

A FLEET OF ONE

John McPhee

The little four-wheelers live on risk. They endanger themselves. They endangered us. If you're in a big truck, they're around you like gnats. They're at their worst in the on-ramps of limited-access highways, not to mention what they do on horse-and-buggy highways. They do the kissing tailgate. They do passing moves over double yellow lines. They make last-second break-ins from stop signs on feeder roads. The way they are operated suggests insufficiency in, among other things, coördination, depth perception, and rhythm. When I went to bad-driver school, the opening lecturer did not imply any such flaws in his students. He was a real bear. He wore blue-and-yellow trousers and a badge. In a voice he fired like a .45, he began by asking us, "How many of you people think you're good drivers?"

We had all been singled out in four-wheelers. My own car had a tendency to ignore stop signs without previously sensing the presence of bears. It lapsed in other ways as well. After I reached twelve points, I was offered admission to the New Jersey Driver Improvement Program, on the following voluntary basis: enroll or lose your license. Among the twenty-five people in the class, two smart-asses stuck up their hands in positive response to the instructor's question. He looked them over, then swept the room. "Well, you must all be good drivers," he said. "If you weren't, you'd be dead."

Then he darkened the room and rolled a film showing cars hitting cars in on-ramps. A, looking left, accelerates. B, looking left, accelerates. B rear-ends A, because A

hesitated, and B was still looking to the left. This primal accident, the figure 8 of bad driving, was the base of a graphic montage that ended in high-speed collision and hideous death on the road.

These memories of bad-driver school ran through me in eastern Oregon after Don Ainsworth, at the wheel of his sixty-five-foot chemical tanker, gave some air horn to a step van that was coming fast up an on-ramp on a vector primed for a crash. A step van is a walk-in vehicle of the U.P.S. variety, and, like all other four-wheelers, from Jettas to Jaguars, in Ainsworth's perspective is not a truck. FedEx, Wonder Bread, Soprano Sand-and-Gravel—they're not trucks, they're four-wheelers, even if they have six wheels. A true truck has eighteen wheels, or more. From Atlanta and Charlotte to North Powder, Oregon, this was the first time that Ainsworth had so much as tapped his air horn. In three thousand one hundred and ninety miles I rode with him he used it four times. He gave it a light, muted blast to thank a woman in a four-wheeler who helped us make a turn in urban traffic close to our destination, and he used it twice in the Yakima Valley, flirting with a woman who was wearing a bikini. She passed us on I-82, and must have pulled over somewhere, because she passed us again on I-90. She waved both times the horn erupted. She was riding in a convertible and her top was down.

If the step van had hit us it would only have been inconvenient, the fact notwithstanding that we were hauling hazmats. The step van weighed about ten thousand pounds and we weighed eighty thousand pounds, minus a few ounces. Ainsworth said he could teach a course called On-Ramp 101. "We get many near-misses from folks who can't time their entry. They give

you the finger. Women even give you the finger. Can you believe it?"

I could believe it.

"Four-wheelers will pass us and then pull in real fast and put on their brakes for no apparent reason," he said. "Four-wheelers are not aware of the danger of big trucks. They're not aware of the weight, of how long it takes to bring one to a halt, how quickly their life can be snuffed. If you pull any stunts around the big trucks, you're likely to die. I'm not going to die. You are."

We happened to be approaching Deadman Pass. We were crossing the Blue Mountains—on I-84, the Oregon Trail. He said, "Before you know it, we'll be sitting on top of Cabbage. Then we're going to fall down." He had mentioned Cabbage Hill when we were still in the Great Divide Basin. He mentioned it again in Pocatello. After crossing into Oregon and drawing closer, he brought it up twice an hour. "It's the terrific hill we fall down before we come to Pendleton. Pretty treacherous. Switchbacks. Speed restricted by weight. You'll see guys all the time with smoke flying out the brakes or even a flameout at the bottom."

From the Carolina piedmont to Hot Lake, Oregon—across the Appalachians, across the Rockies—he had not put his foot on the brake pedal on any descending grade. In harmony with shrewd gear selection, this feat was made possible by Jake Brakes—a product of Jacobs Vehicle Systems, of Bloomfield, Connecticut. Ainsworth called the device "a retarder, generically—you're turning a diesel engine into an air compressor." On a grade we descended in Tennessee, he said, "If you choose your gear right, and your jake's on maxi, you can go down a hill with no brakes. It saves money. It also lengthens my life."

Crossing the summit of the Laramie Range and addressing the western side, he geared down from twelfth to eighth and said, "I won't use one ounce of brake pressure. The Jake is on maxi." As big trucks flew past us—dry boxes, reefers—he said, "These guys using brakes with improper gear selection don't own the tractor or the trailer. Using brakes costs money, but why would they care?" Ainsworth owns the tractor and the trailer. As he glided onto the Laramie Plains, he went back up to eighteenth gear: "the going-home gear, the smoke hole; when you got into this gear in the old days, your stacks would blow smoke." On a grade at Hot Lake, however, he tried fifteenth gear, and his foot had to graze the pedal. He seemed annoyed with himself, like a professional golfer who had chosen the wrong club.

And now we were about to "fall down Cabbage." In ten miles, we would drop two thousand feet, six of those miles on a six-per-cent grade. Through basaltic throughcuts we approached the brink. A sign listed speed limits by weight. If you weighed sixty thousand to sixty-five thousand pounds, your limit was thirty-seven miles an hour. In five-thousand-pound increments, speed limits went down to twenty-six and twenty-two. Any vehicle weighing seventy-five thousand pounds or more—e.g., this chemical tanker—was to go eighteen or under. A huge high view with Pendleton in it suddenly opened up. I had asked Ainsworth what makes a tractor-trailer jackknife. He had said, "You're going downhill. The trailer is going faster than the tractor. The trailer takes over. It's almost impossible to bring yourself out of it. Brakes won't do anything for you. It's a product of going too fast for the situation. It can happen on a flat highway, but nine times out of ten it's downhill." The escarpment

was so steep that the median widened from a few feet to one and a half miles as the northbound and southbound lanes negotiated independent passage. Ainsworth had chosen eighth gear. He said, "Most truckers would consider this way too conservative. That doesn't mean they're bright." Oregon is the only American state in which trucks are speed-restricted by weight. Feet off both pedals, he started the fall down Cabbage praising the truck for "good jake" and himself for "nice gear selection." My ears thickened and popped.

"Six per cent is serious," he said. "I've seen some sevens or eights. British Columbia drivers talk about tens and twelves."

In two strategic places among the broad looping switchbacks were escape ramps, also known as arrester beds, where a brakeless runaway truck—its driver "mashing the brake pedal and it feels like a marshmallow"—could leave the road and plow up a very steep incline on soft sandy gravel. In winter, the gravel may not be soft. Ainsworth recalled a trucker in Idaho who hit a frozen ramp. His load, bursting through from behind, removed his head. On Cabbage Hill, deep fresh tracks went up an arrester bed several hundred feet. After trucks use a bed, it has to be regroomed. The state charges grooming fees. Some drivers, brakeless and out of control, stay on the highway and keep on plunging because they don't want to pay the grooming fees. Ainsworth said, "Would you worry about your life or the God-damned grooming fee?"

He was asking the wrong person.

A little later, he said, "Bears will roost at the bottom here."

Fulfilling the prediction, two cars were in ambush in

the median where the grade met the plain. Wheat fields filled the plain—endless leagues of wheat, big combines moving through the wheat, houses far out in the wheat concealed within capsules of trees. We passed a couple of dry boxes, both of them Freightliners. Among truckers, they are universally known as Freightshakers. "What's the difference between a Jehovah's Witness and the door on a Freightliner?" Ainsworth said.

I said I didn't happen to know.

He said, "You can close a door on a Jehovah's Witness."

We crossed the Columbia River and went over the Horse Heaven Hills into the Yakima Valley, apples and grapes in the Horse Heaven Hills, gators in the valley. To avoid a gator he swung far right, over rumble bars along the shoulder. A gator is a strip of tire, dead on the road, nearly always a piece of a recap. "A gator can rip off your fuel-crossover line, punch in your bumper, bomb out a fender."

The Yakima River was deeply incised and ran in white water past vineyards and fruit trees, among windbreaks of Lombardy poplars. Hops were growing on tall poles and dangling like leis. There was so much beauty in the wide valley it could have been in Italy. Now, through high haze, we first saw the Cascades. On our route so far, no mountain range had been nearly as impressive. We had slithered over the Rockies for the most part through broad spaces. Now we were looking at a big distant barrier, white over charcoal green, its highest visible point the stratovolcano Mt. Adams. We met three new Kenworths coming east—three connected tractors without trailers. One was hauling the other two, both of which had their front wheels up on the back of the tractor

ahead of them. They looked like three dogs humping. It was here that we were first passed by the scant bikini in an open Porsche, here that Ainsworth touched his horn for the second time on the journey. I was marginally jealous that he could look down into that bikini while I, on the passenger side, was served rumble bars in the pavement. I had long since asked him what sorts of things he sees in his aerial view of four-wheelers. "People reading books," he answered. "Women putting on makeup. People committing illicit acts. Exhibitionist women like to show you their treasures. A boyfriend is driving. She drops her top."

We skirted Yakima city. " 'Yakima, the Palm Springs of Washington,' " Ainsworth said. "That was written by a guy on laughing gas." He reached for his CB microphone. "Eastbounders, there's a pair of bears waiting for you. They're down there right before the flats." Now ahead of us was a long pull up North Umptanum Ridge. "We're going to give 'em hell," he said. In the left lane, he took the big tanker up to eighty-three, pressing for advantage on the climb. He was in the fast lane to overtake a flatbed hauling fifty thousand pounds of logs. The distance had almost closed; we were practically counting tree rings when the logging truck began to sway. It weaved right and then left and two feet into our lane. Ainsworth said, "Oh, my goodness!"

Ordinarily, I tend to be nervous if I am riding in a car driven by someone else. Like as not, the someone else is Yolanda Whitman, to whom I am married. On trips, we divide the driving time. I make her nervous and she makes me nervous. She was a student in bad-driver school in the same year that I was. While she is at the wheel, I sometimes write letters. I ask the recipients to

"excuse my shaky penmanship," and explain that I am "riding in a badly driven car." Coast to coast with Don Ainsworth was as calm an experience as sitting in an armchair watching satellite pictures of the Earth. In only three moments did anxiety in any form make a bid for the surface. None had to do with his driving. The first was over the Mississippi River on the bridge to St. Louis—the big arch in the foreground, the water far below—where we seemed to be driving on a high wire with no protection visible beside us, just a void of air and a deep fall to the river. The second was in St. Joseph, where we swung through town on I-229 for a look at the Missouri River, and the narrow roadway, on high stilts, was giddy, a flying causeway convex to the waterfront. Falling down Cabbage Hill, concern for safety hadn't crossed my mind. And now this big logger was bringing up a third and final shot of adrenaline. We got by tightly. The driver was smoking something.

The ridges were dry in that part of Washington—rainfall less than eight inches a year. At elevations under three thousand feet, the ridges were not notably high—certainly not with the Pacific Crest becoming ever more imminent at twelve, thirteen, fourteen thousand feet. We made another long pull, over Manastash Ridge, and drifted down from the brown country into another paradise of irrigation—instant Umbria, just add water. It was a dazzling scene, the green valley of hay, wheat, and poplars; and here the string bikini passed us again, goosed by the air horn and waving. By Cle Elum, we were pulling at the mountains themselves—less than a hundred miles from Seattle and approaching Snoqualmie Pass. Listening to his engine climb, Ainsworth called it "operatic."

Ainsworth thinks his chemical tanker is at least as attractive as anything that could pass it in a car. He is flattered by the admiring glances it draws. He is vain about his truck. That day in particular had started in a preening mode— at a nylon-covered building called Bay Wash of Idaho, next to a beet field west of Boise, where we drew up soon after six and went off to have breakfast before the big doors opened at eight. Ainsworth will not go just anywhere to have his truck's exterior washed. All over the United States and Canada, for example, are washes called Blue Beacon, and they are known among truck drivers as Streakin' Beacon. Ainsworth passes them by. He insists on places that have either reverse-osmosis or deionized rinse water. He knows of three—one in Salt Lake City, one in the Los Angeles Basin, and Bay Wash of Caldwell, Idaho. To the two guys who washed the truck he promised "a significant tip" for a picture-perfect outcome, and he crawled in granny gear through the presoak acids, the presoak alkalis, the high-concentration soap, and warm water under such high pressure that it came through the seams of the windows. "They're hand-brushing the whole critter," he said admiringly a little later. And soon he was getting "the r.o. rinse" he had come for. Ordinary water dries quickly and spottily. This water had been heated and softened, sent through a carbon bed and a sand filter, and then introduced to a membranous machine whose function was distantly analogous to the gaseous diffusion process by which isotopes of uranium are separated. In this case, dissolved minerals and heavy metals failed to get through the semipermeable membranes of the reverse-osmosis generator. Water molecules made it through the membranes and on to rinse the truck, drying spotless.

The Army and the Marine Corps use reverse-osmosis generators to go into swamps and make drinkable water. (Deionization is a different process but does the same thing.) Ainsworth paid sixty dollars and tipped fifteen. We were there two hours. "If you go into a Streakin' Beacon, you're going to be out in twenty minutes," he said. "You see the amount of time we fuck around just manicuring the ship? If I were in a big hurry, I wouldn't be doing it. Lord help us." We were scarcely on the interstate rolling when he said, "This is as close as a man will ever know what it feels like to be a really gorgeous woman. People giving us looks, going thumbs up, et cetera."

This is what raised the thumbs et cetera: a tractor of such dark sapphire that only bright sunlight could bring forth its color, a stainless-steel double-conical trailer perfectly mirroring the world around it. You could part your hair in the side of this truck. The trailer seemed to be an uncomplicated tube until you noticed the fused horizontal cones, each inserted in the other to the hilt in subtle and bilateral symmetry. Ainsworth liked to call it "truly the Rolls-Royce of tanks," and then he would deliver "Ainsworth's Third Axiom: if your stainless-steel thermos seems expensive, wait till you break three glass ones." The tank looked new. He had hauled it three hundred and eighty-seven thousand miles. It was so cosmetically groomed that its dolly-crank handle was stainless steel, its fire extinguisher chrome-plated—costly touches of an optional nature, not in the Third Axiom. Ainsworth uses tire blackener in the way that some people use lipstick. The dark tractor, still in its first ten thousand miles, had several horizontal bands, red and powder blue. On its roof, its two principal antennas were

segmented red, white, and blue. Its bug screen—forward, protecting the nose—was a magnified detail of a flying American flag. His earlier tractors all had similar bug-screen bunting, long before 9/11.

When Ainsworth slides into a truck stop, if there are, say, two hundred and ten trucks on the premises he is wary of two hundred and nine, not to mention others that follow him in. At a Flying J in Oak Grove, Kentucky, he went completely around the big parking lot looking for the space where he was least likely to get clipped. "You're inside the truck stop and you hear your name on the P.A.," he said. " 'Meet So-and-So at the fuel desk.' At the fuel desk is a guy with a sheepish look. Nowadays, they usually don't show up." In Little America, Wyoming, he circled a couple of hundred trucks before parking beside a light pole so only one truck could get near him. He said, "We're fifty per cent protected and that's better than one hundred per cent vulnerable." He has never been dinged and nothing has ever been stolen from his truck. " 'Constant vigilance is the price of freedom,' " he remarked. "Patrick Henry."

Ainsworth wore T-shirts with the truck's picture on them. Tall and slim—wearing tinted glasses, whitish hair coming out from under the band at the back of his cap—he had pushed sixty about as far as it would go. Only in one respect was he as well dressed as the truck. His boots, fourteen inches high, had been custom-made from the tanned hide of a water buffalo by the bootmaker J. B. Hill, of El Paso. Hanging in the sleeper behind him as he drove were boot-shaped leather bags containing other boots, like fly rods in burnished tubes. His caiman boots, he wished to point out, were made from the skins of farm-raised caimans. "Most people think they're either

gator or croc. They're not custom-made. They're off the shelf."

"Whose shelf?"

"Cavender's, in Amarillo."

In his boot library, as he calls it, are mule boots, eel boots, anteater boots, gator boots, crocodile boots. All these boots are in the Third Axiom, he says. Why?

"Because they last forever." His elk and bison low walkers are made by H. S. Trask, of Bozeman. Most truck drivers are content with running shoes. Ainsworth is content never to wear them.

I rode with him as "part-owner" of the truck. I didn't own even one hub nut, but was primed to tell officials in weigh stations that that's what I was. I never had to. My identity in truck stops was at first another matter. Hatless, in short-sleeved shirts, black pants, and plain leather shoes, I had imagined I would be as nondescript as I always am. But I was met everywhere with puzzled glances. Who is that guy? What's he selling? What's he doing here? It was bad enough out by the fuel pumps, but indoors, in the cafés and restaurants, I felt particularly self-conscious sitting under block-lettered signs that said "Truck Drivers Only."

So, a little desperate and surprisingly inspired, I bought a cap. Not just any cap. I picked one with a bright-gold visor, a gold button at the top, a crown of navy blue, an American flag on the left temple, and—on the forehead emblem—a spread-winged eagle over a rising sun and a red-and-green tractor-trailer and the white letters "America— Spirit of Freedom." On the back, over my cerebellum, was a starred banner in blue, white, red, green, and gold that said "Carnesville, GA Petro." I put on that hat and disappeared. The glances died like

flies. I could sit anywhere, from Carnesville to Tacoma. In Candler, North Carolina, while Ainsworth was outside fuelling the truck, I sat inside in my freedom hat saying "Biscuits and gravy" to a waitress. She went "Oooooo wheeeee" and I thought my cover wasn't working, but a trucker passing her had slipped his hand between the cheeks of her buttocks, and she did not stop writing.

I would pay for my freedom at the Seattle-Tacoma airport, when—with a one-way ticket bought the previous day—I would arrive to check in for home. Sir, your baggage has been randomly selected for radiation therapy. Please carry it to that far corner of the terminal. My boarding pass was covered with large black letters: "S S S S S." At the gate, I was once again "randomly selected" for a shoes-off, belt-rolled, head-to-toe frisk. I had become a Class 1 hazmat. At home was a letter from Visa dated two days before my return. "Please call 1-800-SUSPECT immediately." Yes? "Please explain the unusual activity: Georgia? Oregon? Petro? Flying J? Kirk's Nebraskaland? Little America? What is your mother's maiden name?"

"Was."

Self-employed, Ainsworth has an agent in North Salt Lake. Ainsworth rarely knows where he will be going, or with what, until a day or two in advance. "I am in a very specialized portion of trucking," he had once told me. "I have chemicals in a tanker. The whole game hinges on tank washings. Without tank washings, tankers would roll loaded one-way, then go back to origin to load again. In the old days, it was all dedicated runs. Now, due to the widespread existence of interior tank washes, we can move around, taking different things."

For example, when I joined the truck, in Bankhead,

Georgia, he was hauling a load of concentrated WD-40 east from San Diego. He had called the day before, from Birmingham, to say that he had just learned that after delivering the WD-40 in Gainesville, Georgia, he would be going to the Spartanburg Tank Wash, in South Carolina, then deadheading to Harrisburg, North Carolina, where he would pick up the hazmats for the haul west. We had been corresponding for four years but had never met. I was at Newark airport two hours after his call.

Before San Diego, he had hauled a surfactant from Salt Lake to New Mexico. He had washed in Phoenix and deadheaded west. To Hill Air Force Base, in Ogden, Utah, he once hauled parts degreaser for F-16s. From Philadelphia to Superior, Wisconsin, he hauled "a secret ingredient" to the company that manufactures Spy Grease. After bouncing to Neenah to wash, he loaded at Appleton a soap used in the making and curing of bricks. It was bound for Dixon, California. He has hauled weed killers, paint thinners, defoaming agents that form a broth in the making of explosives, latex for sandwiching plywood, and dust suppressants that are "kind to horses' hooves." To Fresno he took latex for a dye that turns brown cardboard white. Wood squeezings, or lignin liquor, is used in curing cement. He has carried it from Bellingham to Rancho Cucamonga—northern Washington to southern California. He turns down a job maybe once a year. "I don't want to haul any more cashew-nutshell oil—I believe it harms my barrel," he said. Cashew-nutshell oil arrives in ships from Brazil. "You can't make any friction device—clutches, brake shoes, brake pads—without it. It looks like creosote or asphalt. It's a hard wash. It calls for a stripper."

South of Pocatello, in a brightly greened irrigation valley, we met a Ranger reefer coming the other way. "They're out of Buhl, Idaho," he said. "They raise trout. I took some liquid fish guts up there last year—out of a tuna place in L.A. Harbor." Before the liquid fish guts, his load had been soap. Generally, the separation is distinct between food-grade and chemical tankers. You haul chemicals or you haul food. The vessels are different, the specs are different—mainly in protective devices against the aftermath of rollovers. Ainsworth used to haul wine, orange juice, and chocolate. He mentioned a load of concentrated cranberry juice worth five hundred thousand dollars, a load of chocolate worth seven hundred thousand. He said orange-juice haulers sometimes carry sizing agents on the return trip (sizing agents control shrinkage in textiles). Very few companies carry both foods and chemicals even in completely separate tankers. Ainsworth remembers a California carrier with a fleet of about twenty trucks who carried paint thinner, washed, and then picked up wine. He said, "Your brother better be F. Lee Bailey if you're going to engage in practices like that."

In Gainesville, north Georgia, less than fifty miles from Atlanta, we arrived at Piedmont Laboratories, Inc., on Old Candler Road, at 7:59 A.M. Piedmont is an independent packer of everything from hair spray and shaving cream to WD-40. "If it's rainy and your car won't start, rip off the distributor cap and spray it in there," Ainsworth said. "The WD means water displacement." A man named Bomba Satterfield came out—brown shirt, brown trousers—and took a sample of our brown liquid. Ainsworth hooked up a Piedmont hose to force out the cargo with compressed air. By nine we were discharging.

Ainsworth said, "We're flowin' and a-goin' right now, Bomba. It'll be about an hour." Satterfield disappeared. Ainsworth said, "Got to take a whiz." As he started off in search of a men's room, he said to me, "If the cargo starts to spill or all hell breaks loose, turn that stopcock and pull down the lever of the internal valve." All hell stayed put, to the relief of the part-owner.

When the load was gone, air was hissing from a valve at the top of the tanker. "If we let air go into the company's tank it would roil the waters," Ainsworth said, adding helpfully, "That's r-o-i-l." He climbed up the steel ladder on the side of the vessel and began, gingerly, to undog the dome. The dome cover was nearly two feet in diameter and was secured by six dogs. "Bleed before you break," he said. "Air is bleeding. Pressure can kill you if you break early." He said he had "heard of guys being blown off the tops of their trucks and into walls and killed." He had "heard of guys having their heads blown off." Other discharging methods could result in negative pressures no less serious. You could implode the tank. If you worked on railroad tank cars, which are made of carbon steel, you could crush them with implosion and twist them like beer cans. Your head would not come off but you would surely be fired. From the dome, we looked down inside the vessel. It looked almost clean. The heel, or residue, was—as we would learn at the interior wash—scarcely more than one ten-thousandth of the six thousand gallons that had been there.

The Spartanburg Tank Wash charged him less than two hundred dollars. It consisted of four parallel bays in what had recently been country. After three pints of heel went into a bucket, a Texas spinner was lowered through the dome. "They're using ultrahot water—just below steam—

and detergent," Ainsworth said. "It's an easy wash." A Texas spinner is a Gamma Jet, directing blasts of water at a hundred pounds of pressure per square inch. The procedure took two hours. "They use steam for caustic, and strippers for supercorrosive solutions," Ainsworth remarked while we waited. "You clean out cement mixers with sugar and water." He had a chemical dictionary in his truck to help tank washers break down any unusual product he might be carrying. "But wash guys usually know. Are you aware that a lot of wash guys get killed every year by nitrogen blankets? Customers sometimes use nitrogen to force a load out of a truck. Then the driver goes to a wash. A wash man goes into the tank. He dies. The driver should have alerted him." Some tank washes that service food vessels are kosher. A rabbi is there, supervising.

Directions supplied by Chemical Specialties, Inc., to 5910 Pharr Mill Road, Harrisburg, North Carolina, were written for vehicles approaching the region from the direction opposite ours. When Ainsworth is given imperfect directions, he sometimes asks, on arrival at the company office, "How did you get to work?" Often the answer is "I take the bus." Ainsworth: "That's apparent." At Chemical Specialties, he nosed onto a scale that was under a loading rack lined with bulbous vats. Releasing air, locking the brakes, he said, "O.K., we're in the tall cotton." Variously, the tall cotton was zinc nitrate, manganese nitrate, D-Blaze fire-retardant solution, monoethanol-amine. Before filling our vessel, a company handler of hazmats rattled off questions while Ainsworth nodded affirmatively: "You got a wash-out slip? Is your outlet closed? Can you take forty-five thousand pounds?" Ainsworth, for his part, had a question he was required to

ask the shipper: "Do we have to display placards?" But he knew the answer and he had the four placards—diamond-shaped, bearing the number 8 and the number 1760 and an inky sketch of test tubes spilling. If you dipped your fish in this hazmat, you would lift out its skeleton, but the hazmat at least was not combustible, not flammable, not explosive. The "8" meant "Corrosive." The "1760" stood for monoethanolamine.

We took it in by hose through the dome. As we filled, Ainsworth sat in the cab plotting his way west. Hazmats had to stay off restricted routes and avoid all tunnels except exempted tunnels. With your tire thumper, you did a tire check once every two hours or hundred miles, whichever came sooner. "Any fines that have to do with hazmats you take a large number and multiply it by a grandiose number," he said. "There's a twenty-seven-thousand-five-hundred-dollar maximum fine." A Class 6 hazmat is poison. A Class 9 hazmat with zebra stripes is "as close to harmless as you're going to get." Explosives are Class 1. Even Ainsworth develops wariness in the presence of a Class 1 placard. Seeing one at a truck stop in Cheyenne, he said, "You might not want to park next to him at night." If a placard with a 3 on it is white at the bottom, the load in the truck is combustible. If a placard with a 3 on it is red at the bottom, the load in the truck is flammable. Odd as it may seem, Gilbert and Sullivan did not write the hazmat codes. A flammable substance has a lower flash point than a combustible substance, according to the codes. "Hazmats" may soon be a word of the past. In Canada they are called "Dangerous Goods" and the term may become international. Hard liquor is a Class 3 hazmat. Depending on its proof, it is either combustible or flammable. The Glenlivet is combustible.

Beefeater is flammable.

I got out of the truck to look at the hose in the dome. Ainsworth said, "Get back in. We're almost loaded and your weight has to be part of the total." He should not exceed eighty thousand pounds, and the part-owner's hundred and fifty would matter. We were, after all, parked on a scale. Drawing on his knowledge of nineteenth-century rifle-sighting, he said, "Kentucky windage and Tennessee elevation is what you are doing if you're not right on a scale."

And moments later Ainsworth said, "He's hammering on my dogs. We're getting ready to get out of here." He backed away from the loading rack, stopped the truck, and went off to sign papers and receive from a laboratory his Certificate of Analysis. As if in a minor earthquake, the truck trembled for minutes after he was gone, its corrosive fluid seiching back and forth. As we began to roll for the Pacific Northwest, he said, "We're weighing seventy-nine thousand seven hundred and twenty, so we'll have to plug our brains in to see where we're going to fuel."

In this trade, if you were "grossed out" you were flirting with the weight limit. In weigh stations, they could "make you get legal"—keep you right there until you discharged enough cargo not to be overweight. "Grain haulers, they may know a farmer who will take it, but this corrosive stuff is something else," Ainsworth said. His twin saddle tanks, one on either side of the tractor, could hold three hundred gallons, and "a full belly of fuel," at seven pounds a gallon, would weigh twenty-one hundred pounds. We never had anything like a full belly. Constantly he had to calculate, and cut it fine. With no disrespect for the Chemical Specialties scale, he

sought a second opinion, pulling into a Wilco Travel Plaza forty miles up the road, where he came to a stop on a commercial CAT Scale (Certified Automated Truck Scale). While Ainsworth waited, while a truck behind us waited, and while the cashier in the CAT booth waited, the load in the big steel vessel took five minutes to calm down. Ainsworth paid \$7.50, got a reading of 79,660, and renewed his fuel calculations. In Candler, North Carolina, at TravelCenters of America, he took on fifty-five gallons of fuel—"just a dab"—and, to pay \$75.85, lined up at the truck stop's fuel desk behind a couple of dry-box drivers with lighter loads, who paid \$325.63 and \$432.22 for their fuel. Always near the intersections of interstates, truck stops have also tended to sprout on the leeward side of weigh stations. Approaching a Flying J just west of Knoxville, he said, "We're going to take on some Mormon motion lotion." He paid Flying J, a company based in Utah, \$65.96 for another fifty-five gallons. Waiting behind trucks at fuel bays, Ainsworth sought to avoid being trapped, because some drivers park at the pumps, go inside, eat, and shower. Farther west, where space expanded, he could show more generosity to the saddle tanks. At the Nebraskaland Truck Stop, in Lexington, he bought a hundred gallons for \$135.90. In the bays, there was always a pump on either side of the truck, one for each fuel tank. Truckers call the two pumps the master and the slave. One pump has the rolling numbers, the other is blank. As a general rule, if you take on fifty gallons or more at a truck stop, you get to shower and overnight free.

Many weigh stations have sensors that provide, as you enter, a ballpark assessment of your respect for the law. If a green arrow lights up after you go over the sensor,

you bypass all other apparatus and move on. The stations have dynamic scales that you slowly roll across and static scales, on which you stop. The weight on each axle is critical as well as the gross. You obey brightly lettered, progressively stern, electrically lighted signs: "Ahead," "Stop," "Park Bring Papers." Sometimes in weigh stations the I.R.S. is present—there to check the color of fuel. Clear fuel is the only fuel you can legally burn on the highway. Red-dye fuel is maritime fuel, farm fuel, or for use in stationary engines. If you are caught with dyed fuel, the fine starts at a thousand dollars. Ainsworth recalled disdainfully a trucker-negative television piece in which "they only interviewed people in the failure line at scales—outlawish people, running around with no sleep, pinching asses, and going a hundred miles an hour." Park bring papers. In a weigh station east of Boise, we passed a painted wooden sign that said "Leaking Hazardous Materials Next Right." We weren't leaking. We proceeded on.

While the common weight limit for five-axle eighteen-wheelers is eighty thousand pounds, in some states you can carry a greater load if, on more axles, you spread the load out. Near Lincoln, for example, when we met a seven-axled ag hopper, Ainsworth said, "He can gross maybe a hundred thousand pounds. He takes grain from Nebraska to Salt Lake and brings salt back." The more axles you add, the more you can legally carry. In 1979, westbound at Rawlins, Wyoming, Ainsworth, in a reefer hauling pork, came up behind a "Long Load Oversize Load" surrounded by pilot cars, a press car, a spare tractor, a tire truck, mechanics, and bears. A lowboy, it had eighteen axles and a hundred and twenty-eight tires. From Argonne National Laboratory, southwest of

Chicago, to the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center, in Palo Alto, California, it was carrying a superconducting magnet that weighed a hundred and seven tons. At close to half a million pounds gross, this itinerant enterprise was the largest legal load ever to move in the United States, a record that has since been eclipsed. To Don Ainsworth, the magnet was just a magnet. But the truck—the tractor! "It was a Kenworth—olive and glossy—with an olive trailer, a sharp-looking rig."

The most beautiful truck on earth—Don Ainsworth's present sapphire-drawn convexing elongate stainless mirror—gets a smidgen over six miles to the gallon. As its sole owner, he not only counts its calories with respect to its gross weight but with regard to the differing fuel structures of the states it traverses. In western Idaho, we took on fuel at \$1.299 a gallon. An hour later, in Oregon, we passed pumps that were selling diesel for \$1.199. He said, "It's much better for us to take Idaho fuel than that phony-assed Oregon fuel. It's expensive fuel that looks cheap." The Idaho fuel included all Idaho taxes. The Oregon fuel did not include Oregon's ton-mileage tax, which Oregon collects through driver logs reported to each truck's base-plate state (in Ainsworth's case, Utah). Oregon feints with an attractive price at the pump, but then shoots an uppercut into the ton-mileage. Passing a sign in Oregon that flogged the number 1.199, he said, "You got to add 24.9 to that to get a true price."

In general, he remarked, fuel is cheap on or below I-40, and north of I-40 it's costly. He particularly likes the "fuel structures" of Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, Missouri, and Oklahoma. To save a couple of thousand pounds and commensurate money, some hazmat-carrying chemical tankers are made of a fibreglass-

reinforced quarter-inch plywood with balsa core. Ainsworth's aesthetics do not include balsa cores. He would rather be caught dead in running shoes. In Idaho, in a heavy quartering wind on the huge plateau beyond Mountain Home, he could barely get into eighteenth gear and could feel the wind getting into his wallet, running up the cost of fuel. In the Laramie Basin, where we passed a collection of wrecked trucks, he said, "This place is Hatteras for box trailers. Those six wrecks, probably, were blown over in the wind. In terms of hurting your fuel economy, a side wind is every bit as bad as a headwind. The smaller the gap between the back of the cab and the nose of the trailer the better off you are in terms of fuel economy." In his mind as on his calculator, he paid constant attention to cost efficiencies. The Wyoming speed limit was seventy-five. Driving into a setting sun near Rock Springs, he said, "All day long I've been going seventy in an effort to save fuel." He asked if I knew what heaven is. Heaven is "this month's Playmate in the passenger seat, last month's in the sleeper, and diesel fuel at ten cents a gallon tax paid." Time and again, as we crossed the continent, he said, "I am a businessman whose office is on eighteen wheels. I have a fleet of one."

Most owner-operators own just their tractors. They haul company trailers. In the hazmat-tanker business, Ainsworth knows of only one other driver who owns his whole truck. Insurance is near prohibitive. Per vehicle per accident, the limit of liability for a dry box or a flatbed is seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars. For a chemical tanker, the limit of liability is five million. So why did Ainsworth want to own the whole truck? "First," he answered, "my piece of the pie increases. Second, I maintain her. I know what kind of shape she is in." The

"wages" he pays himself are \$1.08 times the odometer. But that pie he referred to was filled with more than hours driven. What did he and the truck earn in a typical year? A good year? His responses were strictly elliptical. He would sooner tell you what he paid for his water-buffalo boots, and he was not about to reveal that, either. Instead, he said, "Would we be waltzing around in a brand-new Pete and a virtually new tanker if there was no money in this business? And would my banker back me up? It's good money. It really is."

He said truck drivers make about seventy thousand a year if they are Teamsters, but few are. "Teamsters don't even organize trucking companies anymore. There's no point. Trucking is overpowered by non-union drivers." And companies pay them thirty-five thousand a year. Specialists like auto-haulers can make a hundred thousand a year. An owner-operator may gross a hundred thousand, but roughly half is overhead: payments on the tractor, road taxes, insurance, maintenance, and about seventeen thousand dollars' worth of fuel. There are some three hundred and fifty thousand independents on the road, hauling "mostly reefers and flats." And what about the people in local six-wheelers—dump trucks, delivery trucks? "Those guys who drive these little shit boxes around make thirty to forty grand a year. But, as I've said, they're not truck drivers. A truck driver drives an eighteen-wheeler. The skill level to drive those little step vans is like a kid riding a trike."

Don's father, Arthur Ainsworth, was born in Lancashire, and came to Canada, and then to western New York, after the Second World War. He became the editor-in-chief of *Screw Machine Engineering*, a magazine whose name a

hyphen would have improved. In 1952, he gave up journalism and began rebuilding machine tools, specifically the Davenport Automatic Screw Machine. He also bought fifteen acres south of Rochester—a truck farm. "I'm a farm boy," Don says often, and that is where he grew up, one of seven kids, in the "muck empire" around Honeoye Falls, growing celery, sweet corn, onions, and cucumbers, and hauling them to the farmers' market in the city.

He went to Honeoye Falls High School, class of 1960. After four years as a billing clerk for the Mushroom Express trucking company, he joined the Army, and served in the Azores and at the Defense Language Institute in Monterey ("a lot of those people were spooks"). He was a reporter on the base newspaper. Out of the Army, he found a billing-clerk job in California, and in 1971 was married. He has two children. Jeff, who lives in Sioux City, hauls livestock in his own truck. Alisa lives in Newport Beach, California, and is a programmer/analyst.

Divorced in 1975, he has not remarried, but he calls a woman named Jill Jarvis three or four times a week and sees her half a dozen times a year. She lives in Dayton, Ohio. They met in 1989 in the lot at a Union 76 truck stop near Los Banos, California, in the Great Central Valley. She owned her own tractor in the reefer trade, and it had a crumpled fender. He asked what had happened. She said, "Man driver!" She travelled with a very large German shepherd that had flunked out of training for the L.A.P.D. If anything made her uncomfortable in the society of her peers, she would call out, "Here, Fluffy! Come here, Fluffy," and the big shepherd would leap out of her truck.

In 1976, when he was freshly single, Don began to hang around truck stops in the Los Angeles Basin. Thirty-four years old, he was seeking informal training on the road. At a Union 76 in Ontario, near Riverside, he saw a guy changing a headlamp, chatted him up, and learned that he was independent. His name was Tim, and sure, he said, why not? Don could come along. They took a load of lettuce to Iowa, and returned with pork, team driving. Four months later, Don bought Tim's truck—"a 1973 Peterbilt cab-over with a skillet face." With it, he did "endless pork-and-produce loops," and in 1977 bought his own refrigerated trailer. When "the produce market went to hell," he sold his reefer and found a tanker outfit—Silver Springs Transport, Howey-in-the-Hills, Florida—that would teach him the ways of tankers and take him on as an independent contractor. In addition to the orange juice and the chocolate, he hauled liquid chicken feed, lard, and tallow. It was a living, but after a while he was running empty too much of the time, getting too much deadhead. So he switched to chemical transport.

He watches his diet. Ordering dinner from a Waffle House menu in Smyrna, Georgia, he asked for a salad with his T-bone instead of the eggs. In the Kingdom City Petro, Kingdom City, Missouri, he had a big sirloin for breakfast with eggs over easy and toast. We went past Kansas City, up through western Iowa, and had lunch in Nebraska that day. Typically, we had lunch eight hours after breakfast. He described himself as a teetotaller and a nonsmoker all his life. He said "nor'west" for "northwest" and "mile" for "miles" ("It's twenty or thirty mile down the road"). He spoke trucker. A dump truck was a bucket. A moving van was a bedbugger. A

motorcycle was a murdercycle, or crotch rocket, driven by a person wearing a skid lid. A speedo was a speeding violation. A civilian was someone not a truck driver. A lollipop was a mile marker. A "surface street" was anything off the interstate. On a horse-and-buggy highway, look for William Least Heat-Moon. He also used words like "paucity" and spoke of his "circadian rhythms." He frequently exclaimed, "Lord help us!" He said "shit" and "fuck" probably no more than you do. He seemed to have been to every jazz festival from Mt. Hood to Monterey. He had an innate pedagogical spirit, not always flattering but always warm. Twenty-two miles into Oregon, he explained the time zones of the United States. "There's four time zones with an hour's difference between them," he said. "Spread your four fingers. There's three zones between them." Or, as a Montrealer is said to have said to a Newfoundlander laying sod, "Green side up!"

Each morning, everywhere, he hunted for "the Walleye," often in frustration, because the Walleye tended not to be where his truck could go: "You just don't roll around with hazmat placards looking for the *Wall Street Journal*." He referred to the *Journal* conservatively as "the best-written paper in the world." In the course of a day that began in central Tennessee and went on through Kentucky and southern Illinois, he found no Walleye until we pulled into a QT in St. Peters, Missouri—"a convenience store on steroids that has grown into an El Cheapo truck stop"—where we parked between the pumps in a fuelling bay, left the truck, went inside, bought the *Wall Street Journal*, Xeroxed fifteen pages from "Hazardous Materials Transportation: The Tank Truck Driver's Guide," bought sandwiches to go,

took a whiz, went back to the truck, pumped no fuel, and departed.

"Do you know of a writer named Joan Didion?" he had asked me in North Carolina.

I was too shy to say, "Take the 'of' out."

"She is a powerful writer," he went on. "She was raised in the San Joaquin Valley and now lives in New York City. Do you remember an author—he's dead now, twenty or thirty years; they celebrate him up there in the valley . . . ?" Silent for a mile or two, working on it, he eventually said, "Saroyan. William Saroyan." He had Cormac McCarthy's "Border Trilogy" in the truck. "It's the third time I've read it," he said, "but it's like 'Moby-Dick,' you learn something new every time." Out of the blue, in widely scattered moments, he mentioned other writers, editors. They seemed to come up out of the landscape like cell-phone towers. On I-85, George Plimpton: "Is he head of the *Paris Review* today?" On I-40, William Styron: "He really knows his cured ham." *Esquire* materialized on I-640 in Knoxville: "I don't know how you can run a man's magazine if you're a lady." As we crossed the Missouri River for the first time, Heat-Moon rose for the first time, too. Seeing two combines and a related house trailer in Little America, Wyoming, Ainsworth said he had read "a great book, a terrific book" called "Dream Reaper" that described a new machine for harvesting wheat, but he couldn't remember the name of the author.

"Craig Canine."

The ten-acre parking lot behind the Kingdom City Petro, in Missouri, was covered with steel biscuits, by now familiar to me—yellow humps, about a foot in diameter, protruding from the asphalt. "When the

Martians land and try to figure things out, the toughest thing is going to be the yellow hump at the truck stop," Ainsworth said, but actually any self-respecting extraterrestrial would go straight to a yellow hump and start plugging in jacks to cable TV, the Internet, and the land-line telephone system. After dark, the big parking lots appear to be full of blue fireflies, as drivers lying in their sleepers watch TV. For team drivers, many trucks have in-motion satellite TV. Tractors come with built-in television trays. They're not an option. A truck with no television is about as common as a house without TV in Van Nuys. Ainsworth's TV shelf had boots on it.

Explosives are carried in liquid form in tankers. The more prudent truck stops have designated "safe havens"—Class 1 parking spaces situated, if not in the next county, at least, as Ainsworth put it, "a little away from the rest of the folks who may not want to be there when the thing lights off." Meanwhile, the main parking areas are always decibelled with the idling sounds of diesel engines and refrigeration units. At night in Bankhead, under the full moon, six hundred trucks were idling. It was hot in Georgia but the drivers were cool. Iowa, Oregon, everywhere, the trucks in the truck stops are idling, summer and winter, adjusting personal levels of coolness and warmth. When you are walking in a lot through the throaty sound of hundreds of idling trucks, it is as if you were on the roof of a co-op beside the air-conditioner. From the sidewalks at impressive distances, some drivers can hear their own trucks within the chorus, their own cicada reefers.

The concatenation of so many trucks can be intimidating to new, young drivers. Parking spaces are usually designed so that trucks can enter them and exit

them moving in the same direction. But not always. Sooner or later, you have to back up, or make some other maneuver that raises the requirements of skill. "In truck stops, you see guys with stagefright," Ainsworth said, as we entered the Flying J in Oak Grove, Kentucky. They take their stagefright with them when they leave. Some years ago, a young tractor-trailer driver, new in his job, picked up a load in Minnesota bound for New York City. He got as far as the apron of the George Washington Bridge, where he became so nervous and scared that he stopped the truck, left it there, and headed for a bus station.

Ainsworth's favorite line in truck-stop restaurants is "I see a lot of civilians in here, a very good sign. You see a civilian and the food is good." My own first choice comes off the public-address system like this: "Shower No. 275 is now ready." While guys in truck stops are waiting for showers—or just killing time—they sit in the TV rooms and stare. One hour a week they are asked to clear the TV rooms for Sunday religious services. They gripe and yell obscenities. Ministers are provided by Truckstop Ministries Incorporated, of Atlanta; Transport for Christ International, of Ephrata, Pennsylvania; Truckers' Christian Chapel Ministries, of Enon, Ohio. Some truck stops have mobile-unit chapels permanently parked in mid-lot. "Sometimes they take you to a real church, and return you," Ainsworth said. He seldom misses a Sunday service.

He locked the cab wherever he parked. "Dopers are everywhere," he explained. "And they know the value of everything. In truck stops it's not truckers who bother me, it's pimps and whores, people who want to steal, and people who want to sell you Rolex watches with Timex

guts." He said of a truck stop in the backcountry of eastern Oregon, "At one time it was a whorehouse with fuel pumps." Generally speaking, though, the seaminess of truck stops is in inverse proportion to their distance from major cities. In fact, you could generally call them wholesome if they're out in the tall corn. He described certain truck stops in the eastern Los Angeles Basin as "dangerous" and said they were full of burglars who would "hit you over the head," pushers, fencers of stolen goods, and hookers known as "sleeper leapers," who go from truck to truck. "The stops have security, but once the sleeper leapers get in there's no getting rid of them. You don't say 'Get lost.' They might hurt your truck. You say, 'I just left mama. I'm O.K.' "

In a bitter ice-cold winter wind at a truck stop on I-80 in South Holland, Illinois, he had seen a hooker going around the lot dressed in only a blouse and a miniskirt. Outside New York City, in his experience, no regional truck stop is less safe than the service area on the New Jersey Turnpike named for Vince Lombardi. His description of it was all but identical to his description of the truck stops of Los Angeles: "The Vince Lombardi plaza is a real dangerous place. Whores. Dope. Guys who'll hit you over the head and rob you. A lot of unsavory people wandering around, and not your brethren in transport." About his brethren in transport, the most unsavory item that Ainsworth pointed out to me was lying beside a curb at the edge of a truck-stop parking lot in Kentucky. It was a plastic quart-size fruit-juice bottle with—apparently—apple juice in it. He said, "That isn't apple juice. It's urine. They generally leave the bottles by the trucks. Other trucks run over them. When you see wet pavement, that isn't rainwater."

You see children playing in the truck-stop parking lots, especially in summer—eight-year-olds in baggy short pants like their parents'. A woman in Little America was walking her dog beside a closed auto-hauler with a custom sleeper. A closed auto-hauler hauls concealed expensive cars. A custom sleeper is a family home, stretched onto a bobtail. Indiana Custom Trucks, of Lagrange, Indiana, makes kitchen-bedroom parlors that cost more than the tractors themselves and, of course, have in-motion satellite TV. "People think truck drivers are all evil and mean," Ainsworth said when we were still in North Carolina, and even earlier in our acquaintance he said, "Please do not entertain any stereotypical notions about truck drivers—i.e., that they are tobacco-chewing, ill-educated, waitress-pinching folk raised on red beans and rice and addicted to country music." He is dour about the brethren's obscenities and profanities while talking with one another on CB radio. "A lot of four-wheelers have CBs," he said. "The truckers' language reinforces the stereotype that truck drivers are fourth-grade-educated grease-under-the-fingernails skirt-chasing butt-pinching dumdums. Dodos." Sometimes you look into trucks and see big stuffed animals on the passenger seat. "Lots of real dogs, too. The dog of choice is poodle."

I think it can be said, generally, that truckers are big, amiable, soft-spoken, obese guys. The bellies they carry are in the conversation with hot-air balloons. There are drivers who keep bicycles on their trucks but they are about as common as owner-operators of stainless-steel chemical tankers. At the Peterbilt shop in O'Fallon, Missouri, we saw a trucker whose neck was completely blue with tattoos. Like many other drivers in the summer

heat, he was wearing shorts, running shoes, and white socks. Some still wear bib overalls—the Idaho tuxedo, according to Ainsworth. Sometimes it's the Louisiana tuxedo. Bull racks are trucks that carry cattle. If a bull rack has a possum belly, slung down inches from the pavement, it can variously carry "hogs, sheep, goats, cattle, vicuñas—whatever." Bull-rack drivers, according to Ainsworth, are "all macho guys." In Wyoming, we passed a Freightliner driven by a slight Asian woman in a baseball cap. She wore glasses and her hair was gray. In Oregon, an England company dry box out of Salt Lake overtook and passed us. Ainsworth described the driver as "a lady who looks like a grandmother." Women are now about five per cent of all truck drivers. "You have to have half-ass mechanical skills," he said modestly. "Women don't have such skills." Quite rare are "single lady drivers" and two-female teams. Man plus woman, however, seems to work out as a team. "For a husband and wife it can be a very simple chore. They have drop trailers at both ends. Dropping and hooking, they can easily do a thousand miles a day." The sun never sets on the languages spoken by American truck drivers.

Drug use is "not rampant" among truckers, he said. "Random drug screening is fairly effective. Preemployment screening, too. If they see you staggering around and your eyes are red, you're going for a for-cause screening—urine test, blood test, et cetera. They test for five things: cocaine, marijuana, angel dust, amphetamines, and heroin. Many times, they'll give you a saliva test, just like a horse, right on the spot." Alcohol? "I don't smell it on guys." As a teetotaller, he is a particularly qualified smeller. Truck stops sell beer, and Ainsworth approves. "Better to have it right there than to

be rolling around in your bobtail looking for a liquor store."

Just as the body of a fish tells you how that fish makes a living, the body of a tanker can tell you what it contains. In Ainsworth's words, "The architecture of the tank says what is in it." If a tank has gasoline inside, it has a full-length permanent manway on top, and, seen from the rear, is a recumbent oval. If a truck is a water wagon, the tank—rear view—is rectangular. A perfect circle ambiguously suggests asphalt, milk, or other food. If the vessel is all aluminum and shaped in tiers like nesting cups, it is a food-grade pneumatic hopper full of flour, granulated sugar, and things like that. If stiffeners are exposed—a series of structural rings circling and reinforcing the tank—the vessel is uninsulated, generally operates in a warm climate, and often hauls flammables and combustibles. Ainsworth said, "That is what mine looks like without the designer dress" (the stainless mirror sheath). The double conical side view speaks of chemical hazmats. Since September 11, 2001, all these shapes have scattered more than fish.

"Since 9/11, people see a tanker and they think you've got nitroglycerin in it," Ainsworth said.

Responding to a suggestion that we use a Wal-Mart parking lot while making a visit in Laramie, he said, "There's no way I'm putting these hazmats in a Wal-Mart. People in places like that think the truck is going to explode." In the fall of 2001, near St. Louis, a cop in a weigh station asked what he was carrying. "Latex," said Ainsworth. "Latex is a hazardous commodity," said the cop, but let him go. In a weigh station near Boise with a tankful of phosphoric acid he got the "Park Bring Papers" sign, as did all trucks with hazmat placards after 9/11.

Everywhere, though, drivers were being scrutinized even more closely than the contents of their tanks. Drivers quit "because they looked Middle Eastern and were stopped left and right." If not native born, drivers with hazmat endorsements on their licenses became subject to police checks. "At truck stops, you used to be able to drop your trailer and bobtail into town. Now they don't want that. Something may be ticking." Signs have appeared: "No Dropping Trailers." The asphalt pavement at many truck stops used to be laced with dolly slabs. If you wanted to drop your trailer and go off bobtailing, you used a dolly slab or you might regret it. The retractable landing gear that supports the front end of a detached trailer could sink deep into asphalt and screw you into the truck stop for an extended stay. Rectangles just large enough for the landing gear, dolly slabs were made of reinforced concrete.

September 11th did not create in Ainsworth a sensitivity to law-enforcement officers which was not already in place. He describes the introduction of photo radar as "another encroachment of our rights." On I-10 once in Florida, a cop pulled him over and tried to put a drug-sniffing dog in his cab. He said, "I'm allergic to dogs." The officer said, "It's O.K. We can spray the cab." Slowly, Ainsworth said, "I'm constitutionally allergic to dogs." The bear got the message. The bear, of course, had "run a make" on him—"a cop phrase for plugging me into the N.C.I.C." The National Crime Information Center is a system within the F.B.I. "A cop stops you, runs an N.C.I.C. on your license, your whole history—your hit-and-runs, your D.U.I.s, your drug arrests. He's ready to give you a field sobriety test—walk a straight line, et cetera. Around San Francisco, that's called the Bay Shore

Ballet."

"What did the cop find in your record?"

"Zero. There's nothing that exists on me. We don't really believe in interviews with police. It just gums us up. I run a legal ship, and the equipment is well maintained." Ainsworth added that he can afford water-buffalo boots because he obeys the law, keeping the buzzards out of his wallet. Buzzards, a word of broad application, extends from police to the Department of Transportation and the Internal Revenue Service and beyond. In the argot of the road, D.O.T. stands for Death on Truckers.

A female police officer is a sugar bear. A honey bear. A diesel bear is a cop who deals with truckers only. On a surface street in Puyallup, Washington, we happened by a municipal cop parked in his police car. Ainsworth said, "That's a local. That's not a real bear. Truck drivers would say, 'That's not a full-grown bear.' "

It had been well over a decade since he had acquired his last speedo. At one time, he thought "speedos were merely a form of doing business," but he had completely changed his mind. Individual bears have idiosyncratic speed thresholds that range from zero to ten miles above the limit. So Ainsworth sets his cruise control exactly on the speed limit. "Cops are suspicious of everybody," he said as we were starting to roll from Charlotte. "You have to think like a cop." His thinking is assisted by his radio scanner, which homes on the highway bands for state police. In Malheur County, Oregon, he heard a bear on the scanner say that he had a dump truck in Vale and was going to weigh it on a portable scale. "Vital information," Ainsworth said. "It's vital for you to know where the predators are." He bought the scanner mainly to detect

"bears in the air." How does he know they're in the air? "You learn cop talk: 'That blue truck in lane No. 3—we've got him at 82.5.' " On the Pennsylvania Turnpike he once heard an air bear say to five chase cars on the ground: "We're going home early. We've got our work done for today." In other words, a quota had been met. The quota mattered more than a full shift of the cops' contribution to safety. Speedos, evidently, were for them a form of strip-mining more profitable than bituminous coal. On I-15 in Idaho, after we met a four-wheeler getting a speedo on the shoulder from a bear with flashing lights, Ainsworth turned on the scanner. "We want to know everything about cops," he said. "We want to know if that cop is going to turn and come along behind us after signing the ticket." He did.

"On I-90 in Montana it was legal to go any speed until about two years ago," Ainsworth said. "Guys went a hundred miles an hour. There were too many wrecks. You'd need a big parachute to stop this thing at a hundred miles an hour. I wouldn't think of doing a hundred miles an hour. You're going to Beulah Land."

Backing blindsided at the Peterbilt dealer's in Missouri, he said, "Sometimes you do this by Zen." He had never been to driver school. "I'm a farm boy," he explained. "I know how to shift. There are two things you need to know: how to shift, and how to align yourself and maintain lane control—exactly how much space is on each side. In city traffic it's critical." In the open country of western Kentucky, he said, "Out here, you look way ahead. It's the same as steering a ship. There's a silver car about a mile ahead that I'm looking at now. When you steer a ship, you don't look at the bow, you look at the horizon. When I'm in a four-wheeler, I stay away from

trucks, because if a tire blows or an entire wheel set comes off I'm going to Beulah Land."

Gratuitously, he added, "Atlanta has a lot of wrecks due to aggressive drivers who lack skill. In Los Angeles, there's a comparable percentage of aggressive drivers, but they have skill. The worst drivers anywhere are in New Jersey. Their life cannot mean a great deal to them. They take a lot of chances I wouldn't take—just to get to work on time."

From Harrisburg, North Carolina, to Sumner, Washington, the load in the tank behind us kicked us like a mule whenever it had a chance. The jolt—which he called slosh, or slop—came mainly on surface streets and on-ramps when gears were shifting at low speeds. On the open road, it happened occasionally when we were gearing down, mashing on the accelerator, stepping on the brakes, going downhill, or going uphill. Ainsworth minimized the slosh with skills analogous to fly casting. "You coordinate shifting with the shifting of the load," he said. "You wait for the slop or you can pretzel your drive line." The more ullage the more slop. The density of the monoethanolamine had allowed us to take only six thousand gallons in the seven-thousandgallon tank. The ullage was the difference was the mule.

We would deliver it to Sumner after a day's layover in the Cascades. We were running twenty-four hours early. For the spectacular plunge in christiania turns down through the mountains from Snoqualmie Pass, Ainsworth's gear selection was No. 14 and his foot never touched the brake. The speed limit for trucks was, of course, restricted, but not by weight, causing Ainsworth to say, "They're not as bright as Oregon." The State of Washington was bright enough, however, to require that

a truck stop in that beautiful forest of Engelmann spruce and Douglas fir be invisible from the interstate, right down to the last billboard. About thirty miles uphill from Puget Sound, we turned off I-90 at a nondescript exit, went through a corridor of screening trees, and into the Seattle East Auto Truck Plaza, where a freestanding coffee hut aptly named Cloud Espresso dispensed americano one-shots and mondo latte—truck-driver drinks, strong enough to float a horseshoe. In the lot, at least a hundred trucks were parked and humming. On one flatbed, a guy had a yacht he had hauled from Fort Lauderdale for a Seattle couple who had sailed around the Horn. He was getting ten thousand dollars to take the boat home.

As we began to roll on the second morning, I asked Ainsworth what time it was. He said, "0600 local." Sumner is down near Enumclaw and Spanaway, southeast of Tacoma. On Eighth Street East at 6:50 A.M., we turned into a large, elongate, and already busy lumbermill, where lanes were narrow among high piles of raw logs and stacks of lumber in numerous dimensions, from rough-cut ten-by-tens down. We saw a machine called a C-claw, or grappler (basically a crab's claw with a six-foot spread), go up to an eighteen-wheeler that had just arrived with fifty thousand pounds of fresh wood—forty-foot logs of Emperor fir. As if the huge logs were bundled asparagus, the big claw reached in, grabbed them all, and in one gesture picked up the entire fifty thousand pounds, swung it away from the truck, and set it on the ground.

A man appeared from behind some stacked lumber and shouted, "You guys got chemical?"

"We're not here with his morning orange juice,"

Ainsworth muttered.

"Did you know you've got a hole in your tank?"

A living riot, this guy. He directed us to "the second dry shed" in the vast labyrinthine yard. It was a cloudless day. From the roof of that dry shed, you could have seen the white imminence of Mt. Rainier, twenty-five miles southeast. But we were soon parked under the roof and looking instead at a bomb-shaped horizontal cylinder rouged with rust. This was the destination to which he had hauled the monoethanolamine 2,884 miles. "What is the capacity of the tank?" Ainsworth asked. Answer: "It's big." Eventually, he determined that the receiving tank's capacity was nine thousand gallons. He got out his tire thumper and thumped the tank. "Sounds pretty empty to me," he concluded, and from tubes on his tanker he removed two twenty-foot hoses two inches thick and a ten-foot jumper with double female ends. He hooked them together and forced out the hazmat with compressed air. As the fixing preservative in pressure-treated wood, chromated copper arsenate and ammoniacal copper arsenate were being phased out by the pressure-treated-wood industry. Some people had built their houses entirely of pressure-treated wood, and from the arsenic in the preserving compounds the people were going the way of old lace. Adults had been hospitalized. Children were at particular risk. So arsenic compounds were out now, and we had brought the base of the broth meant to replace them. In an hour, the six thousand gallons were discharged. We climbed to the dome, Ainsworth eased it open, and we looked down into the vessel. There remained what turned out to be a pint and a half of heel. It was a very dark and glistening, evil-looking blue. If blood were blue, it would look like

monoethanolamine.

At 0900 local we were back on the road. Ainsworth was headed for a wash in Portland, and then would bounce to Kalama, near Kelso, and take a load of K-Flex 500 to Kansas City, and then bounce to Gastonia, North Carolina, for latex bound for White City, Oregon. From the lumbermill, he took me fourteen miles to the Flying J Travel Plaza, Port of Tacoma Truck Stop, Interstate 5. As he departed, the long steel vessel caroming sunlight was almost too brilliant to look at. I stood on the pavement and watched while the truck swung through the lot and turned, and turned again, and went out of sight. As it did, the Flying J's outdoor public-address system said, "Shower No. 636 is now ready." ♦