

Roadside Attraction

by Gita M. Smith

Breau came rolling in after midnight, stinking under the arms and covered in red clay. He'd rolled the four-wheeler in a ditch -- to avoid hitting a deer, he *said*. More likely he'd fallen asleep drunk and woken up when the quad landed in six inches of filthy water. I told him to whoa right there in the laundry room and strip before tracking up my kitchen. He showered with his ball cap still on, gripping the shower nozzle with one hand for balance and trying to soap his body with the other.

Breau liked the red wine, creature comforts, boiled shrimp and moonlight on the bayou, in that order. He loved his babies and me, and he always came home, no matter how late or how flavored his blood was with alcohol. When the circuit judge of Feliciana Parish took away his driver's license for the final time, Breau just bought a Yamaha 4-wheeler and drove off-road between home and Ti-Louis' roadhouse or home and the lumber yard left to him by his drunk of a Daddy.

When he flipped the Yamaha the first time, I took the key away until he had roll bars installed.

The second time, I rounded up the children and had them beg Breau to wear a helmet whenever he drove. He started to cry midway through the intervention. But he never did trade his ball cap for protection.

The women in my family have a talent for marrying mannish boys. We like them tall and strong, but we never check under the hood to see if they're fully grown up. I will teach my daughters not to mistake height for maturity.

You can love a man till death do you part, but never marry a shrimper, a drunk or a preacher. You don't want to be the wife of anyone who wears white boots or kills himself young or tells other people they're going to hell. No good can come of it.

So Breau had flipped the quad for the third time. The next morning

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while he was sleeping it off, I drove toward Ti-Louis' in a borrowed truck with a winch, to find the crash site. I took our eldest, Jorge, along in case there was a chance we could right the vehicle and ride it home. What we found was a flattened mess of metal and ABS plastic, its roll bar reduced to tinsel by the force of the collision when the quad landed, top down.

The fact that Breau was alive -- and not just alive but unharmed -- is theological proof of guardian spirits. Me, I'm no believer.

But this, *this* was as close to a miracle as I could conceive of. Jorge stared at the tangled remains in the ditch for several long minutes, his hands thrust into his jeans back pockets, his thin young face a question mark.

"We gonna leave this here?" he asked.

"Best to. We gonna let your Daddy come look at it."

"What if someone takes it away? For scrap?" Jorge asked.

"Let's put a note on it," I said. "Get a pen and paper from my purse. Write, 'EVIDENCE. DO NOT TOUCH.'"

That evening, at the start of sunset, I drove Breau down to see the 4-wheeler. He was feeling clear-headed after a long sleep and a meal.

There is a certain stage of sobriety among men who drink every night. In that stage, they are their best selves -- reasonable and generous with affection. The need for alcohol has not kicked in, and during these few hours they can accomplish great things. They write chapters of their novels, fix cars, tutor their young ones. They also make promises. Oh, how they make promises.

It was in such a state of mind that Breau approached the remains of his off-road sport utility vehicle. He stood some distance away, at first, edgy as if it was a sow who might charge him for coming too close to her shoats. Then he took slow, careful steps toward the rim of the ditch, stopping again within 10 feet of the bank.

"It ain't a snake, Breau," I said. "It won't rear up and bite you."

Again he slowly stepped closer, but this time I saw his legs were

shaking. He brought his hands up to his face and sank down on his knees in the damp red clay.

"Oh God, oh Lord oh God, oh shit!" he wailed. "Oh God, how did this happen? Why don't I remember this happenin?"

"You were drunk, plain and simple," I said.

There's no point in beating a man when he's down, and even if he's not, there's no point in acting the wine sheriff. All those women in my family who married callow men, they sure did try, though. But none of their nagging made a whit of difference. You can't save someone from himself.

But a man who sees the Miraculous in his own life and who feels what I like to call "mortality hits" at the side of a two-lane blacktop road -- that's a man who just might stand a chance. Not of being saved, but saving himself. It could happen.

