

The Jack Reacher Experiment: Dead Ringer

(excerpt)

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Hundreds of big-rig headlights had whooshed by over the past couple of hours, and there wasn't anything particularly unusual about the pair Wahlman was looking at now.

Except that they were headed straight toward him.

He dove and rolled down the grassy embankment to his left. He half expected the semi to follow him and crush him, but it didn't. It thundered on by, transmitting vibrations all the way down to the bottom of the ditch, tremors that stomped through Wahlman's core like a herd of rhinos. There was no slowing down, no grinding of gears, no screeching of brakes. No indication that a human being was behind the wheel.

Amped on adrenaline, breathing hard, Wahlman clawed his way up the slope, handfuls of slick grass eventually giving way to the gritty pavement at the top.

The massive vehicle continued westward along the shoulder. Roguishly. Inelegantly. Just a stupid machine lumbering through the misty blackness. A machine the size of a house. A machine that would destroy anything in its path.

Wahlman didn't own a cell phone, and there weren't any cars or trucks or motorcycles to flag down at the moment. The interstate had been eerily quiet before the semi approached. No vehicles for several minutes, westbound or eastbound. Wahlman didn't know if it was like that every Sunday at 4:17 in the morning, but he figured it probably was. If you were in Slidell, you probably weren't going to be driving into New Orleans at that hour, and vice versa. You were

probably in bed. Maybe one of the lucky ones who could actually sleep through the night every night.

The big truck rolled on. Probably a Freightliner, the way a soft drink is probably a Coke, although it could have been a Kenworth or a Peterbilt or a Mack. Or some other brand. It was pulling a heavy load. You could tell by the hum of the tires on the pavement.

The headlights illuminated a bridge up ahead, a small one built over a canal.

Wahlman figured the truck was traveling at a speed between fifty and sixty miles an hour. Not inordinately fast, but certainly not slow either. Maybe it had been coasting for a while. Maybe the driver had fallen asleep. Or died of a heart attack or something.

Wahlman was standing there wondering exactly what had happened when the truck abruptly veered to the right and crashed through the concrete railing that ran along the side of the bridge. The trailer broke loose and toppled cacophonously out into the middle of the highway, showering the pavement with bright orange sparks as the tractor plunged nose-first into the water.

Wahlman wasn't much of a runner. He never had been. He'd played football in high school, but they always put him in a position that didn't require much speed. Offensive line, most of the time. At six feet four inches tall and two hundred forty pounds, there weren't many players who could get past him. In his junior year, a sports reporter at the local newspaper started calling him *Rock*, and the name stuck. *Rock Wahlman*. There were *Rock Wall Man* posters at all the pep rallies, and the cheerleading squad even had some t-shirts printed up one time. He'd been nearly impenetrable on the football field, but he wasn't fast. Not then, not now. He galloped clumsily toward the wreckage, greasy hot steam from the submerged engine rising and meeting him as he finally made it to the edge of the bridge.

The headlight on the driver side was still on, cutting a wedge of brightness into the murky brown canal water. The water wasn't very deep. Eight feet at the most. Wahlman couldn't see into the cab, but he could hear the muffled roar of a classic heavy metal song blaring from the stereo. Nobody could have fallen asleep to that, he thought. Which meant that the driver had lost consciousness some other way. Maybe a cardiac event. Or a stroke. Or something else.

Wahlman pulled his boots off, slid down into the water and peered into the passenger side window. The driver was male, late thirties or early forties, as big as Wahlman, maybe a little bigger. He wore a plaid shirt and a black ball cap. His eyes were closed. There was a thread of blood that started at the corner of his mouth and ended at the edge of his button-down collar. The water inside the cab was up to his chest. Wahlman couldn't tell if he was breathing or not.

Wahlman pounded on the window.

The driver didn't stir.

The music had stopped, and the headlight was getting dimmer by the second.

Wahlman went up for a quick breath of air, and then he dove back down and got on his hands and knees and frantically started searching for something to break the window with. He raked his fingers through the silt, combing a radius of several feet, scooping and grasping at the sandy mud, coming up empty again and again.

He climbed around the engine housing to the other side of the cab, cupped his hands against the window. The water was up to the driver's chin now. Wahlman reared back and hammered the glass with his fist, but it was no use. The resistance from the water prevented the blows from being forceful enough. Maybe he could break through with the heels of his feet, he thought, but he needed to get another breath of air first. He was about to push himself back up to the surface when the driver's eyes opened.

“Help,” the guy shouted. “Help me. Please.”

Wahlman made a cranking motion with his hand.

“Roll the window down,” he said.

Water would flood the cab, violently, like a dam bursting, but then the pressure would equalize and the guy could pull himself out.

“I can’t move my arms,” the man said.

Every cell in Wahlman’s body was screaming for oxygen. He held one finger up to let the driver know he would be right back, and then he surfaced and swam over to the bank. Gasping, coughing, lungs on fire. He grabbed a rock the size of a softball, jumped back into the water and made his way down to the passenger side window. The water was up to the driver’s nostrils now. Wahlman started slamming the window with the rock, but the glass didn’t break. The water was slowing him down and he was lightheaded and his muscles were starting to fatigue. It felt as though he had been drugged and beaten and thrown into a vat of pancake syrup.

The driver made one last gurgling cry for help as the headlight grew dimmer and dimmer and then went totally black. Wahlman couldn’t see anything now. He kept trying to break the window. There was nothing else he could do. He tried several different angles, coming down as hard as he could, gripping the rock with both hands, pounding and pounding and pounding, finally hearing a muffled crack as the safety glass crumpled and folded inward. There was no big gush, as he thought there would be, which meant that the cab was completely full of water now.

Using the rock to grind off any remaining chunks of glass from the window frame, Wahlman managed to climb in and grab the driver by his shirt and pull him out of the truck. The guy was unconscious now. Totally limp. Dead weight. Wahlman struggled to get him into a

rescue hold, but he couldn't. The man slipped away and sunk to the bottom of the canal like a sack of bowling balls.

Wahlman needed air. He surfaced and took a deep breath, and another, the air warm and wet and heavy, and then he went back down and lifted the driver onto his shoulders, trudged up the slope and heaved the unconscious man onto the rocky bank.

Wahlman was nearly unconscious himself. He coughed out some water and sucked in some air and reached over and pressed two fingers against the side of the man's neck to see if he had a pulse. Nothing. Wahlman struggled to his knees and started chest compressions, noticed right away that the bottom of the man's shirt was soaked with blood.

And then he noticed something else.

The man looked exactly like him.

Same facial features, same hair color, same massive arms and shoulders. The guy had a tattoo on his neck, but otherwise it was like looking into a mirror.

Wahlman continued performing chest compressions.

"Breathe," he shouted.

But the man didn't breathe. And when a thick glob of blackish-red blood oozed out from the center of his mouth, Wahlman decided it was time to stop the resuscitation efforts. He scooted away from the corpse, rolled onto his back, stared up at the diffuse moonlight. A thick blackness engulfed him, and he wondered if he was dying, and he thought he was, and his fingers started tingling and his legs went numb and there was nothing he could do but lie there and let it happen.