Larson Hill. The clock turned over and I turned with it.

THE SUPERVISOR · STORM HOUR 8

There is a checklist for this storm and I will tell you a secret about it: it is green. Every line. Callout list activated, twenty-two of twenty-four reached, two alternates slotted, green. Brine produced and loaded, green. Fleet fuelled, green — fuelled before the shift, in one case, which I have chosen to record as initiative. Tow services staged at Zopkios by sixteen hundred, green. CVSE on station at Box Canyon, green. Chain-up signage activated twenty-one forty, green. The protocol has ten steps and we have performed all ten in order and on time, and Enter that into whatever record survives this shift, because the road closed anyway at four minutes past three in the morning, and I am the man who will sit in the review, and the review will want to know what failed.

Nothing failed. That is the finding I will be defending. Nothing failed, and it closed.

The operations room is a wall of screens and a coffee machine with a handwritten sign on it that says BE THE STORM YOU WISH TO SEE, which no one admits to writing. The screens carry the station feeds — Box Canyon north and south, Zopkios both directions, the summit camera, Great Bear north — plus the weather stations reporting every twenty minutes: air temperature, pavement temperature, wind, precipitation rate. The feed console has a unit designation on the channel like everything else in this operation, and the man who sits at it on nights is the calmest employee the Sons have ever paid. All-Seeing, on the log; he signs it All-Seeing and I have never thought to ask why, the way you never ask why the yard tractor is called the yard tractor. He does not predict. He does not editorialize. He reads the numbers when asked and sometimes before being asked, at exactly the moment the number becomes the one you need, which is a knack, and knacks are

not auditable, so I have stopped noticing it in any way that generates paperwork. What he reads is not the screen. Twice this event a feed went dark — a station down, a camera iced over, nothing where the number should be — and both times he told me what the dark feed would have said, from the shape of the ones around it, and both times the station came back and he was inside a tenth of a degree. He reads the gap between the feeds the way the rest of us read the feeds. I have watched him report a curb icing at Box Canyon off a camera pointed at Zopkios, and be right, and file it without appearing to think it strange that he could.

Pavement temperature at midnight: minus five point five and falling. That number matters more than any other number in this room, and it matters on account of a line in the specification I have read aloud to new hires the way other men read safety poetry. Above minus nine, the contract requires bare pavement, and the chemicals work, and the road is a road. Below minus nine, the chemistry quits, and the specification changes its mind about what the road is. *Compact conditions are allowed.* That is the wording. Allowed. Snow and ice compressed to a solid mass, forty millimetres of it, legally resident on a Class A highway, provided we keep it smooth. The same ice that is a deficiency at minus eight is infrastructure at minus ten. I did not write the specification. The specification is smarter than I am. But there is a number on screen four that decides which road I am running tonight, and it was falling.

The trouble, when it came, was not the snow. I want to be precise, for the review, about the sequence, because the sequence is everything and no single line of it contains a decision.

Twenty-three fifty: rate exceeds three centimetres an hour on Snowshed Hill. Plows cycling at ninety minutes, holding.

Zero zero forty: first commercial spinout, northbound, between Box Canyon and the snowshed. Unchained. He had come through before the signage activated, or around it, or past it; there are men who treat the chain-up as a toll they can beat. One truck sideways across the centre lane. Recovery dispatched from Zopkios — staged two hours before the storm for exactly this, the protocol reaching out of its binder and placing a wrecker where the wreck would be.

Zero one twenty: second and third spinouts, same grade. Here is where the arithmetic turns. A plow cannot cycle through a stopped truck. The lane the plow cannot reach receives the four centimetres an hour that the plow can no longer remove, and the four centimetres an hour is what stops the next truck. I have tried to explain this shape to the ministry in three different post-event reviews and I will try again in this one: the trucks stop the plows and the stopped plows stop more trucks, and there is no first cause in it anywhere, no author, no moment a man in this room or any room chose closure. The closure assembled itself on the hill out of its own materials, the same as the weather did.

Zero two thirty: crews report they cannot cycle Snowshed Hill in either direction. Traffic control repositioning the queue back to the staging pullout, clear of the avalanche paths, per the specification, which has a clause for where waiting people are allowed to exist.

Zero three zero four: the event went into the system. Both directions, Hope to Merritt. The DriveBC entry published with the wording the ministry keeps for these hours, and I heard it read back on the channel by a driver with his radio keyed to the cab speaker, the phrasing coming through flat and official over the idle of two hundred diesel engines: an assessment is in progress and there is no estimated time of reopening.

No estimated time of reopening. I have typed those words myself in other winters. There is no crueller honest sentence in the inventory. It is not that we will not tell you. It is that the estimate does not exist, cannot exist, has no materials to be built from, and the sentence says so with its hands open.

I called nobody for permission. That belongs in the record too, not as confession but as geography. People imagine a closure has an owner. The ministry closes for hazard; the police close for their own reasons on their own authority; and this closure, the commonest kind on this road, was closed by the aggregate behaviour of forty drivers, ratified by an entry in a database. There was nobody to call. I have sat in this chair eleven winters and the hardest part of the job to explain is that its biggest event has no verb with my name on it.

The feed console read me the numbers at shift change without being asked. Pavement minus seven point one. Air minus nine. Wind northeast twenty, gusting. Rate holding at three.

“Trend on pavement,” I said.

“Falling. Through minus nine tomorrow night, on the current curve.”

“The forecaster said the same.”

“Then you have two sources,” he said, and turned back to the wall, and on the screens the snow came down through the camera lights at Box Canyon in long diagonals, steady, at the stated rate, exactly as issued, and every light on my checklist was green, and the road was closed, and in the review I would say the sentence I had been drafting since zero three zero four: everything worked.

THE BRAKE CHECK · STORM HOUR 14, NIGHT

The threshold is 11,794 kilograms licensed gross vehicle weight. Not 11,800. Not “about twelve tonnes.” Eleven thousand seven hundred and ninety-four, a number with the fingerprints of two committees on it, and when the lights are on, everything at or over that number chains up before the hill. I have recited the number all night. I recite it the way the pharmacist recites the dosage, without heat, as a fact of the licensed world, and tonight, at the hour I am describing, a driver stood on my scale line insisting his tractor ran 11,700 licensed, ninety-four kilograms of argument between him and the mountain, waving the registration like a winning ticket.

The registration said 13,600. He had been reading the tare.

“That’s the empty weight,” I said.

“I’m empty.”

“You’re licensed. The lights don’t weigh you, they read your licence.”

He chained up. They almost all chain up. The objection is a ritual, a small ceremony of dignity before the kneeling in the slush, and I have learned to allot it ninety seconds and stand quietly in the falling snow while it discharges. I keep, in my head, where the ministry cannot audit it, a taxonomy of the excuses, and after fourteen winters the collection has the depth of a museum. The Empty Runner you have met. The Southern Man, who informs me that in Texas nobody chains anything. The Physicist, who explains that his particular load, on his particular tires, generates traction unknown to the manufacturers. The Fatalist, who says if it’s his time it’s his time, and is sent to sit in the fatalism of the parking area until his time improves. Tonight added two species new to science. A man told me he could not chain up on religious grounds, and when I asked which religion, he took so long to invent one that we both started laughing, and he chained up mid-laugh,

which I recorded as voluntary compliance. And a woman running a reefer unit out of Red Deer told me the chains were a conspiracy of the chain manufacturers, while installing them, expertly, in under seven minutes. The conspiracy has excellent technique, I told her. She said that was how you knew it was real.

The left-lane ban I enforce with a lighter hand, because the hill enforces it first. Commercial vehicles out of the far left lane on Snowshed Hill, Box Canyon to Zopkios, both directions. The left lane is where the plows live, the escape channel, the one seam the maintenance operation cannot surrender, and a truck that wanders into it during a storm is standing in the fire lane of the mountain itself.

A Two Hills Transport unit came through my line about midnight. Chains hung right the first time, tensioners seated, walked his own rig with a flashlight before I reached him, had the log open on the seat for the asking. Alberta outfit. The snow had been at his door decal since Kamloops and it read TWO HIL, which gave him a vaguely Welsh appearance. I waved him through and he raised two fingers off the wheel, and that was the entire transaction, and I would trade forty of the taxonomy for ten of him. He was the night's argument for the job.

The relief officer worked the far end of the line most of the night. Big fellow, older, borrowed vest with the reflective piping gone grey, one of the extras they position from the regional pool when the protocol activates. I never caught the unit number on his shoulder. What I caught was the compliance. Every driver he approached chained up without discharge of ritual. No Empty Runners at his end of the line, no Physicists, no ninety-second ceremonies; he would lean at a cab window for a moment, and the driver would climb down and go to the hooks, sometimes before the window was fully up, in one case, I would nearly swear, before the window opened at all. At two I sent him the Southern Man — my Southern Man, mid-speech, Texas already invoked — and watched the speech end at the vest like weather at a wall. The man chained up without finishing his sentence and looked, if anything, relieved, in the manner of a guest excused from giving a toast. What the relief officer did, when a driver made his case, was not argue it. He waited until the case was fully out, every word of it, and then he said no. Just the one word, and not to the man — I watched

this and I am sure of it — but to the thing the man had proposed, as though the proposition were a third party in the conversation and the driver merely its lawyer. No, he told the argument, and the argument had nowhere to go after that, because it had not been engaged, it had been declined, and there is no appeal against a man who will not pick the argument up. Fourteen winters I have been collecting objections, and this man walked the line all night without harvesting one. I stood in the cold and watched it happen four trucks running and worked out what it was. Some guys have the voice for it. That is all. There is a register some men carry that arrives before the argument does, and the rest of us make do with the number.

The bulletin came through at 0304 on the CVSE channel and the road channel both. Closed both directions, Hope to Merritt. The word-ing travels at these hours; a driver three vehicles back had DriveBC read aloud by his phone with the cab speaker on, the sentence drifting up the line in that municipal monotone — an assessment is in progress and there is no estimated time of reopening — and the line received it the way a waiting room receives a delay, a settling, a shutting-off of engines one by one down the dark, which is the sound of hope being winterized.

Here is the arithmetic of my night, and I have had since 0304 to sit with it. The road did not close at my end. Every unit that passed my line was chained, checked, compliant, legal to the kilogram. The road closed behind me, up the hill, on the aggregate of everyone who went around, ahead of, or before the lights — closed, as the bulletin put it with no sense of what it was saying to me personally, on account of non-compliant commercial vehicles at the mandatory chain-up location. My location. The mandate held at the gate and failed as a totality, and there is no report field for that, and I filled out the fields there are.

By four the line was shut down to nothing, the last of the queue folded back to the staging pullout for the night. I ran the lights anyway. That is procedure — the signage stays active until the event stands down — but I will admit the procedure and I were aligned in spirit for once. The chain-up lights burned over an empty scale line and a stopped road, orange on the snow, ridiculous and correct, and I sat in the truck with the heater going and the taxonomy quiet and watched

them, two lights insisting on the rules of a hill nobody could reach. Fourteen winters, and I could not tell you whether the system worked perfectly tonight or failed completely, only how it managed both by three in the morning. The lights would stay on till told otherwise, and so would I.

INTERLUDE II

ROAD CHANNEL · 0330-0415

COLDWATER BASE: All units, Coldwater Base, hourly check. Report by unit.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. Snowshed Hill, holding at the closure line. No change.

HAND THREE: Coldwater Base, Hand Three. Zopkios, engine running, no change.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One. Yard. No change. Requesting confirmation somebody is awake at Base.

COLDWATER BASE: Loader One, Coldwater Base. Confirmed.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One. Sorry to hear it.

COLDWATER BASE: Station reads for the log. Box Canyon: pavement minus eight point two, air minus eleven, wind northeast twelve. Summit: pavement minus eight point nine, air minus twelve, precipitation nil the last interval. Zopkios: pavement minus eight point six. Logged zero three forty.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. Confirm precipitation nil.

COLDWATER BASE: Hand One, Coldwater Base. Nil this interval. Trace prior interval.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. So it's over.

COLDWATER BASE: Hand One, Coldwater Base. It is between.

SEEKER ONE: Coldwater Base, Seeker One, on the shared channel.

Rolling from Zopkios to the Sowaqua staging area, southbound in the northbound lanes, per the release-order tasking. One vehicle.

COLDWATER BASE: Seeker One, Coldwater Base. Received. Advise Traffic Control at the pullout of your arrival.

SEEKER ONE: Coldwater Base, Seeker One. They are advised. They are also asleep.

COLDWATER BASE: Seeker One, Coldwater Base. Then advise them again on arrival.

COLDWATER BASE: All units, Coldwater Base. Next check zero four thirty. Base out.

CLOSED

THE AVALANCHE TECHNICIAN · STORM HOUR 22,
PRE-DAWN

I phoned my mother at five, before first light, from the truck at the Zopkios lot with the heater going. This is a standing arrangement, in place since my first season, and neither of us has ever proposed ending it.

“Is it a firing day?” she asked.

“It’s a firing day.”

“Give them my regards,” she said, and hung up, because it was five o’clock, and that is the entire ceremony, and I will not be explaining it further to anyone, including myself.

The road below me was closed and had been closed since four minutes past three the previous morning, and I want to be accurate about my relationship to that closure: it was not mine. The corridor closed itself out of trucks and snow in the usual proportions. What I had, stamped and scheduled, was a closure of my own inside it — a control closure, six hours on the books, requested two days ago when the forecast crossed its thresholds, approved through channels, coordinated with a road that then went and closed anyway for its own reasons. A closure inside a closure. The paperwork does not have a field for irony, and I have checked.

Below me the road held its two lanes of unbroken white, the guard posts marking the shoulder in a dwindling row until the snow took them. Nothing moved on it. It had the specific stillness of a thing built for motion and briefly without any, a stadium at four in the morning.

People imagine my job as a duel with the mountain. It is closer to being the caretaker of an argument somebody else already won. This highway was built against avalanches the way a museum is built against fire — the threat considered early, at the drawing stage, and

answered in concrete and geometry. The alignment itself is a defensive position. Boston Bar Creek runs below the road as a natural catchment, and above the road stand the earthworks: stopping dams, deflection mounds, berms, ten of them through the worst of it, engineered in the eighties and now so thoroughly grown over with alder and young fir that tourists photograph them as scenery. The men who designed those mounds solved most of my job before I was born. What remains for me is the residue of the problem — the starting zones the geometry cannot reach — and a binder that indexes them.

The binder is the Snow Avalanche Atlas, and it sat open on the passenger seat all morning, and I will defend it against any book you can name. Every path on this corridor is in it: numbered, mapped, characterized. Starting zone elevation, aspect, track, runout, return interval. The mountain above this road has been read, catalogued, and cross-referenced, and when I look up at a slope I am not reading wilderness, I am rereading a known text for changes since the last edition. Path 4.2 had my attention that morning. South aspect, wind-loaded on the new snow over a rain crust from December, and the numbers from the study plot said the new load was sitting on that crust the way a filing cabinet sits on a hotel bed.

The helicopter was grounded. This is the modern method here — control from the air, charges placed from a machine — and the machine has limits, and the morning was beyond them: ceiling on the deck, winds gusting past the operator's charter minimums, visibility in the starting zones amounting to a rumour. So we did what the job mostly is, which is wait. I have explosives authorization, a purchasing authority that would alarm my mother, certification renewed annually, a level of fitness the job profile specifies in metres of tower I must be able to climb, and the morning's application of all of it was sitting in a warm truck watching a ceiling, drinking coffee at a rate the study plot would have recorded as steady accumulation.

My assistant asked, around seven, what we would do if the window never came.

"Extend the closure."

"And if it never comes tomorrow?"

“Extend the closure.” The road was closed anyway. There has never been a cheaper day to be cautious in the history of the program, and I said so, and he wrote EXTEND THE CLOSURE on the whiteboard under STRATEGY, where it remains.

The window came at ten forty. A lift in the ceiling, winds inside minimums, forty minutes of flyable air if the forecast aloft held — and I will say this for the forecaster on this corridor, her aloft numbers are better than her surface numbers, and her surface numbers win awards. We flew at ten fifty-two.

I should explain the flying, because most people picture a bomb dropped from a door and that is not the work. The charges are prepared on the ground — cast boosters, a measured length of detonating cord, the assembly built and checked twice against the day’s shot plan, because the one thing you do not improvise at altitude in wind is an explosive. We fly with them in a bin between my boots. The machine is a small one, doors off on my side regardless of temperature, because I need to place the charge and I need to see it land, and a door is an obstruction between me and both. You do not throw the charge. You commit it — a specific word, and the right one — leaning out into the rotor wash with the mountain going past at the speed the pilot and I have agreed on in advance, and you release it so that it arrives where the shot plan says the slope is weakest, which is a decision you make at a closing speed of sixty kilometres an hour against a target you can see for perhaps four seconds. The pilot flies the line. I fly the charge. Between us there is a running conversation conducted mostly in single words and hand pressure, because the intercom is a suggestion in that wind, and neither of us has time for a sentence.

The mountain at that range is not scenery and it is not a text either; for the length of the pass it is simply very close and moving, the starting zone coming up under the skid with the new snow on it lying in the smooth dangerous way the study plot had warned me it would lie, and then it is behind us and I am watching over my shoulder for the result while the pilot pulls us off the slope and around for the next line. I have four seconds of aiming and then a lifetime of looking back. That is the shape of the job in the air, and it is the reverse of the job on the ground, where I have days of looking and four seconds of doing.

I am required to log every shot, and the blasting log is the only place my judgement becomes visible, so the log is where I live. If you want to know who I am professionally, do not interview me; read the log. Shot one, path 4.2, charge placed in the wind-loaded pocket below the cornice line, result: size two point five, ran to mid-track, arrested in the upper catchment. Which is the log's way of saying the slope fired, the snow came down, and the engineering of 1986 reached up and caught it, the same as it has caught everything for forty years. Shot two, path 4.4, result: no release. Shot three, path 4.4 secondary placement, result: size one point five, runout negligible. Three shots, one real result, the mountain's argument settled for the week, all of it over by eleven twenty-six.

Here is the honest version of the shot, since the log will not carry it. There is a want in this work and every technician carries it and none of us discusses it at conferences: you want the release. Not the harm — there is nobody below; the closure exists so that there is nobody below — but the release itself, the sanctioned detonation, the one profession on this hill where the correct outcome arrives as a roar. I spend my winters being careful so that four times a season I am permitted to be enormous.

The coffee had gone cold in the cup holder. Outside the truck the light was coming up grey on the study plot, the ridge above it still in shadow, a raven working the wind along the treeline and finding nothing. I watched it a while.

The corridor's fine engineering keeps threatening to make even that unnecessary — most storms, the mounds and the geometry need nothing from me — and when the charge took on 4.2 and the pocket released and ran clean into the catchment, exactly as indexed, I felt what I felt, and logged the size class.

The cleanup handoff went out before we landed. Deposits in the catchment above the road trigger the contractor's obligations — five hundred cubic metres an hour, uninterrupted service until clear, commencing on notification — and I notified, and somewhere down the corridor a man with a loader received, on a closed road, a legally binding production quota. He acknowledged in the tone of a man being

handed homework in a burning school. I sympathized on the channel, briefly, in the approved format.

At noon I closed my own closure. This is a form: the control work complete, the hazard rating revised, the six-hour window formally ended two hours early, the corridor released back to — and here the form wants a status, and the status was CLOSED, because the road I was reopening was shut for reasons that had nothing to do with me and would stay shut until the trucks that closed it were gone. I signed a document returning a road to a closure. Somewhere in an office my form will be filed beside the other closure's paperwork, two shut doors in one hallway, each certifying the other's irrelevance.

My mother will ask on Sunday how the firing went. I will say it went well. She will say, as she has said for eleven seasons, that it seems like good steady work, and there is no arguing with any part of that.

CLOSED

THE PLOW OPERATOR · STORM HOUR 30

The second wave established at dinnertime, on schedule, which somewhere down the valley would be entering a private ledger as a win.

Plowing a closed road is the same job with the audience removed, and I had believed, for twenty-one winters, that the audience was the hard part. The traffic, the tailgaters, the tourist honking at brine on a dry road. Remove them, I would have told you, and what remains is the pure work: the lane, the blade, the cycle. Then the road closed and I got my wish, and I am here to report that the pure work is worse. On an open road the storm erases your pass and you resent it in company. On a closed road the storm erases your pass in front of nobody, and the arithmetic keeps running anyway — ninety minutes, both lanes, the seam — and around the third cycle of the evening a question climbs into the cab with you, and the question is: for whom. The lane I cut at eight was white at nine-thirty. No vehicle would touch it either way. I cut it again. I am not able to tell you why in any sentence I would sign, and I cut it again at eleven.

The Merritt crew came over the top at eight-forty, and the record should show that we were glad to have them, and that nothing in the following is inconsistent with that. The call had gone out in the afternoon — the protocol's own escalation, Coldwater requests Merritt assistance, a sentence that costs our side a small tax of pride every time Base transmits it. Merritt acknowledged with the grace of a sibling being asked for money. Their units came down the hill in convoy, plows up, lights on, at a parade speed I chose to read as care for the equipment, and their lead operator got on the shared channel and asked Base to confirm which lanes we would like *cleared*, with a stress on the word suggesting the ones we had been doing were something else. It went

on in this register all night. Their courtesy was procedurally perfect. There is no protocol violation in the phrase “happy to help however Coldwater does things,” and there is no answer to it either.

The wing beside me all night was a Merritt wing. My usual echelon partner was reassigned at shift start — his unit shifted north for the Merritt integration, some sound scheduling reason, none of my business — and I spent the night learning what his absence weighs. The Merritt operator was good. Competent overlap, safe margins, nothing to report. But the margins were margins. He held sixty, seventy centimetres off my line and adjusted when I drifted, the standard practice, the practice as taught — and it turns out I have spent years inside a nonstandard practice without once discussing it, a forty-centimetre seam that never needed adjusting because it was never wrong, and you do not know a thing was held until somebody else holds it correctly. I ran my lane. His berm carry was fine. The seam left a thin windrow at the join that I took on the return pass, every pass, all night, the way you take over a chore from someone who has gone away.

At ten Base pulled me off the Carolin Mine Road loop. This is a low-class side road off the corridor, a spur with a twenty-four-hour service standard, on my sheet as a once-a-shift courtesy pass, and the reassignment order moved my once to zero — mainline priority, all units to the corridor, side roads deferred per event protocols. Fine. Correct, even; the standard permits it and the event demanded it. I mention it only because the dispatcher read the order in the tone of a man crossing an item off a list, which is what it was, and I acknowledged in the tone of a man being freed of a chore, which is what it was, and the spur went dark on the plan, and that was the entire event. Somewhere it is written down. Nothing else about it is anywhere.

I fuelled at the Coldwater yard past midnight and tried the phone. The yard sits in a dead pocket — one bar on the office steps if the weather respects you, nothing in the lot — so I used the landline in the dispatch shack, dialled my own house, got my own voice on the machine, dialled my daughter’s, got her husband’s voice, cheerful, recorded in the summer, promising a prompt return of the call. Kamloops General does not accept general inquiries at half past midnight and should not. I stood in the shack with the receiver against my ear a

moment after the beep, contributing nothing, and then said it's Dad, weather's on schedule up here, and hung up, and it was not until the truck that I heard the sentence and laughed at the man who had said it. Weather's on schedule. Twenty-one winters, and at the one moment the receiver was live, the corridor forecast is what came out.

The parts room saved a Merritt unit at two, and I was in the yard to see it done, which I regret in a specific way I will explain. Their number-two truck came in with a spinner bearing gone, the abrasive spreader locked, a part that is truck-specific and, per the Merritt operator, on four weeks' order at their own yard since November. The parts man met him at the bay door already holding it. Boxed, tagged, the correct revision of the correct casting for a truck that does not live here. I have known that parts man, or believe I have known him, for six or seven winters — a large unhurried presence at the wicket, glasses pushed up on his head, the only calm room in the operation — and I watched him hand across the impossible bearing and log it out in his book, and the Merritt operator said what anybody would say, which was that there was no reason on earth for that part to be on this shelf.

"There's a reason," the parts man said. "It was ordered."

"Who ordered it?"

The Merritt operator started to say the spinner bearing was the problem, and the parts man was already talking past him — not the bearing, the seal behind it, because a bearing that goes on that casting goes because the seal has been weeping a week and nobody logged it, check your last three shift sheets for a wet patch under the spreader. Which was not the question. The question was where did the part come from. But it was the question under the question, and the Merritt operator went quiet, and later that week, I heard, found the seal exactly where he'd been sent, a week of weeping under the spreader, unlogged. I asked the parts man afterward how he'd got from a bearing to a seal that fast. He looked at me the way you look at someone asking how you knew your own phone number. He could not tell me. He had already been three questions down the road before the first one finished, and could not walk it back to show me the steps, because for him there had been no steps.

He turned the book around. The requisition was six weeks old, initialled in the column where initials go, C-W in the small tidy hand the parts room uses for everything, and the requisition was in order because the parts room's requisitions are always in order. It was ordered, the book said, and the book is the record, and the record was in order. The Merritt operator took his bearing and went away happy, and I stood at the wicket a moment longer than I needed to, and the parts man looked at me over the glasses with the patience of a man who has answered his last question of the night, and said, "Was there something else?" And there wasn't. That is what I regret: that I stood there long enough to be asked, and that the honest answer was no, nothing else, nothing I could put on a requisition. Good inventory looks like foresight if you keep it up long enough. I have been saying that line for years. It was midnight in a storm and I had just heard my son-in-law's summer voice on a machine, and I was not at my strongest, and for a moment at the wicket the line would not hold the weight I have always stacked on it. Then it held. It's a very good line.

Third cycle after fuelling, the queue. Base routed me down past the Sowaqua staging pullout to cut the access clean for the morning's release order, and I ran the lane along two hundred metres of held trucks, close enough to read the doors. Engines idling for the heaters, exhaust standing in columns, windows curtained or fogged, a hundred strangers asleep in the care of a plan. Two-thirds of the way down was a Two Hills Transport unit, Alberta plates, a chrome mud flap with a rearing horse catching my beacon as I passed — asleep like the rest, interior dark, mirrors iced. I cleared his lane for the morning and he will never know, which at three in the morning on a closed road felt, briefly, like the profession entire in one sentence, and then the cycle turned over and I went back up the hill.

THE CLOSURE TOWN · STORM HOUR 34

By the second morning of a closure the town has changed hands, and I mean that kindly. Hope belongs to the people who live here maybe three hundred days a year. The rest of the time it belongs to the road, and the road pays its rent through my front desk, and I will not be apologizing for the arithmetic in this unit, so we may as well get that stated early.

Twenty-two rooms, twenty-two full, folding cots in four of them. No-vacancy sign lit since the first evening — and the sign is a formality, a porch light for a party everyone already knows about, because the vehicles find you anyway, nosing off the highway in an unbroken procession from the moment the gates go up. I have the choreography cold by now. Coffee urn moved to the lobby. Breakfast extended to eleven. The church hall put on standby — I sit on the emergency reception committee, which in this town is a standing army with a phone tree — though standby is where the hall stayed this time; a snow closure is a two-day affair and the town absorbed it the way it absorbs everything, in rooms and booths and parking lots. In twenty-one we did it for real, eleven hundred meals and mats in the gymnasium, and a two-day snow event now feels the way a fire drill feels to a building that has burned.

The desk teaches you the taxonomy of the held. The sales rep who recalculates his territory aloud at breakfast as though the territory were listening. The family bound for a wedding in Kamloops, the mother renegotiating by phone in the breakfast room each morning with a sister whose position hardened by the hour. The retired couple for whom the closure is the first scheduled event in some years, out photographing the snowbanks by nine like guests at a resort. And the drivers, who hold rooms when they can get them and their cabs when they can't, and

who tip in cash and information, the second being the more valuable currency: it was the drivers who told me the second wave was in before the television did.

Now I will tell you how the road actually works, since nobody official ever will, and you may check my record against theirs. Somewhere — Victoria, I have always assumed, though I would accept Kamloops — there is a desk, and the desk decides. Not the weather; the weather is the occasion, not the decision. The desk weighs the thing the province actually cares about, which is the corridor's reputation, the freight numbers, the optics of a pileup on the national news against the optics of a closed artery, and when the scale tips, the desk closes the road, and opens it the same way. You can see the deliberation in the timing if you watch for it, and I have watched for thirty years: the closures that come just before the evening news, the reopenings timed for the morning shows, the way the sentence *no estimated time of reopening* holds the public in the exact state a waiting room magazine holds a patient. My brother-in-law drove plow out of the Boston Bar camp for a decade and he used to laugh at me and say there is no desk, it's trucks and centimetres, nobody decides anything — and I would say to him what I will say to you: that is exactly what the desk would want its plow drivers to believe, and anyway, somebody sets those timings, and somebody words that sentence. Nothing that reliable is an accident. The road is run by someone, and the someone is shy, and the town has learned to live with the arrangement, and profitably.

The television people hold their rooms by the season, which supports my point, incidentally. Overlander Media, four rooms, booked from October to April, paid whether occupied or not — the production putting money on the closure the way you would put money on a horse you had raised yourself. They know. Their business is knowing. The crews arrived the evening the forecast was issued, a day before the first flake, vans and pelican cases and the boy with the drone who is not allowed to fly the drone, and they were positioned and fed before the road had done anything worth filming.

And then the road declined to perform. This closure — trucks, snow, an orderly queue, zero catastrophe — is, by the standards of their program, a dead loss, and by the second morning the story producer

was at my desk in open mourning. Nothing has crashed, she said, as a grievance. The one recovery of note happened at night in blowing snow, footage unusable. Three days of budget and the storm was producing, in her words, weather. I poured her coffee and made the mistake of asking what they film when nothing crashes, and she looked at me with the winter entire in her face and said: waiting. We film the waiting. And so they did — the queue idling at the staging area, the drivers' curtained windshields, my own lobby, the urn, the sales rep and his territory — the crew going room to room and booth to booth harvesting delay itself, which the producer assures me will be cut into something called a mood piece, which her network reliably buries in January.

For the release forms they sent the older man, and I want a moment on the older man, because I have watched a lot of production people work my lobby and I have never watched anything like this. Big, unhurried, some sort of field manager or consent wrangler — his lanyard says Overlander but I never once saw him touch a camera. He works the breakfast room with a clipboard of releases: your face may appear, your voice may be used, sign here, initial there. Allfather, on the crew's lips and on the call sheet — that is simply who works the forms. Standard paper; I have signed a version myself most winters. What is not standard is the ceremony he makes of it. He does not slide the form and point. He sets it down square in front of you, states what it gives and what it takes in one plain sentence each, produces the pen last, and then waits — actually waits, hands folded, no hurry in him anywhere — while you decide, and the waiting has a quality I can only call old-fashioned, as though the paper were being witnessed rather than collected. The sales rep read the form, every line of it, visibly expecting to be rushed, and was not rushed, and signed with the slightly stunned air of a man whose objection had been received before he raised it. And they came to him for answers, which is the thing I noticed most, because it is the opposite of what a man with a clipboard usually gets. A driver would open his mouth to ask whether signing meant such-and-such, and the answer would already be crossing the table — the clause number, the exact limit of it, one sentence, no question back to clarify what he'd meant, because the answer had arrived before the question finished forming and it was always the right answer to the

question the man was actually going to ask. He never said let me check. He never said good question. The number was simply there, in his mouth, ahead of the asking, the way change is already counted in the hand of a cashier who has been at it forty years. The wedding mother said no. The man thanked her — thanked her — made a notation, and moved along, and her table was somehow the more solemn for having declined, as if she had been offered a sacrament and would now be politely damned around.

I asked him at the urn, because it is my lobby and I ask things, how he came to this line of work. He considered the question with the same patience he spends on the forms.

“People should know what they’re swearing to,” he said.

“It’s a TV release.”

“It’s their likeness,” he said, “going out of their keeping,” and topped up his coffee and went back to it, and I have been at this desk thirty years and can read every traveller who comes through those doors, and I could not read him, and I gave up pleasantly, the way you give up on a crossword you suspect of being misprinted.

He knew who to ask, too. That is the other thing I watched. Not everyone was approached. The crew filmed widely but the clipboard moved narrowly, and the movement had a shape: the sales rep, yes; the retired couple, yes; the drivers at the window booth, yes; the quiet man who has been reading the same paperback in the corner since the gates went up, no, passed by, morning after morning, though the camera loved his corner. He did not appear to weigh it. He did not stand at the door of the breakfast room and survey and decide. He simply went to the tables he went to, directly, the way a man crosses a room he has crossed before, as though which of my guests would become story and which would stay weather were a thing already settled and he was merely the one who knew the answer. No one he passed by ever knew a question had been settled about them. I know because I watched for it. Watching for the quiet decisions is the trade of a front desk, all of it, and I have had thirty years, and the desk in Victoria could learn things from that man about running a road.

The lobby television carries the road channel’s public face all day, which is DriveBC on a loop, and mid-afternoon the entry refreshed,

and the breakfast room went quiet at the chime the way a gate lounge quiets, and the sentence came up unchanged: *an assessment is in progress and there is no estimated time of reopening.* The sales rep swore at his territory. The wedding mother dialled her sister. The story producer, filming my lobby from the stairs, whispered something to the camera operator, and the camera turned, slowly, away from the television and onto the room — onto the held, receiving the sentence — and I rang up two more nights across the board and topped the urn, because the desk decides and the town provides, and someone, somewhere, words that sentence carefully, and I would bet this hotel they know exactly what it does to a room.

CLOSED

THE RECOVERY · STORM HOUR 40

We were on station at Zopkios two hours before the first flake, per the arrangement, and I will head off the usual question at the gate: yes, we get paid to stand there, and no, I will not be telling you how that works, partly for commercial reasons and partly because after nine winters I could not draw you all the plumbing of it myself. There is an arrangement. The protocol has a line that says tow services will be secured, and we are what secured looks like — two heavy wreckers and the rotator, idling at a brake check on the province's timetable, invoicing, when the time comes, some carrier's insurer in another province. The ministry places us and never pays us. The man who pays us has never heard of the protocol and is asleep in Red Deer. You would think an industry would collapse under an arrangement like that, and instead it is the most reliable work on the mountain. The storm is scheduled. We are pre-positioned for a certainty. It is the nearest thing this trade has to farming.

Towing and recovery are different words and the difference is the business. Towing is moving a vehicle that has merely stopped being able to move itself: hook, lift, transport, a fee. Recovery is everything between where the vehicle is and where towing can begin — the winching, the rigging, the uprighting, the persuading of forty tonnes out of a creek bed — and recovery is billed by the hour, by the machine, by the complexity, and recovery is where the mountain does its shopping. I teach every new man the catechism his first week: we do not charge for the tow, son, we charge for the disagreement. The tow is the handshake at the end of it.

We waited at Zopkios in the meantime, which is most of the job. The rotator ticked as its engine cooled and warmed on the block heater's cycle. Snow filled the wiper wells faster than it filled the lot, some trick

of the geometry I have watched nine winters and never bothered to solve. A man can sit a long time in a warm cab at a brake check and call it work, because it is.

The first real hook of the event came at nine — a tractor unit over the bank at Larson Hill, off the northbound side, thirty metres down in the timber, driver out and unhurt and standing at the guardrail in the specific posture of a man rehearsing a phone call to his dispatcher. Trailer stayed up top, jackknifed but on the pavement, which simplified the evening by half. The tractor was a rotator job, and the rotator went out with the full crew, and I will spare you the rigging plan except to say it ran four lines, two trees, and six hours, and that the truck came up the bank at one in the morning as gently as the word gentle can be made to apply to a crane lifting a Kenworth through standing fir in a snowstorm.

The rotator has fans, by the way. This never stops being strange to me. Seventy-five tonnes of boom on a ten-axle carrier, and grown men at highway barriers film it the way their grandfathers filmed film stars. There are toys of it. Of my truck. A driver in the held queue once asked our operator to sign the door of it, and he did, and the man drove away moved. That machine has appeared on the television program eleven times, which the production tracks, and its hourly rate, which I do not publish, is the most requested number on this highway. The rate sheet lives in the office in a drawer, like scripture in a language the parish is better off not reading, and every winter some fleet manager demands to see it, and every winter I tell him the truth, which is that if you have to ask, the mountain has already answered.

The tractor was a write-off. Most of them are. That is the part the fans and the program never quite carry: we perform six hours of precision rigging, in weather, at night, to raise a vehicle whose next stop is an auction of its parts. The care is not for the truck. I put it to my crews this way, once a season, in the yard: the care is for the bank, which has to hold the next fool; for the timber, which belongs to somebody; for the fuel and oil, which want to be in the creek and must not get there; and for the trade, which is watched — by the carrier, by the insurer, by the queue, and eleven times by a television audience — and which gets one reputation per operator per lifetime. You lift a

wreck like it matters and the fact that it doesn't is between you and the auctioneer.

Now the passenger. Somewhere in the held queue's first night, an abandoned car had come to us off the RCMP's sheet — a sedan left at the Portia pullout, out of fuel or out of nerve, its driver gone into some other vehicle, some bus, some kindness, before the closure sealed. No plate query would run; the system was slow with the event. It was our older yard man who sorted it — Seeker, on the dispatch board, the quiet one who rides along on the big jobs and does the walking and the paperwork nobody else will fight for. He had the owner's name inside ten minutes and the owner's mother on the phone inside thirty, and when I asked how, he held up the registration. It was in the visor, he said, where they keep it, which is where it was, and where, I will note for the record, nobody else had looked, including the constable.

He worked all night in that vein and it is worth describing, because I have run crews for nine winters and never had a man whose paperwork felt like the main event. At the Larson Hill job, while four of us flew the rigging, he walked the tractor's cab — logbook, phone charger, a wallet down beside the seat rail, a thermos, a paperback, a child's drawing taped above the bunk — and bagged and tagged the lot, itemized, and had it into the driver's hands at the guardrail before the truck itself cleared the bank. The driver went through the bag while his livelihood swung in the trees above him, and it was the drawing he checked for, and having found it he stood easier, and watched the rest of the lift like a man at somebody else's funeral. Later, past two, the yard man cross-referenced the queue's plates against the release order — Base wanted a staging sequence for the morning — and read the list back on the channel in full designation discipline, forty-one units, no notes, no errors, and somewhere in the middle of it, a truck's carrier phoned before we had phoned them, asking after their unit by position in the queue, and our man confirmed the position without surprise, and I chose, at two in the morning, on a closed road, at the end of a six-hour lift, not to ask the obvious question, on the grounds that he listens to everything — the scanner, the channel, the CB chatter the drivers think is private — and a man who listens like that is owed his small magic trick. That is my finding and the file is closed.

He couriered the wallet's twin, by the way — a purse from the abandoned sedan — down to the owner's mother in Chilliwack on the morning supply run, with the paperwork riding in the side pocket where she would find it. Included, in his handwriting, at the bottom of the inventory sheet, one line I have kept meaning to raise with him and keep deciding not to: *Returned complete.* Not itemized-and-released, which is the form's language. Returned complete. It is not a phrase from any procedure we run, and it is the best two words of paperwork I have read in this trade, and I have decided it is company style now, effective whenever he started doing it, which, now that I look back through the files, may be always.

THE BRAKE CHECK · STORM HOUR 46, SECOND NIGHT

They redeployed me to the Sowaqua staging pullout for the second night, which is how I came to spend eight hours as an enforcement officer with nothing left to enforce, among four hundred metres of vehicles doing nothing wrong.

Nobody describes the queue at rest, because at rest it is not television. Forty-one commercial units and a scattering of cars, marshalled in lanes on the pullout, engines idling for the heaters in a long uneven chord. Exhaust standing in columns where the wind let it. Windshields curtained, or fogged, or scraped into little portholes. Every set of wheels chocked or angled per the traffic plan, every unit logged, every driver accounted for, and not one thing occurring. My taxonomy is a taxonomy of objection, and objection requires motion, requires somewhere to be and a rule between a man and the being there. The queue had surrendered its somewheres two nights ago. I walked the lanes with a flashlight I did not need and a citation book that had gone, for the duration, ornamental.

There is a clause in the maintenance agreement — the supervisor recited it to me once, at a barbecue, from memory, as a party piece — that prices out what the held are owed. Additional personnel, pilot vehicles, food, beverages, and washroom facilities: payable if requested by the Province. The Province had not requested. The cap on that line, he told me, holding a paper plate, is zero dollars, and it is the honestest number in the contract, and everyone at the barbecue laughed, and standing in the queue at one in the morning I performed the calculation the clause performs and arrived at the same figure and did not laugh. The held were owed nothing and were receiving, from the system as designed, exactly that. What they received beyond it came from elsewhere.

A stopped queue is its own small country and it organizes itself the way countries do, out of proximity and boredom, overnight, without anyone declaring it. By the second night the pullout had a shape. Down at the lower end the long-haul men, who have been stopped before and will be stopped again and treat a closure as weather treats a field, slept the flat sleep of the professionally delayed, curtains up, alarms set to the channel. Mid-queue were the ones for whom this was novel and therefore intolerable — the shorter-run drivers, a courier or two, the handful of cars that had been swept into the commercial queue by the timing of the gates — and they were the ones awake at the odd hours, walking, checking phones that had nothing to tell them, wearing a path in the plowed apron between their vehicles and the porta-john that the traffic plan had, to its credit, remembered. And at the top, nearest the gate, the anxious freight: a reefer of something perishable running its genset hard, a tanker placarded in a way that had earned it a wide berth and a lonely parking spot, a car carrier with its cargo wearing two nights of snow like dust sheets over furniture in a shut house. Nobody assigned these positions. They found them, the way water finds its level, and by the second night the finding was complete and the country had its regions, and I patrolled it like a constable of a place with no crime.

I learned the queue by walking it, which is the only way to learn anything, and what I learned is that a stopped person will tell a man in a vest things he would tell no one moving. Not complaints — the complaints had exhausted themselves the first night. Confidences. The tanker driver, three years sober, told me the waiting was the hardest thing he'd done dry and then thanked me for nothing I had done. A young woman in a car meant for Kelowna showed me, unasked, a phone photo of the dog she was not going to reach in time to say goodbye to, and I looked at it properly, because looking properly was the one service on the pullout I was equipped to provide. The car-carrier man wanted to talk about his divorce and I let him, at two in the morning, in the cold, because the alternative was that he talk to no one, and a citation book is poor company. I wrote none of it down. There is no form, and there should be no form, and if the Province ever requests one I will retire the day it arrives.

What the queue received beyond its nothing came, that second night, from three places. Some of it came from a reefer unit halfway down lane two, where a driver had opened his trailer and gone into the sandwich trade. Cheese or ham and cheese, cut in the box, two dollars, which anyone could see was cost. He would not take five for two. He would not take a toonie and keep the change. Exact change or an IOU written in his own book, in his own hand, with the unit number of the debtor, and by the second night the book ran to three pages and he spoke of his receivables with the gravity of a man carrying a region's economy, which, within the fence of that pullout, he was.

Some of it came down the lanes in a half-ton with a light bar, ROAD SAFETY on the doors, one of the contractor's patrol trucks — the wellness run, Base called it on the channel, twice a night, checking the stopped vehicles down the corridor. Companion, that truck signs as, booked out on the night sheet between a plow and a loader as though warmth were a line of equipment the Sons kept in the yard, which on the evidence of that pullout it may as well be. The driver worked the queue window to window. I watched the truck come down lane one at walking pace and watched what happened at each cab, which was that the window came down. That is the observation, all of it, and I am aware it does not sound like one. But I have spent fourteen winters approaching stopped cabs in an official vest, and I will tell you what a rolled-down window costs at two in the morning on the second night of a closure: everything. Drivers at that hour crack the glass an inch for the vest, if that. For the patrol truck the windows came down all the way, forty-one times, before the truck had fully stopped, the drivers reaching for the crank while the headlights were still a lane off — though the vest explains it, mostly; ROAD SAFETY on a door at that hour is the first vehicle in two days that wants nothing from them, and a man will open a window for that. She had a steel thermos and a stack of paper cups and a manner of leaning on the sill as though the sill were the counter of an establishment the two of you had been closing down for years. At the cab across from me she poured, and handed it up, and said — I heard it clearly — you boys picked a lovely week for it, which at two in the morning, to a man forty hours into a delivery that had stopped mattering the day before, is the wrong joke, at the wrong hour, in the wrong register, and he laughed. Not politely. I heard

the laugh travel down his exhaustion and come out the other side with some of the exhaustion attached, and she moved to the next cab, and the next window was already down.

And some of what the queue received came from a man on foot with a clipboard, working the lanes ahead of the morning that was still five hours off. The release order. When the road opens, the queue does not simply go; it is sequenced — escorts, chain-off, the staged unit numbers read into the channel in blocks — and somebody has to walk the physical queue and reconcile it against the paper one, plate by plate, because vehicles have shuffled, and two have been dug out and departed via the westbound shoulder in defiance of everything, and one has a dead battery its driver does not yet know about. The man with the clipboard was off the recovery crew, the older one, the quiet one; I knew him a little, in the manner that everyone on this hill knows everyone a little. He walked the lanes slowly, reading plates with a penlight, annotating. At the truck with the dead battery he paused, and wrote, and moved on, and at six in the morning, when that truck would not start and its driver surfaced from his bunk into the specific despair of a man about to hold up forty vehicles, the boost truck was already beside him, dispatched, the recovery man told Base without inflection, on the basis of the overnight walk: cold soak on that unit, he said, you could hear it. You can, too — a diesel that will not start in the morning idles differently at night, some flutter in it, any old hand will tell you so, and I have decided to be told so, and to leave it there, because it was five hours before the morning when he wrote it down, and the line moves in the morning or it does not, and it moved.

The Two Hills truck sat two-thirds down lane one. I had waved him through my line on the first night — the good one, the two fingers off the wheel — and here he was in the pen with the rest, the rearing horse on the mud flap wearing a sock of snow. His interior light was on past midnight. I walked near enough to see, not intending anything by it, and he was sitting up at the wheel of his stationary, impounded, going-nowhere truck with his logbook open on the rim, making an entry. Flagging the day. There is a custom on this hill — you stop at the brake check, you put a line in the book, due diligence, the little rite that says I stood here and did the thing — and the man was performing it for a day in which he had driven zero kilometres to nowhere at the

government's pleasure. He saw my flashlight and raised the two fingers again. I raised two back. Between professionals the transaction was complete, and I went on down the lane feeling, for the first time in two nights, that something on the pullout had been inspected and passed.

At the end of lane three, past the last unit, at the fence line where the plowed apron gave out, the relief officer stood facing the queue. The big one, from my line on the first night, the vest with the grey piping. I had not seen a duty roster with his name on it for the pullout; the regional pool moves men around in weather and the paperwork follows late, and I have stopped chasing it. The roster had him as Keeper, down at the bottom on the Sowaqua night line. He was not patrolling. He was not checking anything. He stood at the end of the lanes with his hands folded in front of him in the manner of a man at the back of a church, and he was looking down the queue — the idling, the exhaust, the curtained glass, the little lit porthole where the sandwich ledger was being balanced — and he stayed there, in the cold, unmoving, for as long as I watched, and I watched a while. I did not go and speak to him. I will be plain that this was a decision, and that I made it at the time, and that I stand by it. There are men you approach on a night shift for the company, and there are men whose watch you do not interrupt, and every officer alive knows the difference at forty metres, and I had a queue.

Past three, a driver up in lane two had his phone read the road report aloud, cab speaker on, the synthetic voice carrying in the cold flat air the sentence the corridor had been sleeping under for two nights — an assessment is in progress and there is no estimated time of reopening — and nobody groaned, nobody swore, no engine revved. The queue received its sentence the way the snow receives more snow. Somewhere down the lanes a window went up. The patrol truck's tail lights turned at the far end and started back along lane three. The sandwich man's light went out. And the officer at the fence line stood his watch over all of it, hands folded, till the hour I was relieved, and for all I know after, and the last thing I did on the pullout was raise the flashlight to him, once, and he nodded, and that is the report of my second night, entire: forty-one units, no infractions, nothing to enforce, everything, somehow, enforced.

THE SUPERVISOR · STORM HOUR 54, TOWARD DAWN

The storm did not end. The storm stopped, which is different, and then the stopping had to be made official, which is the part of this job I have given up explaining at barbecues.

I had been in the chair since four. The reopening ledger runs to three pages — escort assignments, chain-off staffing, staging release blocks, the Merritt units' return routing, the abrasive resupply for the cleanup phase — and I was deep in it, deliberately, because the alternative to being deep in the ledger was watching screen four, and screen four does not go faster for being watched. Pavement at Box Canyon: minus eight point nine at four o'clock. Minus eight point seven at four twenty. The precipitation column read nil, nil, trace, nil, and every nil armed the definition and every trace disarmed it, and somewhere above the corridor the storm was ending several times, exactly as forecast by the only person on the distribution list who would find that sentence normal.

She called at five ten. Symmetry, I suppose; she opens these things by phone and closes them the same way.

"It's done," she said. "Ended three forty-seven. That's the last measurable at the network. You can start your clocks."

I had the Box Canyon feed in front of me showing a trace at the four o'clock interval. I told her so.

"Box Canyon reads high in a northeast wind. It's picking up blow-off from the berm, not precipitation. The event ended at three forty-seven."

"My log will show trace at four."

"Then your log will be wrong in a way that satisfies the contract," she said, "and my network will be right in a way that doesn't matter," and we sat with that a moment, the two of us, professionally. It is not a disagreement. I want to be accurate. She measures the atmosphere and

I administer a definition, and at three forty-seven her instruments were telling the truth and at four o'clock my station was telling the truth, and the two truths were about different things, and the contract, which is the only party in the conversation with the power to decide, believes my station. The event ended, for every purpose that generates obligations, at the moment my log's last trace was followed by the interval that stayed nil — four forty, as it turned out — and the bare-pavement clock armed itself at four forty-one, and that is the timestamp that will survive. Her three forty-seven will survive too, in her records, being correct. This corridor is administered under two endings roughly an hour apart, and nothing about the road cares, and both of us will die defending our own.

The console read me the crossing at six oh five without being asked. Minus nine at Box Canyon, minus nine point one, and then, at the six twenty interval, minus eight point eight. And warming. He said it in the tone he says everything, which is the tone of a man reading the departures board, and I logged it. That number is the hinge of the event and it will not appear as a hinge anywhere else: at minus nine and warming, the compact on my travelled lanes stopped being infrastructure and became deficiency. The same ice. Legal at six, illegal at six twenty. Forty millimetres of tolerated solid mass converted, by two tenths of a degree, into a compliance failure with a running clock, and every plan on my desk inverted with it — the storm had been setting our tempo for three days, and at six twenty the tempo came back to us, and it arrived with a deadline attached. Twenty-four hours to bare. For three days the institution had been one phase behind the weather. Now the weather was gone and we were one phase behind the contract, which is the natural condition of this industry, and I found I preferred it. You cannot be reviewed by weather.

He had, I noticed later, pulled the six-forty interval onto the board before the feed cycled — the confirming read, the one that made “and warming” a trend instead of a flutter — and had it sitting there when I looked up for it. The feeds refresh unevenly in cold; the intervals come in when they come in; I did not ask which had come in when. I had a reopening to run. That is not evasion, it is triage, and any supervisor

who tells you he chases every timestamp on the best morning of the event is describing a supervisor with too few pages on his desk.

I ran the night's reassignment ledger before the handover, for the record I will be handing to the review. It is one page. Every unit movement of the event, timestamped: the Merritt integration, the echelon reshuffles, the staging access cuts. Line eleven: 2204, Unit 6 released from Carolin Mine Road loop, mainline priority per event protocols. Sound at the time, sound now; the standard permits it and the event demanded it; the review will read line eleven in four seconds and agree. I initialled the page.

The Merritt crews went home at seven, northbound in convoy, plows up, at the same parade speed they arrived at, and their lead operator thanked us on the shared channel for the opportunity to observe Coldwater's methods at close range, which took him eleven seconds of transmission and will take our side all summer to answer.

And the month's numbers were already assembling themselves in the tray, because the performance report does not wait for feelings. I could read the shape of it before the totals: response times within specification across the event. Patrol frequencies met. Material usage inside the winter budget line. Callout compliance at ninety-two per cent, which is over threshold. One line for the closure, stated in hours, cause category: compound — weather/traffic. No penalty triggers. No exception reports. I said it out loud to the empty half of the room, at the end of the worst three days of the season, as the finding I will neither soften nor explain in the review: the month will look normal. It will look exactly normal. The paper was built to measure what we did, and we did what the paper measures, and the three days in between — the pullout, the queue, the erased lanes, the man in Osoyoos — have no column, and a system that recorded them would be worse, and I have thought about that harder than about anything else in this chair, and I sign the report on Thursday.

Dawn came up grey and workmanlike over the yard. On the screens the road lay under its forty legal millimetres, waiting to be made bare, and the first grader was already moving on the Box Canyon feed, down-pressure, throwing a low grey wing of ice off the driving lane, and behind me the console said, to nobody, in the departures-board tone: all

stations nil. Six intervals running. It's over. And I said, without turning around, because the ledger was open and the escorts staged and the morning finally, contractually, ours: it ended at four forty. And he said, agreeable as ever, that too.

DAY THREE — REOPENING

INTERLUDE III

ROAD CHANNEL · 0900-0940

COLDWATER BASE: All units, all units, this is Coldwater Base. Reopening sequence commences zero nine thirty. Escort order as published. Acknowledge by unit.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. Acknowledged. In position, Snowshed Hill.

HAND THREE: Coldwater Base, Hand Three. Acknowledged.

SEEKER ONE: Coldwater Base, Seeker One. Acknowledged. Staging release list follows on your direction, forty-one units in six blocks.

COLDWATER BASE: Seeker One, Coldwater Base. Proceed with block one.

SEEKER ONE: Coldwater Base, Seeker One. Block one: units per the overnight reconciliation, lead unit the reefer, second the Two Hills highway tractor, third through seventh as listed. Note unit nine boosted at zero six ten and holding charge. Block one is correct as read and correct on the ground.

COLDWATER BASE: Seeker One, Coldwater Base. Received. Traffic Control, commence block one on the escort.

TRAFFIC CONTROL: Coldwater Base, Traffic Control. Block one rolling. They are honking.

COLDWATER BASE: Traffic Control, Coldwater Base. Noted.

TRAFFIC CONTROL: Coldwater Base, Traffic Control. It is not hostile honking.

COLDWATER BASE: Traffic Control, Coldwater Base. Log it as weather.

COLDWATER BASE: All units, Coldwater Base. DriveBC event record is amended as of zero nine twelve. Estimated time of full reopening is posted: eleven hundred hours. Repeat, an estimate is posted.

HAND THREE: Coldwater Base, Hand Three. Confirm there is an estimate.

COLDWATER BASE: Hand Three, Coldwater Base. Confirmed. Eleven hundred.

HAND THREE: Coldwater Base, Hand Three. Three days, and now it tells us.

COLDWATER BASE: Hand Three, Coldwater Base. Keep the channel clear.

COLDWATER BASE: Hand One, Coldwater Base. Hold at the snowshed for block two... Hand One, stand by. Message from Merritt Base, relayed at their request, quote: passed to Coldwater relay zero eight fifty, for the operator of Unit Six: Kamloops General advises mother and daughter are well. It's a girl. Seven pounds one ounce. End of quote. Coldwater Base confirms transmission of the foregoing per relay procedure.

HAND ONE: Coldwater Base, Hand One. ...Received.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One. Request the seven pounds one ounce be entered in the log.

COLDWATER BASE: Loader One, Coldwater Base. It is in the log. It went in the log at zero eight fifty-one.

LOADER ONE: Coldwater Base, Loader One. Then the log is correct as read.

COLDWATER BASE: All units, Coldwater Base. Block two on the escort in five. Base out.

THE CLOSURE TOWN · STORM HOUR 63

Checkout is the closure run backwards, and I could conduct it from a hammock. Urn back to the breakfast room. Cots folded and racked — my husband built the cot racks, the winter before he died, to a design he refused to explain until it was finished, and every closure for eleven years I have folded the town's spare beds into a dead man's good idea and found the fit exact — bills printed, keys in the bowl, the no-vacancy sign dark by ten. The procession that arrived over two nights leaves in two hours. A town fills like a bathtub and drains like one, and the desk is the plug, and I have been the plug for thirty years and have no complaints about the work that I intend to share.

The wedding family went at five in the morning. Highway 3 had opened overnight, and the mother had done her sums at the counter the evening before — the long way around, four extra hours, against another night of her sister's hardening position — and paid up and led her family out into the dark, and the record should show what happened four hours later, because it is the finest evidence yet assembled for my side of a long argument. At twelve past nine, the lobby television chimed, and the road report amended, and for the first time in three days the sentence had a number in it: estimated reopening, eleven hundred hours. An estimate, at last, posted to a breakfast room containing, by then, nobody who needed one — the drivers gone to their staging blocks, the sales rep gone at seven, the family four hours down the far road on the strength of no information whatsoever. Three days of no estimated time while a town full of people hung on the words, and then the estimate arrives the moment the audience has left. You may call that a coincidence of operations. I have watched this road for thirty years, and I will tell you what the desk knows that the engineers do not: an estimate is a promise, and you do not post a promise until the people who could hold you to it have gone. That is

not cynicism. That is press relations, done well, and I would run my own front desk by the same rule if I could get away with it, and the fact that I can't is the difference between a motel and a ministry.

A local came in around ten — the potter, from up the valley — wanting the road news firsthand rather than off her phone, the desk having been the town's authoritative source since before phones deserved the title. Not the corridor; she had no use for the corridor. She'd been trying to get up the Carolin Mine road since Thursday, she said, something up there she'd been checking on daily before the weather, three days now unchecked, and was it open, and I said what the report said, which is that the side roads come back after the mainline, cleanup order, no times posted, and she thanked me and bought one of the good chocolate bars and stood at the window with it, looking at the mountain, and then went home. I charged her for the chocolate bar. She would have been offended otherwise, and been right to be.

Overlander checked out last, as always, the vans loading in the lot like a small carnival striking. The story producer settled all four rooms through April — the retainer, paid whether the beds are slept in or not, the surest money in my ledger — and delivered, unprompted, her verdict on the event, leaning on my counter with her sunglasses up in her hair in defiance of the season: three days, she said, and nothing happened. Nothing. A queue formed, a queue waited, a queue left. Beautiful management, no story. She said beautiful management, no story in the voice of a woman reporting a death in the family, and I topped up her coffee for the road, on the house, since the house was hers till April anyway.

The older one with the clipboard was the last of them out. He came to the desk while the vans idled, and he had the releases with him — the signed ones, squared up in a manila envelope, and he went through them at my counter one final time, front to back, unhurried, the vans idling and the producer glancing in through the glass and him proceeding at the speed of a man alone in an archive. Two forms he pulled out and set aside. Didn't say why. Tore them once, lengthwise, and asked me for the recycling, and fed the halves in himself, and the two faces on those forms will stay weather after all, wherever they are this morning, not knowing they were ever nearly story, first chosen and now unchosen by a man in my lobby running some ledger of his

own. The rest went back in the envelope, and the envelope went inside his coat, flat against him, carried out the door the careful way, the way you carry documents that matter — and I have watched couriers, lawyers, and repo men cross that lobby for thirty years, and I know the difference between paper a man is delivering and paper a man is keeping, and I know which that was, and I let it go through my door anyway, and would again. Some guests you audit. Some you just bill. He paid cash, exact, counted twice, and thanked me for the coffee specifically, all eleven days of it, itemized, from memory.

The patrol truck stopped in at half past ten on its way back down the mountain — the contractor's wellness run, off duty now, the corridor emptying its people homeward — and the driver came in for a coffee she then did not drink, because we got talking, and the coffee went cold at her elbow the way coffee does when the counter is doing its real work. I could not tell you what we talked about. I mean that in the technical sense: I have replayed it, and it does not summarize. The cot racks came into it, and the potter's chocolate bar, and whether a town can be said to have a busy season if the season arrives by accident, and her thermos, which has a dent in it with a history, and none of it was about anything, and it was the best hour of my three days, and when she left — block six was through, the corridor was open, her truck was the last vehicle in my lot — the lobby sat different for a while. Emptier than the emptiness the checkout had already made, which I would have told you that morning was as empty as the room got. You run a desk long enough, you can hear the difference between a room nobody is in and a room somebody has left, and I stood in the second kind, washing her cup, in no hurry at all to reach the first.

The last thing the television did before I switched the lobby set to the curling was refresh the event record to green. OPEN. No delays. The sentence that had run the town for three days was gone — not amended, gone, the record wiped smooth in the manner of all official memory, as though no assessment had ever been in progress, as though the estimate had been there all along. The desk in Victoria closes its files clean. Mine stay open. Twenty-two rooms, aired by Thursday, and the retainer runs to April, and the next one is already out there over the water somewhere, being modelled.

THE PLOW OPERATOR · STORM HOUR 68

The shoes came off at eight, figuratively speaking, which is the only way anything happens to a plow truck figuratively. Cleanup phase. The event has officially ended — it ended, I am told, at four forty, and also at three forty-seven, and the two offices responsible have agreed to disagree in writing — and with the ending came the clock, and with the clock came the down-pressure work: the graders and the belly blades out on the corridor scraping the tolerated compact off the pavement, bare lanes in twenty-four hours, the deadline the storm spent three days deferring and could defer no more. Twenty-one winters and the cleanup morning is still my favourite shift of an event. All storm long you ride the shoes, you skim, you leave the whisper of snow that keeps the steel off the asphalt, and it is right that you do, and it is also three days of doing a thing deliberately less than perfectly, and then the ending arms the clock and the contract itself orders up perfection, and the blade comes down, and the road you have been maintaining becomes, for one shift, the road you get to finish.

The corridor was pouring by nine thirty. Escort blocks first, then the general reopening at eleven, and then just traffic, the backed-up commerce of three provinces coming through in a river — northbound loaded, southbound loaded, campers, couriers, a hockey team, the sandwich reefer somewhere in it, everything the road is for, doing what the road is for, at speed, past my window. Not one vehicle in a thousand knows the lane is a made thing. They know weather delayed them; the phone told them so; the road itself just resumed, is how it reads from a warm car, the pavement simply there again the way water is back in the tap after the notice ends. I watched them pour past a grader working the shoulder windrow and give it the wide berth you give a road's one obstacle, and I noted, as a matter of professional record

and nothing else, that the obstacle had made the road. This is not a grievance. That much is plain. It is the design. A maintained corridor is a corridor nobody thinks about; the thinking is what we remove; bare pavement is the removal of the last thing winter gave them to think about, and by noon we would have removed ourselves from the morning's memory as well, and that is the specification, and we met it.

My echelon partner was back at seven, his unit slotting in beside mine at the yard gate without ceremony — the gate sheet pairs us as it pairs us most storms, my number and Hand's — the wing coming over into the old overlap on the first pass down Larson Hill as though the Merritt interval had been a rumour. Forty centimetres, no adjustment, four kilometres. I ran my line and his steel ran the seam and the windrow went where windrows go, and neither of us transmitted anything about it beyond the block acknowledgements, and there was nothing to transmit. Some work you do with a man. Some work has been doing itself so long you are both just present at it. We took the driving lane bare from the snowshed to the summit by early afternoon, trading lead at the turnarounds, the sun coming through in patches and the scraped lanes going black behind us in long widening ribbons, and it was, and I say this with twenty-one years of comparison shopping, plowing.

Base relayed the last station read of the event at two: Box Canyon pavement minus four and warming, all stations trending, chemical effectiveness confirmed corridor-wide. Minus four. The number that ran the mountain for three days was now just a temperature. Somewhere in the ops room they would be watching the same feed and feeling the same thing or nothing; the console reads the departures board either way.

I had known since ten to nine, for the record. The relay came through on the channel — Merritt Base to Coldwater Base to me, per procedure, quote and end quote, seven pounds one ounce entered in the log at zero eight fifty-one — and I acknowledged per procedure, and what I did with the information past acknowledging it is between me and the inside of a plow cab, which is the most private room in British Columbia, and holds what it holds, and holds it well at highway speed with the blade down. Her mother was born in March of a bad

winter too. I plowed that week also. There is a continuity in this that I decline to develop further on a working channel.

There was daylight left and half a circuit in the shift, so I ran it first. Southbound from the summit, blade down, and I keyed up for the end-of-shift report on the way, which is a formality, thirty seconds of nothing, mileage and material, and I gave the mileage and the material, and then I did not unkey, and Base waited, and I said the other thing.

“Base, Hand One. Log this last or don’t, dealer’s choice. What reopened this road is the same thing that kept it, which is the crews. Not the melt. The crews. That’s my report for the event. Hand One clear.”

Base came back after a moment and said, in the Base voice, received, Hand One, it’s entered, and the channel moved on to the abrasive resupply, which is what channels are for.

And there was still the half circuit, so I ran that too. The last of the compact coming off the passing lane in a low grey ribbon, the traffic giving me the wide berth and then closing behind me over the black, and at the Larson Hill turnaround I swung it and lined up northbound and took the driving lane home, one more pass, the same pass, the pass there is.