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## THE CRASH

SINCE ARRIVING IN Ojai on Monday, the Houck sisters had been kept busy with visits to friends and family. On Monday, after visiting Nancy Mason, they spent the evening with their mother. The next day they drove south to Westlake Village to see their father, his family, and their brother Greg. On Wednesday morning they returned to Ojai for more visits with friends.

That evening Jacqueline had dinner with Laurie Canty, her equestrian trainer, and Laurie's husband Billy. Raechel joined a group of friends at Billy O's Restaurant & Saloon in nearby Ventura for a farewell visit. The next morning she stopped in to see a few friends in Ventura and Ojai. Just before heading for Santa Cruz she dropped by Nancy Mason's nearby beauty salon to say goodbye. Nancy told her, "Come back before the wedding, I'll do your hair."

Raechel and Jacqueline Houck left Ojai midday Thursday, Oct. 7 for the 300-mile return trip north. The weather was clear; traffic on north-bound 101 was moving well. If all went smoothly they'd be in Santa Cruz in time to drop off the rented PT Cruiser at Enterprise that evening.

For the first 150 miles or so the trip was uneventful. By 4:30 p.m. they had passed the town of Paso Robles, in San Luis Obispo County, and were more than halfway home. Shortly before five p.m. they passed

the turn-off for the town of San Miguel, where a stark, lonely ruin of a Spanish mission bell-tower flanks the highway, and crossed the border into Monterey County.

At a point a few miles north of San Miguel the highway transects Camp Roberts, a forty-two-thousand acre military reservation whose terrain along 101 is dominated by rolling hills, grassland, and scrub trees. The Nacimiento River, flowing westward across Camp Roberts into Lake Nacimiento, passes under 101 near this point. The roadway along this stretch is flat and straight, with a speed limit of 70 miles per hour for cars, 55 miles per hour for trucks. Northbound and southbound vehicles, travelling in two lanes each way, are separated by a 30-foot-wide grassy median. A rest area serving northbound travelers lies slightly beyond the river crossing. Another, serving southbound traffic, lies a mile further on. Nearby is the small town of Bradley.

As the Houck car approached the northbound rest area, something went horribly wrong.

Carlos Woods was driving a southbound Freightliner Century tractor pulling a refrigerated trailer. His co-driver Richard Woods, who was also his cousin, was napping in the sleeper berth behind the driver's seat. The 18-wheeler had left Salinas with a partial load of produce a few hours earlier and was headed south to Los Angeles to pick up more freight for Gorvack Transporting, the Florida company that owned the rig. Moments after Woods passed the southbound rest area, he recalled, it happened:

"I saw some smoke and that got my attention and I looked over to the left and by the time I looked over to the left I seen a car turned like an angle and start heading towards the median, so I knew something was wrong, so I locked the brakes up on it, on the truck... And by then they had got in the median... I'm already on the brakes all the way down, just sliding. And basically the car kept sliding across kicking up dust... I just knew it was just going to come on over towards me, so I steered right to try to steer away from it."

The Houck PT Cruiser had suddenly and, it seemed, inexplicably veered leftwards off the northbound roadway and was hurtling across the median toward Woods's oncoming truck. Woods wrestled to redirect the truck away

from the car's trajectory, but it was too late. In a split-second the two vehicles met head-on. It sounded to Woods like "everything just blew up." The violence of the crash broke the truck's windshield; shards of glass flew into his face. When his vision cleared he could no longer see the PT Cruiser.

"Well, after the impact it just, like a cloud of smoke, fire, by then the truck had went from the shoulder of the road over to the median and we was trying to get out but the doors were jammed at first. And we finally got the door open, and we got to get out on the passenger side. And once we got out on the passenger side we got, ran over towards the shoulder trying to figure out which way the car went because we really couldn't see anything at that time," Woods recalled.

Esther Kosty was on her way north to her home in King City, about 30 miles north of the crash site, from her job as office manager at a vineyard management company near Paso Robles. She was leaving the northbound rest area after a brief stop. As she drove down the rest area exit ramp and was preparing to merge into 101 traffic, she heard "a big boom, crash" and saw "a PT Cruiser embedded in the front end of a semi... It was in the median, between the northbound and the southbound lane." The PT Cruiser was engulfed in flames.

Kosty pulled her car over to the shoulder of the ramp and dialed 911. She tried to tell the dispatcher where the crash had occurred but, shaken by the sight of the burning car, she couldn't remember the name "Camp Roberts." In frustration, she yelled that the crash was in the median in front of a rest area near a military camp. As she watched, someone jumped from the passenger side of the truck and ran. Another motorist appeared with a fire extinguisher but after trying to approach the crashed and burning vehicles, he backed off. As Kosty watched, "Things were exploding... The whole thing was inflamed [sic]." The fire "had gone all the way through" the car. As the fire grew more intense Kosty heard more explosions from the direction of the crash.

A few hours earlier Denise Schafer and her friend Candy Lindquist, en route from Los Angeles to Spokane, had stopped in Santa Barbara for lunch and some shopping. After leaving Santa Barbara on northbound

101, they had become vaguely aware of a silver PT Cruiser in the cluster of traffic around them. “You know, as you drive sometimes you’re, you know, with the same pack of cars, and you know, we would pass them and then they would pass us.” She’d noticed the PT Cruiser in particular “because you don’t see them very often.”

Schafer had lost sight of the PT Cruiser when, as they neared the northbound rest area, “all of a sudden I saw – as I was driving I saw the semi-truck sliding into the median, and I thought at first it was the truck, the semi-truck, on fire, the cab on fire. And then it was Candy, my friend, who – passenger, who said, ‘it’s the PT Cruiser.’ And that’s when I realized that it was the PT Cruiser in the front of the semi-truck... The next thing that I remember are the two men who were in the semi-truck jumping out of the truck.”

The PT Cruiser had plowed under the front end of the 18-wheeler. Schafer could see that the car’s rear tires “were just right up against the grill of the semi... It was just totally in flames.”

She pulled over to the right side of the road – “Everyone was pulling over” – and called 911. The dispatcher told her they knew about the crash and the police were on their way. Then “I got out of the car and wanted – I guess Candy said that it’s the PT Cruiser, and so I got out of the car to, in craziness thinking that maybe there was something someone could do.” The two women were moving toward the median with the idea of somehow helping but “by that time, you know, people were saying to get back and stuff, so we never really went over there. And it was obvious there wasn’t anything we could do, unfortunately.”

The first police officer to arrive on the scene was Russell Deases, who worked out of the California Highway Patrol office in King City. Assigned to patrol a 25-mile stretch of 101 that took in San Miguel, Bradley, and the rest area, he had been on the road since 2 p.m. At a few minutes before 5 p.m., heading north on 101 not far from San Miguel, he saw “a large column of black smoke” ahead of him.

“Upon cresting a rise in the roadway just south of the fire, I observed a big rig and another vehicle fully engulfed in flames in the center

divider. As I reached for my radio microphone, dispatch advised me of the head-on collision.” He reached the scene moments later, but “I was unable to get close to the vehicles due to the intensity of the fire.”

Within minutes, firemen and equipment from the Camp Roberts Fire Department and the California Department of Forestry station in Bradley had arrived. Soon they were followed by four more CHP officers – Douglas Finch, Darrell Mackinga, William Stratman and Anthony McFarland – and Detective Andrew Kopicki, an investigator from the Monterey County coroner’s office. A CHP helicopter circled overhead; an officer in the ‘copter took pictures of the site. Ambulances arrived and stood by to transport any injured survivors of the crash.

The trailer of Woods’s rig was sprawled across most of southbound 101. The tractor jugged into the median, the PT Cruiser partially buried under its nose. Police closed the southbound lanes to traffic while the firefighters attempted to bring the blaze under control. Woods and his cousin were standing, stunned, by the side of the road. After they assured Deases there were no other occupants in the burning truck cab, an ambulance took them to Twin Cities Hospital in San Luis Obispo to be treated for minor injuries.

By now the police officers had cleared the area of bystanders and Deases was assessing the crash based on witness statements and the post-collision location of the PT Cruiser, labeled “Vehicle #1” in his subsequent report, and the 18-wheeler, or “Vehicle #2”:

“For reasons unknown, Vehicle #1 swerved to the left and crossed over the dirt center median into oncoming traffic... and a head-on collision occurred in the no. 2 [outer] lane of southbound US 101. Both vehicles became engulfed in flames as they continued to travel southbound. Vehicle #2’s momentum forced both Vehicle #1 and Vehicle #2 across the #2 and #1 lanes into the center divide where they both came to rest...Vehicle #1 (PT Cruiser) was located in an upright position under Vehicle #2’s (Freightliner) engine compartment which was fully engulfed in flames facing in a northwesterly direction upon my arrival. Vehicle #1’s passenger compartment (roof and all four doors) had been

compressed back into the rear seat. Vehicle #1's engine compartment, firewall, and hood were pushed back into the front seating positions. All four of Vehicle #1's tires had been incinerated completely in the fire."

The truck's tractor and cab also were "fully engulfed in flames" and sustained "total fire damage." Its passenger compartment had melted and burned in the fire. "All interior items (seats, sleeper bunks, storage area and dash) were incinerated... front tires had been incinerated completely." All that remained of the tractor was the engine block, protruding frame, and front axle and wheel assemblies.

Visible within the PT Cruiser were the bodies of Raechel and Jacqueline Houck, pinned under the truck's engine compartment – "badly damaged traumatically and burned," according to Kopicki of the coroner's office. "I removed the bodies from the wreckage with the assistance of the firemen and the Coroner's contracted removal service personnel." Both bodies were burned beyond recognition. In the scorched remains of a wallet in Raechel's pocket, the officers found enough of her driver's license to provide them with identification.

When autopsies were performed the next morning the coroner would determine that both sisters had died of "massive blunt force injuries" that were "virtually instantly fatal." The fire had not caused their deaths, he concluded.

The last CPH officer to arrive at the scene, Michael Schad, had not gone on duty until 8:30 p.m. that evening, some three and a half hours after the crash. Schad was directed to go to the crash site and prepare a factual diagram – a schematic mapping of the vehicles' location and measurements; location of physical evidence such as skid marks, road and median dimensions, and roadway terrain leading up to and away from the site. When he arrived he found that although firemen were still there, the fire had been put out. He watched as tow trucks lifted the semi up and off the PT Cruiser and took away the car's burnt-out remains. Then he walked the scene, making spray-paint marks at key points on the ground. "Once the roadway was clear and traffic had – the roadway was clear of the emergency vehicles as well as the other CHP officers and

the tow trucks, the traffic thinned out quite a bit, and I believe it was – as I recall later in the evening, probably ten or eleven, I started making – I believe I may have finished with all the paint marks... I tried to make sure I painted the whole scene before I took measurements.”

By now it was dark and Schad needed a flashlight to continue his work. He was unable to precisely diagram the point at which the PT Cruiser had come to rest, which had earlier been marked with orange spray paint by another officer. “...once the tow truck driver pulled the vehicle out from underneath the semi truck it took away the orange paint so I wasn’t able to correctly locate that.” He made an estimate of the point using the scorch marks left by the car on the grassy median. He located what appeared to be a drivetrain part that had separated from the PT Cruiser at some point – a differential assembly, as another officer described it to him – and marked it on the diagram. He saw patches of fluid on the ground, including “a tremendous fluid mark at the beginning of the area of the impact all the way the entire route of the path of Vehicle #2,” but didn’t note these on the diagram because it was difficult to determine whether they were produced by one or the other of the crash vehicles, or by the fire-fighting effort, or were bodily fluids from one of the fatalities.

It was close to midnight before Deases and Schad finished their work and left the site. The remains of the PT Cruiser and the tractor-trailer had been towed away and put in storage. Traffic was again flowing in both directions on 101.

The next day Deases started to write his report, in which he would conclude, “Party #1 (Houck) caused this collision by making an unsafe turning movement to the left, crossing through the center divider, and colliding with a Big Rig. This is a violation of section 22107 Vehicle Code which states: No person shall turn a vehicle from a direct course or move right or left upon a roadway until such movement can be made with reasonable safety.” He could not know what had caused Raechel Houck to make that unsafe, fatal turning movement.