

Cam Terwilliger
from *Man & Machine*

When they let him out of rehab in New York our son comes upstate to live with Carla and me for a while. In two weeks it'll be his thirty-second birthday. Bobby doesn't want anymore birthdays though. Bobby wishes the plane crash had killed him.

Since both his legs were amputated he rolls his pants up to where his knees used to be, fastening them shut with safety-pins from a small plastic case he keeps in his pocket alongside the daily pack of cigarettes he started smoking after the crash. He ordered them online, a box of ten cartons he stores at the foot of his bed in the dining room, the place he's forced to sleep until we have a lift installed. He's lost weight, sweats constantly, and had two episodes of heart arrhythmia during his operations. At the hospital, they shaved his head to suture the cut that runs from above his brow to the base of his skull, stitches now traveling the path like a tiny railroad. Still, they say he might walk again someday, with a pair of artificial limbs. He won't hear it though. He says he doesn't care about anything anymore, which includes walking. Instead, he uses the wheelchair. It's a model I picked out: The Vandicare 950, a lightweight carbon steel with heavy-duty urethane tires that—as a mechanic—I could tell was well made.

Two months ago, Bobby was flying an Embraer RJ145 from Pittsburgh to New York when the plane's hydraulics suddenly froze over central Pennsylvania. He says what happened after that is foggy, but the guy from the FAA told me that the plane plowed through a cornfield, then slammed into a nearby silo. Only four passengers were killed, which was good, he said. It was better than it should have been because Bobby handled the descent so well. This didn't surprise me much. Bobby's been good at everything he's ever done. After graduation he put in a long stint with the air force and

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when he was flying his missions in Iraq he had an immaculate record. About a year before he returned from maintaining no-fly zones, Bobby mailed a citation he received to Carla and me. 90 successful missions. At the top, he had taped a Polaroid of himself in the cockpit of his F15 Strike Eagle, giving a thumbs-up to the camera on a Saudi runway, his helmet, visor, and oxygen mask combining to obscure his face completely. The irony is that most people think Bobby's a war injury. Every time someone comments on how sad his situation is for "our guys," Bobby snaps at them. "You've got it all wrong," he says. "War was great. War didn't hurt one bit. It was civilian life that screwed me."

Today I watch him outside as he aligns The Vandicare with the basketball hoop above our garage, the same bent hoop he used as a kid. He stares at the backboard for a long time before shooting, hands pressed against the ball beneath his chin, griped by a pair of black callus-preventing wheelchair gloves. He shoots a few times, only making a couple. Then he simply pushes himself up and down the driveway, ball in his lap, smoking a cigarette and allowing the ashes to fall on top. The trees that line our street behind him are naked. It is November.

Carla wishes Bobby would talk to us more, tell us what's on his mind. Whenever she says that, though, I want to respond: isn't it obvious what's he's thinking? What does he have to look forward to? Life as a handicap? Workman's comp? The sensation of pain in a pair of legs that isn't even there? C'mon, I want tell her. He's got nothing.

Carla and I married right out of high school because I got her pregnant a few months after our first date. When my father found out, he took me for a drive in his pick-up, then parked at a gravel pit where he laid out my future. At the end of the talk, he removed his checkbook from the glove box and cut me one for a thousand bucks. "You

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marry that girl,” he said. He clamped a hand on the back of my neck as he held the check out. He was a brick layer, his palms huge and rough.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

A few months later Carla miscarried. I didn’t know whether to be relieved, or sad. She cried about it often and I comforted her each morning before she went to Tupperware parties to peddle plastic, and I left for the front desk of a dealer repair shop, a job my father found. Carla needed me then, and I knew it, which made me feel strong.

I spent the following year with grease monkeys at work, getting stains on my uniform, having a beer on the job, learning about auto-repair: an education my father already started. And it seemed to me then, with Carla at home, that I was an adult. After a few months I told her we should stay together even if we didn’t have a baby, and we weren’t unhappy—though any time we fought it took great strength from each of us not to admit the fact that we’d married essentially by accident. We waited quietly through the first year of our marriage, waiting for what we didn’t know until it arrived: our second chance, Bobby, our son, the pilot.

At 8:00, “Man & Machine” comes on and Bobby wheels in to where the armchair used to be, turns up the volume, and starts tapping his stumps, something the doctors told him to do to keep up circulation. “Man & Machine” is a show on cable Bobby likes that I’ve started watching too. It’s about early rockets tonight. How they sent the first satellites, and then astronauts, into space. On TV, there’s a photo of Apollo 13. Flames lick out from beneath the rocket in the moments before it pierces the atmosphere, enters space, and is lost.

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“Sometimes I wish I could trade places with one of the people who died,” Bobby says suddenly, still watching. This isn’t the first time he’s said this. He doesn’t hold anything back from me like he does with his mother. I get the truth. “I had another dream about that little girl. I dreamt she would have grown up to be a figure skater and I saw her there on the ice in a cute white outfit with a fake sunflower on the shoulder. Dad, she could really jump.”

On "Man & Machine," Nazis fire a V2 rocket and it lifts slowly into the air to blast its way across the English Channel, erasing some randomly determined corner of London. The lethal V2 is the predecessor of all space-faring rockets, according to the narrator. Next, Sputnik appears: antennae like nails all around it.

“You’re just thinking about her because of the papers,” I say. The media coverage of the crash was extensive because the FAA couldn’t determine the cause. The papers called it “The Mystery Crash” and there was a lot of speculation about human error. A few even dug up the victims’ info. One was a school teacher. One was a banker. One was a dentist, and one was a child. She’s the one Bobby dreams about.