Mud

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I saw the man before he died, under the front tire of my father’s truck. He was pinned and the truck stalled and then settled in the mud and three grown men were not enough to push the truck forward or backward to stop the man's pain. I was not a grown man. I was a girl, fourteen, puny, under a hundred pounds, not useful to their efforts, so I crouched by the man under the tire and tried to distract him from his fate.

We were on our way, me and my father, to a junkyard in Applebox, to abandon a couch, an old refrigerator and four mattresses, leftovers from my mother's life; we didn't need the things anymore now that we had the money from her death.

“Worst time of the year for driving with loads,” my father said before we got stuck; he liked to throw out comments that turned into prophesies. He was right this time about the loads, about the time of year: April, when the snow ran down in liquid form from the Appalachians, turned front roads into concrete river beds and back roads into mud.

In the truck I talked about woodworking.

“What do you know about that?”

“I’m reading a book,” I told him. He shook his head to end the talk. We sat in silence until we passed another truck stuck in the mud, with two men struggling to dig it out. We couldn't stop, said my father, couldn't risk the break in momentum. So we kept going and their eyes followed us, a hundred, two hundred feet and then we hit the bog, and we lost it, tires spinning, truck jerking, rear end sliding, load tipping, a moment of freedom, a spurt. We burst around the corner and then we hit him, the young man standing by the edge of the road. We hit him and rolled over him, and he sank and we sank. The men from the other truck came running to us; they must have heard the scream. We were outside looking down at the victim when they—one man, older, heavy, gray beard to add merit to his weight, and a younger man, maybe his son—stopped when they saw what we’d hit. They were stoic, taciturn men, speaking in gestures and long stares instead of words. I saw the words coming through their eyes, their stiff bodies as they stopped a few feet from us: why didn't you stop to help us? And my father's response, stoic in return, remorse kept hidden for the sake of his pride. Still, the young man under the tire helped us struggle out of the moment, his screams turning to moans.

“He was just standing on the side, waiting,” I said, looking at each man, willing them to forget, to move on.

“Back tires are stuck in the mud, can't move it,” said my father. They nodded and moved to the back of the truck.

“Katie, put the truck in gear and step on the gas,” my father, and the two men looked at the man under the tire as a piece of wood, an inanimate dilemma. I started to climb into the truck.

“Extra weight,” said the older man, shaking his head at me. “Don’t wanna put extra weight on the fella, bad enough.” Another pause, a new problem. My father wanted to argue but he held back, closed his mouth.

“Put it in neutral,” he said and I did it. I leaned in over the seat, slipped the gear and pulled back out without shifting any of my weight inside. I stepped around to the back to help but they left no space for me. I moved toward the man. No one had said a word to the man under the tire.

Dead road, no other cars, us on the way to the dump, these men I didn't know. I crouched down, looked at the man under the tire, really, for the first time. He'd stopped screaming and his moans came out as whispers.

“What were you doing there?” I said, instead of comfort, instead of finding something to set him at ease, choosing to satisfy my needs. He didn't speak. He turned his head. The tire sat square on his stomach, the softest spot. He wore a thick black coat, flattened; the tire, I thought, probably crushing every organ, digging down, trying to make contact with the spine. The back of his head touched the edge of the metal wheel well; when he lifted it, he came within an inch of the tire. When he turned, he looked like a man bothered by someone disrupting his sleep. He was older than me but younger than the others.

When he turned I could see the strain from the hard breaths. His face was terrible, depressing, hopeless, horrifying. I wished I'd seen my mother with his face, in this state, in some state. I hadn't seen her at all. Here and then gone. The nurses wouldn't let me see her, as if they knew what was best. Stoic like the men behind the truck, dressed in white like wolves undercover, faces attempting compassion for the sake of their roles, telling me with their lines that she was not in a state to see anyone, that her appearance would only make things worse for others.

“Push! Again!”

The frame rocked, the tires moved, an inch forward, up, and then down; each time the truck stopped, the tire settled and a heavier groan pushed out of his mouth—the last air, I thought. Each time the last air.

“They're going to move it,” I said. “And then we'll get you to a hospital.” Every few seconds the frame rocked again.
His jeans were old, worn, four rips I counted, frayed to nothing at the bottoms, next to the brown boots, brown socks. I saw his coat again, dark blue patches blended in with the color, a frayed red and green flannel leaking out the base of his waist. All his clothes were beat, like he’d pulled them off a dead man rotting in the woods, like the clothes marked him in a line of bearers of these fabrics, and I imagined another man, the next man, desperate, taking anything, pulling the shirt and pants and coat from this man and staggering away to his own fated end and I looked away, my mind wandering as it did, as was my habit—something to get over, said my father.

“Hey,” I said.

His head was back, under the tire, head touching the black, rust-stripped metal.

“Hey!”

His eyes didn’t open. I grabbed his left hand, pressed my warmth into him and his eyes moved, fluttered as if he were dreaming.

“C’mon!” My father’s voice directed at the sky.

“Hey!” I spoke in quick thrusts, choppy whispers. I squeezed his hand.

“Do you want to see my breasts?”

His head turned. His eyes opened. I’d gone from an A to a C in the last eight months. Many of the boys wanted to see my breasts, my tits, jugs, I didn’t know which word was best. Breasts, I thought. The dictionary term.

We were on a mud road, middle of nowhere and I looked around before I unzipped my coat, reached in, unhooked my bra, let it fall, then tucked it into my coat pocket. I lifted my sweatshirt and the T-shirt underneath. He looked. I don’t know what he saw: part of my head behind layers of coat and shirt, two cups of concentrated flesh slightly dangling. He looked for a moment and then closed his eyes, let his head fall back against the metal. I leaned forward, grabbed his hand and placed it on my chest, let the shirts fall over our hands—held it there while the grunts sounded behind us, while the truck rocked.

They couldn’t do it. They couldn’t dislodge the tires with their strength. The two men couldn’t push with their truck because their truck was stuck, still stuck, because of us.

“Honey! We’re going to try to free their truck, use it here!” my father shouted—maybe saw the outline of me, never looked at the man, the boy and the placement of his hand—and ran off with the stoic men. I should have stepped on the gas earlier, a moment of pain for salvation. I heard their footsteps, rapid, fading away, and I knew it was too late. I leaned in.

His face was dirty, two-, three-day growth on his cheeks, neck, bare in most other spots. His hair was long, black, straight and oily, dipping into the mud beneath. I kissed him. Like touching my lips to the damp earth, salt and dirt.

“I’m sorry,” I told him. I turned his head, spoke into his mouth. “I wanted to see you. I wanted to see you, however you were.”

His eyes opened. I saw the green, spotted, dirty if eyes could be. My eyes adjusted to the near contact.

“I must be a fucking sight,” he whispered and cleared his throat. “Ugly as sin.”

I lowered my forehead, touching his. “You’re not.”

I set his hand on the ground, pulled myself up and looked around, moved to the back of the truck, looked at their progress, deep grooves in the mud, pockets of stone, bare road for grip. I ran forward and jumped into the driver’s side. I’d learned how to shift, add the pressure, flip into reverse at the right moment, rock it back and forth. My father said I was too young. My mother showed me how to do it. Age meant nothing to her—just another rule to ignore, like crossing only on green.

The window was down. The engine was loud on the revs, the shifts, but I thought I heard the gasps each time the truck settled back into the center. I tried to block them out. I shifted, stepped on the gas, felt the roll, shifted, stepped on the gas, a little more, a little more—he’s still alive, still alive—shifted, rocked, shifted—they’ll never get back in time. It moved, almost, shift, gas, shift, gas. The truck climbed, grabbed the hump, settled back then struggled to grab again, lifted, reached.

Suddenly, the truck climbed over. The tire hit the space of air and then thud, it settled on the mud. Nothing beneath. I jumped out and saw them from the corner of my eye, arriving breathless as I landed, slipped, and fell forward in the mud.

And we froze, all four of us, as our eyes locked on what lay under the truck.

His face did not accuse us, did not blame us. I crawled forward on my knees, reached out and wiped the sweat from his brow. The trees, the forest creatures, the air, the men—all silent, all waiting. And that’s when I saw it, through his closed eyes, in his thin, upturned lips, in his nostrils gently flared as though inhaling the perfect memory: One moment of freedom. One moment of ecstasy.

They didn’t see it, weren’t looking for it. At some point they’d lost the ability.

I remembered forever both expressions. His: what it meant to be newly alive. And theirs: what it meant to be simply waiting.