

Rest Area

by Holly Patton

I open up the door of my white Taurus, my arm leaning on the door, my head hanging limply. I am not sure where I am. The only sign I've seen on the dangerous, truck-infested I-40 is the small green, metal mile-marker 200 which is somewhere between Brinkley and Memphis. My head thumps like it is getting ready to implode. The November sky is gray and the air is cool but heavy. I have managed to pull over at a rest stop and thankfully there are only four big trucks idling in the upper parking lot.

The taste of bile lingers in my mouth and burns my nose. This pressure. Oh God, please stop it. I am a prisoner inside my head. All I want now is relief and a thought runs through my mind. End it. Just get out of the car, lie down in this parking lot and let one of those eighteen wheelers squish my head. The pressure of the truck could not equal the pressure inside my head; the blood throbs like it's stuck in a vice. The pain is unbearable and death would be a relief. The next three minutes feel like hours until, finally, vomit rises like a sleeping enemy, rushing hot from my stomach.

Weakly, I pull up my head and slump my body sideways into the seat, trying to breathe. Crickets chirp incongruently and empty Coke cans, panty hose, and Snickers wrappers litter the parkway. I'm tempted to crawl over and see if a tiny sip is left in the abandoned Coke can.

Out of the blue, a deep, calm voice gently asks, "Can I help?" I think it is yet another hallucination. I am prone to hallucinate with migraines this severe.

"Miss? What can I do for you? What do you need?"

A heavy man in faded overalls and a black, grayish beard with penetrating blue eyes walks toward me. Around him, on long red leashes are two small white dogs happily wagging their tails. He's not a hallucination.

My migraine-addled brain struggles. He's walking his dogs. I don't care one smattering if he is coming to abduct me; I'm not much to abduct right now.

"Tell me what you need. You look like you are in a heap of hurt."

I can't answer, I'm sobbing hysterically now. This kindness of this stranger loosens a faucet of tears, so deep and old they burst up like a corner fire hydrant. This is the first time anyone has offered to help me in days, months, maybe years. I realize if I don't speak now, he'll think I'm mute.

"I need something to drink. A Coke. Does it work?" I point weakly to the rusty, old Coke machine near the restrooms. My head slumps back down into the seat.

He looks at me strangely. As far as he can see, I am deathly ill, hysterical, and asking for a Coke, like it is my final meal. It feels like it is.

He pauses, one hand in his overall pocket. "I'll be right back. You stay still."

What can I say to him? "For starters, my seventeen-year-old son slammed his fist into the armoire because I told him I wouldn't live with his not calling, not coming home at night? My fourteen year-old has had multitude of detentions--tardiness and not turning in homework?"

A call report sits next to me, noting the doctors I have tried to sell my wares to today, slick drug brochures flung all over the car. I have been jumping in and out of the car trying to persuade physicians about the benefits of the newest, best psychotropic drug. It's extremely powerful, and now I'm going to have a breakdown at mile-marker 200. Irony personified, that's me. That's my life.

The 10-page report due in four hours for my counseling class at the graduate school flops above the driver's side visor. It focuses on solutions to accomplish rather than on the past; a therapy called *Solutions based brief therapy*. Hah.

Maybe that will help. My current therapist isn't doing any good. She continues rehashing my family of origin issues. Abandonment, no parenting, no support, no guidance. Yes yes yes. I'm highly aware of that and want to get past that, not stay stuck.

"Yeah, Mister, can you come live with me and be a father to my two, testosterone-filled angry sons? Can you do this ridiculous job? And, oh yeah, the car needs to be cleaned before I meet with Bradley, my micro-managing boss, or I will get written up, again. And the really big question, can you help me understand why men continue to drive me completely crazy?"

Over mushroom and sausage pizza and Amstel Light, my boyfriend of one year told me he couldn't move forward. Suddenly, after 3 months of gut-wrenching silence, he showed up last night and spent two hours begging. Pleading for me to give him another chance.

I feel as if my own heart, head, and now my knotted shoulders, are tearing me to pieces. Anxiety. Fear. Exhaustion. Yet the only thing I can ask for is a Coke?

The quiet man ambles back.

His big thick hand is wrapped around the sweating can. "All they had was Pepsi."

His gentle voice brings more tears. How can this stranger be so kind?

"Thank you," I whisper.

He reaches into his overalls and pulls out a neatly folded white handkerchief. "Here, take this and wipe your face."

"Thank you, but I'm ok. I don't need it."

“Yeah, you do.” He folds it and gently wipes the snot from my nose, saying, “You just keep that one. I’ve got another one.”

“Here, let me find a dollar for my Coke.”

“No, you don’t worry about that. Looks like you got plenty of troubles already.”

“Thank you, thhhankks so much.” This time my words creep out from deep places of gratitude and awe. “I’m so sorry to be any trouble.”

“It’s okay, honey. I don’t know what has you so twisted up inside but the Good Lord does. I’m going to keep you in my prayers. You’ll be all right. You just tell Him your heart and He’ll help you.”

His blue eyes are like patches of the sky slipping out from behind the clouds above us. Suddenly, the leaves blow around the car and he turns to walk away, but there is an undeniable presence in the emptiness.

I watch him climb into a new, shiny red Peterbilt. I glimpse the license plate as the truck begins to pull away.

BHW 039. What? My current contrite boyfriend, Mr. Unavailable’s exact initials and my age inked into the truck’s license plate.

This gentle man makes an everlasting mark on my soul.

Miraculously, my head is not feeling like there is going to be an imminent explosion. Even though I hate the sweetness of Pepsi, this one tastes good, soothing and healing.

I wipe my face with the soft cotton handkerchief and notice three small initials JFC. JFC. I wonder who he was. We haven’t exchanged any typical niceties-and the only words I’ve been able to utter are “Coke” and “thanks” yet somehow he’s touched me like no one has in years.

I hardly recognize it. Unconditional kindness. Nothing else. No ulterior motive. A clean white hankie, a cold can of Pepsi, and a few kind words.

I reach over to cram the handkerchief into the glove compartment, but I stop to lift it to my, and inhale it for a few seconds.

The smell of Tide envelopes me. I'm filled in all my broken places as I remember back 30 years. It's Tide, the detergent Teenie--who'd been my grandmother's maid and my sanctuary—had used for all our laundry back in the summers of my childhood. Her scent and love now hovers in this car and fills me with her fierce love and determination. I remember her strong, dark arms wrapped tightly around me.

An angel who drives a shiny red 18-wheeler leaves me with this tiny white cloth. I inhale one last time, carefully placing the hankie in the glovebox. I sit back in my seat, and look into the now setting sun, and ease onto the access road towards home knowing I'm not alone.