

Machines

by Steve Lundin

Will Offstead's prosthetic left hand held the wheel unerringly as he worked through the gears. The intricate machinery that began at his elbow was encased in flesh-coloured plastic, shiny as if sheathed in sweat.

Through the tinted windshield the highway reached out ahead of him in a straight line, black topped and barren. In the yellow blur of the countryside, patches of snow appeared like unpainted spots on a canvas, textured and almost translucent in the sharp cold sunlight. Stands of alder cloaked the low hills with a mantle of dull gray, derelict barns the hue of dried blood appearing every now and then alongside them.

Leaning forward as if nailed to the wheel, Will pushed the Kenworth up into cruising speed, his gray eyes fixed on the black highway as it poured like liquid into the grilled maw of his hungry machine.

Jaws working on a wad of Beeman's, Will ran his hand through his thick black hair in a jerking motion, raking his nails against his scalp until it tingled. The wet horizon was a gray mass of clouds building in front of him, piling higher and higher and swelling obesely at the sides. Snow for sure, he muttered to himself. No need to check the radio. No need to check anything.

He flicked his eyes to the three mirrors in quick succession, then turned them back to the road. Nothing back there, nothing at all. His whole body ached as if every muscle and every ligament had been stretched beyond their limit then locked there. His bones felt brittle as wire. But there was nothing back there, not a goddam thing.

The inside of the cab stank of burnt rubber—he could smell it in the cloth, the plastic, the metal; and air fresheners didn't do a damn thing. Reaching into his breast pocket he pulled out another stick of gum, unwrapped it one-handed and jammed it into his mouth.

There was a truck stop up ahead, ten miles this side of Billings. No one ever used it anymore, since the interstate had been widened and resurfaced. No one used this highway at all, it seemed. Will preferred the milk-routes; they were more peaceful, less trafficked. He could clamp his claws on the wheel and roll on forever without a damn thing getting in his way.

The road took on a grade and the Kenworth began to growl. Gearing down, Will leaned forward, his ribs feeling like they were about to split open under the strain. The loads were getting heavier each time out. Machine parts, tons of them—the whole country seemed to be held together by machine parts, bolts rattling, metal straining; the whole country wheezed and whirred and parts were breaking down everywhere. Will could feel the load on his back, a crushing weight dragging him back down the grade. He was nearing the top of the rise, engine roaring, the cab shaking with effort. Then he reached it, and a valley sprawled out before him, the small dingy Gas Cafe squatting on its floor like a forgotten toy.

The stormclouds had swallowed the sun and the afternoon had grown dim and dull edged. Clutch out, Will brought the semi down into the valley slowly, the weight of his load seeming to push him, striving to grind him down into the ground. His foot was leaden as he eased down on the airbrakes. The Kenworth hissed and he swung it into the turn-off and stopped beyond the lone gas pump. Sighing, he unclamped his grip on the wheel and shut her down.

There were lights on in the cafe, but otherwise no sign of life. Will opened the door and climbed down. The wind blew bitter cold, coming in from the north, crossing the front of the storm. He walked over to the entrance, his eyes searching through the cluttered window. He couldn't see anyone. Trying the door he found it unlocked. Warm air swept around him as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

The tables were set but unoccupied. An overhead heater churned out hot air with a rattle. "Hello? Anybody here?"

A sound came from the kitchen and a young woman stepped out and stood behind the counter. Her gaze flicked over Will's shoulder to the white Kenworth sitting outside, then turned back to his face.

She was short, mousy haired and plump. Her round face was youthful and complex, seeming to bear the last vestiges of adolescence with weary impatience. "This place open?" Will asked.

Frowning, she shifted from one foot to the other, then replied in a wavering voice. "Not really. Season's over and we've closed up." She placed a hand on one hip. "Sam's not around—he owns the place. I'm just cleaning up. I don't think the pump's working."

Will shook his head. "Don't need gas. Just a cup of coffee and maybe a donut."

The woman bit her lip, then shrugged. "Okay."

Will took off his coat and sat down at a table. Looking out the window he saw a row of wrecks; rusting, seized-up tractors and combines; twisted and crushed cars, pickups and trucks squatting in the frozen frost-sprinkled mud. His gaze stopped on the wreck of a VW Bug. It was hardly recognisable, corkscrew twisted with shreds of metal sticking out everywhere. Christ, Will muttered silently. After a moment he turned his head around and watched the woman spooning coffee into a filter.

The cafe was small; stools and chairs covered in red vinyl,

the tabletops red formica with gold and silver flecks. A jukebox stood in one corner, dark and silent. The air smelled musty and dry, unused.

"Coffee'll be ready in a minute," the woman said, turning with a smile that froze as she saw his arm where it rested on the tabletop, the two steel fingers and spring-backed thumb open as if caught in the act of grasping, tearing, rending. Will smiled.

The woman regained her composure and met his eyes with an embarrassed smile. "Be ready in a minute. What kinda donut you want?"

"What do you have?"

Surprise widened her eyes. "I think they're all frozen!"

"Don't worry about it then."

When the coffee was ready she brought the pot over and filled his cup. Outside the wind whined as if in fear and the sky had gone dark. "Looks like a bad one," she said, pausing to stare out the window before returning to the counter and setting the pot on its heater. "Sure hope Sam gets here soon."



Photo by Cammy Yiu

"He's coming to pick you up?" Will removed his gum and wrapped it up in a serviette. Then he sipped slowly.

"Uh huh. From Billings. That's where I live."

It started snowing, the flakes spinning in the wind. Will stared at the jukebox for a moment, then frowned and nodded at the wrecks outside. "Pretty smashed up, that Bug."

"No kidding. that was just last spring, too. Two killed, from a graduation party." She stood behind the counter clutching a red, blue and white tea towel in both hands, her face looking vaguely troubled as she watched the snow coming down. "We get lotsa accidents around here. Every year three or four dead, though it seems to be getting worse. They bring all the wrecks here."

Now that he was no longer behind the wheel, Will could feel his muscles easing their grip on his bones. "It's machines," he muttered, then turned to face her. "Some people get that machine under them and they think they're God. Maniacs behind the wheel." He shook his head. "Makes you wonder what the country's coming to." He

raised the cup to his lips.

"It's just meant to be," the woman said, her eyes unconsciously dropping to his prosthesis, then away without meeting his gaze. "People die because they were meant to."

"Makes you wonder," Will repeated, his brow clenching as if in the grip of threatening thoughts. Abruptly he shook his head, smiled at the woman who stood staring at him. "Me, I didn't die—I got this here arm instead." Chuckling, he faced the storm again.

"Want more coffee?" she asked after a moment.

"Sure. Why not get off your feet and pour yourself one while you're at it." He sensed her hesitation. "Got anything good on that jukebox?" He smiled at her. "Probably not. Probably just Rock'n'Roll. That's all you young people listen to nowadays."

The woman shook her head. "Not me. I'm a country fan. Most of my friends are, too." Carrying the pot over she set it down on the table and sat down. "The selection's not so good on that thing. All these people I never heard of." She