

Afternoon of Ice and Stone

By Marla Cantrell

T-Buddy looked out the window above his narrow bed. Rain had turned to ice during the night, and now the limbs of his pecan tree appeared to be covered in glass. He knew one thing; he wouldn't be going in today. His own mama was killed on the highway, back when he was eleven, on her way to work on a day much like this one. He remembered it all: the cop showing up at his door asking for T-Buddy's daddy, who hadn't been around in seven years. He remembered the way the sleet pelted the porch and how he believed that if he let the officer come in, a great hole might form there in the living room and take T-Buddy down into it.

T-Buddy's boss at Hauling Class was none too happy when he took the call. "You're a delivery man," he said, and then he spelled the word d-e-l-i-v-e-r-y. "They ain't even letting schools out. If you can't make it in today, don't bother coming back."

He'd taken the job in the summer, when the only threats were heatstroke and bad drivers and road construction. None of that was enough to warn him away. He hadn't thought about winter. That was the flaw in his nature, not seeing far enough down the road.

He looked around his house, so small he could pull it behind his pickup if he could force it from its foundation. It was perfect in its smallness: mini-fridge, a loveseat that filled an entire wall, a table that folded out in case he had company. He never did.

There was nothing to do but go back up to his loft where his single bed waited. He switched on the TV to the cooking network and watched skinny chefs make fat food so beautiful it looked like art. At noon, he opened a can of chili, slid a frozen blackberry pie into his tiny oven, and ate it all. There was no more food in the house.

T-Buddy had a pair of cleats from his football days. He put them on. He wrapped a red bath towel around his neck like a scarf. He put on his grandpa's old army jacket. He took a nerve pill and pocketed the bottle. The market was twelve blocks away, and he headed toward it.

The cleats were a bad idea, more like skates on the slick walk. Before he reached the end of his street, he'd moved onto the grass. He thought about the last time he'd worn the shoes. He'd been a tackle in high school. Out there, his body worked in his favor, his surprisingly quick gait, his strong legs, his chest like something you'd see on the cover of *Men's Health*. Football helped him deal with the loss of his mama back then, to hit another person and not get blamed for it. He pounded one gloved fist into his open palm. "Bam," he said aloud, and the word echoed in the still, blue air.

A car crept by, the first one he'd seen, and the driver waved. T-Buddy waved back and then stepped a little farther off the sidewalk. A car could skid, could swerve, before you had

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time to do much of anything. The nerve pills rattled in his pocket.

When he reached the intersection, he hit the “WALK” button, stepped back onto the brown grass, and waited. He looked down the street and saw a Hauling Class truck headed his way. The truck stopped at the traffic light, and T-Buddy turned his head away. It was too late. His friend Basil had seen him, and he was honking now and rolling down his window. “Because of you, I’ll be working past midnight, man. What the hell?” Basil touched his temple. “You sick in the head or something?”

T-Buddy felt his stomach clench. A car behind Basil honked, and he waved the driver past. “Get over here, T-Buddy. Climb in and talk to me. I’ll stay put.” He looked T-Buddy up and down and waited.

Stepping into that truck was hard like fighting a battle is hard, like walking a tightrope is hard. Touching the bottle with his nerve pills helped. Still, he shook as he landed one cleat on the running board and hoisted himself up.

Before the door shut, Basil took off. T-Buddy gripped the dash and worked the seatbelt with his other hand. “You idiot,” he said, but that only made Basil drive faster. There was a slick spot on Meadow Lake Road, and the truck fishtailed and T-Buddy cried out, and then he popped another one of his pills, swallowed it dry, wiped his brow.

“You got nerves like my aunt Edna,” Basil said. And then he punched T-Buddy’s arm. “We got a near perfect safety record. You can look it up. Roads are just roads, weather’s just weather. Your time comes or it don’t.”

“That’s what the preacher said about my mama.” T-Buddy shook his head. “Didn’t believe it. Didn’t believe the rest of it either. Heaven and whatnot and streets of gold. She was only twenty-nine,” he said, then turned his head to look out the passenger window.

The wind was howling. A tree branch popped and fell. “I had a sister die at seven,” Basil said. “Seven. Made no sense at all, but there you go. I got a girl that’s six now. Can’t hardly look at her sometimes. I watch her sleep most nights. I take her to the doctor and make him check her out four times a year, blood work, scans, the whole nine yards. I do what I can, but it don’t amount to much. That’s just the way this world works. Fighting it is like fighting your own shadow.”

T-Buddy couldn’t take other peoples’ sad stories. That’s why he watched so many cooking shows. No sickness there. He looked down the stretch of highway. The power lines bounced in the wind. Two miles up ahead, around the bend, was where his mama’s car caught air, where it sailed across the railroad tracks, where it upended in the ditch. He felt eleven again, motherless, and he wanted to feel ten or nine or even eight. At eight, the world was still a good place.

Pointing in the direction of his dead mama’s wreck, he said, “I can’t go up there.”

Basil looked at him, opened his mouth to say something, paused, and then reconsidered. “We can circle around. I got a delivery up on Old Vega Road anyway.”

The road they turned onto was gravel, the kind where there’s always a lone dog scruffing around, where there’s always a line of fence posts half eaten away by rot. The truck slipped on the turn, and then straightened out, and then stopped cold. T-Buddy squeezed his eyes

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shut, tried to breathe.

“Well, looky there,” Basil said, and T-Buddy opened his eyes. In a field were three sculptures made of cement and all kinds of junk: wire, pieces of broken bottles, green and blue and brown, and round mirrors that caught reflections of the clouds and threw them back.

“What the heck?” T-Buddy said, and then he pointed. “That one up by the old barn, that’s an angel, right? You see an angel?” He got out of the truck and crunched along the gravel, then slipped through the fence, and headed toward it. Basil followed, stopping at the concrete cow with a wine bottle for a tail, an old antenna on its shoulders like wings.

T-Buddy glanced at the statue that looked like a life-size Volkswagen, a giant pink peace sign on the driver’s door. A real steering wheel sat on the hood, making it look as if you could wind it up and drive it away.

Moles and armadillos and gophers had done their work on the pasture, the ground was tunneled and fell with T-Buddy’s footfalls. He stumbled, got back up, walked faster. The angel, whose wings were iridescent things, seemed to call his name. The angel’s hair, a red wig that had been dipped in shellac, fanned out as if a strong wind were blowing. He stood and took her in, her chicken wire skirt, her blue marble eyes, her hands two icy garden trowels.

Behind him, Basil climbed atop the cow, slipped across its icy back, and smiled. Then he took out his phone and snapped a photo of himself. At the same time, T-Buddy reached out his hand and touched the frozen chicken wire on the angel, the trowels. He started to reach up to touch her wings, but something stopped him. There was too much beauty in them, maybe that was it, or it might have been that they seemed so delicate they might turn to powder. So he stood there with his hand raised, and the sun broke from behind a cloud, and a covey of bobwhites rose and flew over him.

On the last night of his mama’s life, she was wearing a black T-shirt that read “Keep on Truckin’” and pink sweatpants, and when she said goodnight, she stood at his bedroom door for a long time, framed in light, so that she seemed to glow when he turned in his bed and saw her still there. For a moment, he had this thought: she looks like an angel. And as he fell asleep, he imagined her, her red hair let down from its ponytail, flighty wings suddenly appearing where her shoulder blades should have been.

Once, she told him her idea of heaven was twenty acres and a good barn, a cow named Miss Priss, and him. “Nothing else I’d need,” she’d said, and he’d not even looked up when she said it, that’s how unimportant it seemed at the time. She might have wondered if he’d heard her, if he’d remember how carefully she had loved him, once he was grown. T-Buddy shaded his eyes and looked at the angel’s stone face, and he wondered who had made her, or if she’d fallen in this field from on high, just for him. The thought made everything that hurt in him bust free. He breathed in deep, and it felt as if there was suddenly more room in his chest. He touched the open spot with his gloved fingers. It ached still, that tender place did, but not nearly as much as it had before.

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