

# Hero

## of the Highway

The runaway van had to be stopped.  
There was only one thing he could do to avert disaster

BY LISA FITTERMAN



Mohamed Karabila over with the A7 highway in the background tk  
NOTE: I AM GETTING confirmation on that highway from photog-ML.

# Paul

Carosio gives his wife a kiss. "Au revoir, mon amour," he tells Martine, brushing her cheek with his grey moustache. "I'll be back around 3:00 or 3:30, depending on traffic."

A glance out the window of their little apartment in north-end Marseille reveals a cloudless sky, no rain on the congested highways, a good omen for a deliveryman. At 59, Carosio, has lived with a mechanical aortic valve for 29 years, and Martine worries constantly about him driving in his condition and she begs him to not eat as much, and to lead a healthier lifestyle. But Carosio loves food and relishes his daily routine of manoeuvring the roads around Marseille in his white Renault Trafic delivery van.

As Carosio walks out the door, he is greeted by the sound of backfiring trucks, the shouts of vendors and the squealing brakes of buses. The busy streets of the city are his world—familiar, customary, comforting.

"Bye sweetheart," Martine calls after him. "Drive safe!"

Evening Rush, June 1, 2010

Construction worker Mohamed Karabila joins the flow of cars, vans and trucks racing along the A7 to Marseille, all pushing the speed limit of 130 kilometres an hour. Streaks of

blue, yellow, black, white and silver dart across three lanes. The air is filled with the growls of diesel engines, wailing sirens and honking horns.

Tall, with broad shoulders, a shaven head and a serious bearing, Karabila is tense but alert behind the wheel of his grey Renault Mégane. He has already worked a six-hour shift and now at 3 p.m., and he is rushing to the Marseille airport to pick up his older brother, who is arriving from Morocco. Karabila still has 30 kilometres to go, and the white delivery van crawling along in front of him at 100 kilometres an hour is not helping.

"Come on," he mutters. "Move!"

All of a sudden, Karabila jolts upright. Am I seeing things, he asks himself? The van ahead of him has swerved and hit the emergency shoulder on the right-hand margin of the highway. Other vehicles flash by on the right, oblivious to the van's erratic passage.

Maybe the driver has fallen asleep, Karabila thinks. Maybe he's drunk. Or sick.

The van weaves and bounces off the guardrail again.

Karabila switches lanes, pulls alongside the van and glances in through the window. The driver is slumped in

his seat—unconscious or dead.

Karabila's large, calloused hands grip the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turn white. The van is not slowing down. This guy must have his foot on the pedal. He is going to kill himself and take others with him. I have to do something.

Karabila grabs his cell phone and punches Emergency 1-1-2. Even as he reports his location, he knows that help won't arrive in time. It's up to him to do something. An idea, a sequence from an action movie flickers

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in his mind—get in front of the van, use your car to stop it. But Karabila is not a stunt man. He is a 29 year-old laborer who lays bricks for a living. He considers the danger, the folly of what he imagines. He thinks of his young wife, his parents, his siblings, his tiny niece waiting for him at home in Cabannes.

"Dead or alive, the only chance of stopping an accident is to stop that van right now," he mutters to himself.

Taking a deep breath, Karabila swerves his little Renault in front of

the runaway van. He realizes that the first impact could be catastrophic. Cars travelling at 100 kilometres an hour normally take about 15 seconds and 200 meters to come to a complete stop. Karabila not only needs to bring his own car to a controllable stop, but also a racing van that outweighs his vehicle by 500 kilograms. A controlled stop is probably out of the question. If he brakes too hard, the van will ram him, sending both vehicles careening across the highway into heavy traffic.

As carefully as he can, Karabila now tries to match the speed of the oncoming van. Closer, closer it comes. He taps his brake, slowing no more than two metres a second. Then, Wham! His Renault bucks, swivels as Karabila fights the impulse to shut his eyes. "I'm going to die," he thinks.

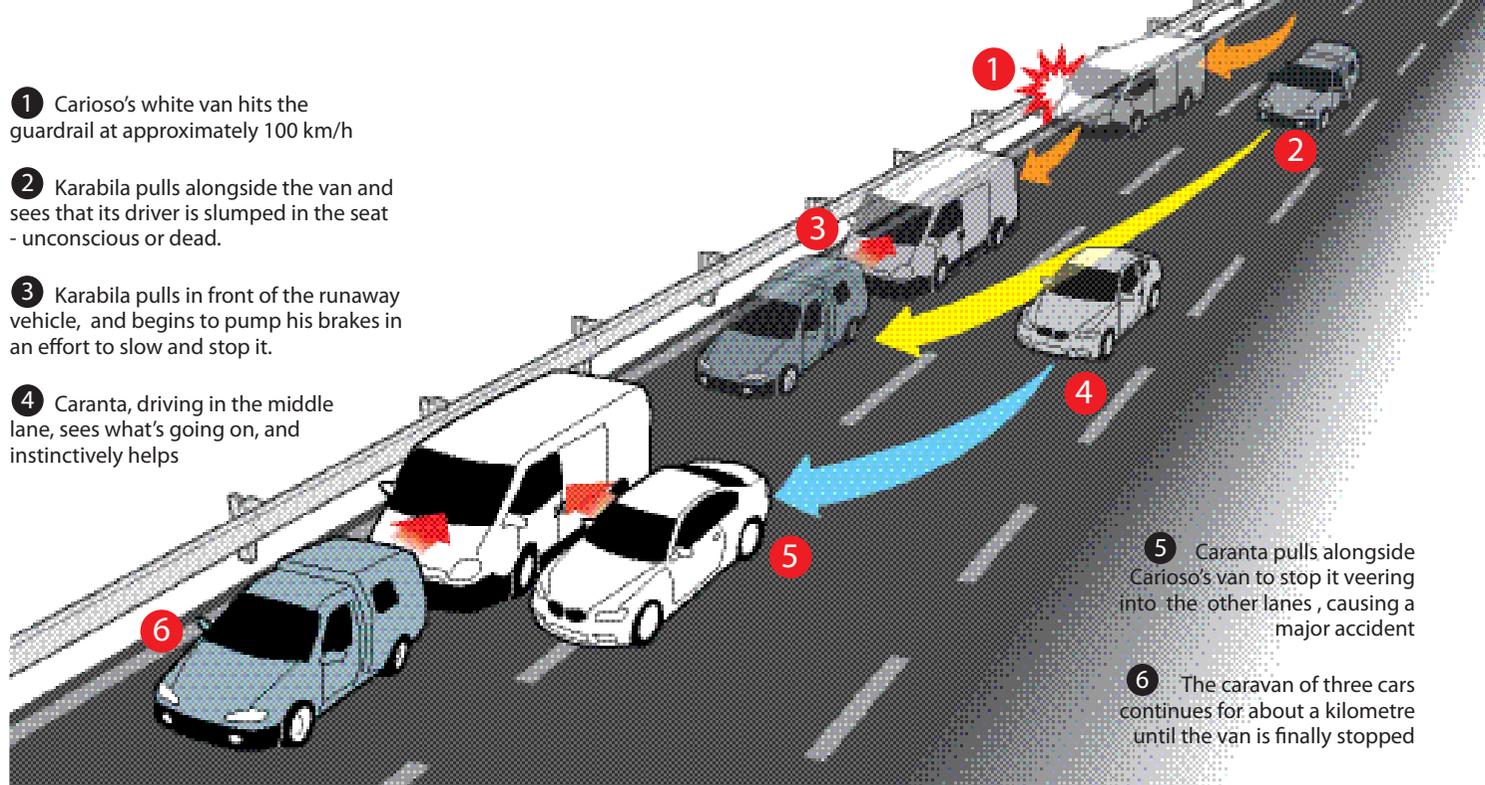
To Karabila's over-stimulated senses it seems like the fast-moving cars, time itself, are moving in slow motion. In spite of his fear, he brakes again. Tap. Tap. The van slams into his rear bumper again. Crash! Thud!

Karabila continues to push regularly, gingerly on the brake. All of a sudden, out of the corner of his eye, he sees a white flash to his left and behind. A BMW X1 pulls alongside the van, blocking it from skidding into another lane with unsuspecting drivers racing up from behind.

Bruno Caranta, 38, is an automotive safety expert. Slight, scholarly-looking, with sandy blonde hair, he was returning that day to his office after a business appointment. He just gotten onto the A7, behind Karabila, when he, too, saw the van bounce off the guardrail and skid out of control. When he realized what Karabila was trying to do, he spontaneously decided to help.

Despite his work experience and knowledge of what could go wrong, he positions his BMW on the left, alongside the runaway vehicle so it could not veer across lanes. Like Karabila, Caranta keeps his eyes fixed on the road. The two men don't exchange hand signals or flash their lights. It's as if each knows what the other is thinking, and how best to bring the charging van to a halt. There is a real life, deadly game of bumper cars, and

- 1 Carioso's white van hits the guardrail at approximately 100 km/h
- 2 Karabila pulls alongside the van and sees that its driver is slumped in the seat - unconscious or dead.
- 3 Karabila pulls in front of the runaway vehicle, and begins to pump his brakes in an effort to slow and stop it.
- 4 Caranta, driving in the middle lane, sees what's going on, and instinctively helps



- 5 Caranta pulls alongside Carioso's van to stop it veering into the other lanes, causing a major accident
- 6 The caravan of three cars continues for about a kilometre until the van is finally stopped

## A tall, burly volunteer fireman pushes his way to Carosio to check for vital signs. **There's nothing.**

they are playing on pure instinct without rules or prompts.

The van swerves again, towards the right side of the BMW, but Caranta ignores the danger and keeps his course steady and even with the white

delivery van. The improbable three-vehicle caravan screeches and jerks its way down the highway. Seconds fly by. Cars flash past them, heedless of their plight.

A hundred meters, two hundred. Still the van hurtles on, but Karabila and Caranta stay with it. 500 meters. Gradually, the van begins to slow.

The wild operation takes only 120 seconds and covers little more than a kilometre—but to the two men in the rescue cars it feels like an eternity and an infinite distance.

Finally, the van bumps into Kara-

bila's car for the last time. Karabila stops, sucks air into his lungs. It feels like he has been holding his breath forever. He closes his eyes in fear and amazement at what he has just done.

Younes Rafiki is on his cell phone to his wife, newly pregnant with twins, when he comes upon a bizarre sight: three cars seemingly conjoined bumping to a halt on the right-hand side of the road. The young deliveryman realizes what is happening. I have to hang up, "he said to his wife by cutting off communication. On this, by "reinforcing" it just attaches itself closer to the curb for the traffic permanently.

The vehicle finally stops! Younes then immediately rushed to evacuate the driver of the vehicle. The man is limp, grey as death.

"Let me through!" a voice calls out. Christian Cobo, a tall, burly man has also stopped at the scene. Cobo, who drives a tractor-trailer for a living, is a volunteer fireman. In France, all firemen are trained in first aid. Cobo kneels down next to the lifeless man on the pavement and feels for a pulse. There is none.

Immediately Cobo starts cardiac massage. Compress, release, compress, release. The rhythm is oddly like the one Karabila used—a rhythm



Carosio's "angels": Christian Cobo, Younes Rafiki, Jean-Louis Ros (the gendarme at the scene, and Bruno Caranta

that stopped a van, is now being employed to start a heart.

Cobo keeps the rhythm going. Five minutes. The man under his hands is

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still inert. Ten minutes. Cobo is beginning to feel the strain in his hands and shoulders. Still, he keeps the tempo

strong and regular. How long was Carosio unconscious before he arrived? he wonders. Cobo knows that 20 minutes without oxygen leads to irreversible brain damage or certain death. Suddenly he senses a heartbeat. Then another. A sputtering pulse.

Cobo continues his ministrations until he hears a siren. A first aid crew arrives and loads Carosio into an ambulance. They rush off for Hospital Nord in Marseille.

For five days Carosio hovers between life and death. On the fifth day he opens his eyes and finds himself in a hospital room with Martine

and his family at his bedside. He has no idea what has happened to him. No recollection that he has had a heart attack. No memory of the two minutes of terror on the highway.

Doctors found a clot in an artery under his left arm and unblocked it. Then they operated to install a defibrillator, which regulates the heart like a pacemaker but also gives it an internal shock if it starts beating too fast.

"It's a miracle you survived," Martine tells him. "And from now on, you listen to me!" Then, she tells him the story of the three strangers who met up with him along the highway (rsch: okay?).

At the end of June, Carosio is released from the hospital, and he now leads a normal life. His family is boundlessly grateful to his rescuers and initiate a campaign to honor them with medals of courage

On a rainy Sunday four months after the incident on 7A, Carosio, Martine and their close-knit family - their children Magali, Frederic, Emmanuel and their daughters-in-law, Aurore and Ludmilla, and their grandchildren Melyssa and Maheva -- walk into the conference room at the gendarmerie in Salon-de Provence. They are all dressed in white to symbolize gratitude and love. The family brings petit fours, candies and surprises for children,

and flowers and a cake in the shape of a heart for the four heroes: Karabila, Caranta, Rafiki and Cobo.

There are lots of hugs and photographs. But as the party wears on, Carosio is overcome by emotion. He drifts to the edge of the room and silently takes in the scene of his family laughing and talking with the Samaritans who had come to his aid along the highway. His eyes fill with tears. "These men," he says sweeping his arm to across the room, "they are like angels."



Epudit volorepro vit evelloresti cumq; viaecest et vel iliqui quia net ulparum.

## STORY OVERRUN