

A Redemption Story

By Ed Hurst

23 February 2007, revised 09 March 2016

1

He ignored the pleas of the secretary and stumbled out the door with the keys in his hand. She was about the only one there that early in the morning, and was hardly any match for his huge size, athletic prowess, and the arrogance of privileged birth. Daddy had paid for the four years of college, he had played football well enough to start most games, and graduated with a decent set of honors. By golly, he had earned the right to stay out all night and get drunk. Now with the sun coming up over the truck sales lot, he was going to take the company demo model out for a ride, never mind that he had a hard time getting the key in the door lock.

He managed to heave himself unsteadily into the driver's seat and start the motor before the secretary could summon any help. By the time a mechanic came rushing out of the garage, the shiny 1-ton was turning east out of the side entrance to the truck lot. The 12-cylinder diesel motor roared through dual exhausts as the rig sailed out of sight behind the trees.

In just a short time he was out of the little town and heading up into the hills. He loved his this showpiece truck. Dad had been awful busy lately. Even when he was in town during breaks from classes, Dad had often asked the young man to drive here or there on some errand, a task he undertook with casual pride. Perhaps there was something in the truck which the boy was trying to use to replace all the time he never got with his dad. He thought of Dad as his eyes closed just for a second or so.

At nearly 80mph, he jerked his head up just in time to see that he was in the wrong lane. Wrestling the wheel to the right, he dropped the passenger side wheels off the pavement before he corrected again back to the left. Twisting around in the seat, he glanced back to see the tracks in the shallow ditch alongside the road, and noticed he had just missed a signpost. Giving an enthusiastic hoot at his good fortune, he faced forward again, but not before drifting one more time into the opposing lane as he entered a sharp curve at the top of a rise. Hands jerking the wheel back to the right again, he barely managed to stay on the pavement before running off the other side. His gaze refocused just in time to spot the front of the little station wagon coming up the hill at him out of a deep shadow. Eyes wide in shock, His hands twitched, a futile start at avoiding the collision. His foot just barely lightened on the gas peddle.

Two vehicles impacting head-on at highway speeds make a short, sharp metallic crunch, rather like the sound of sheet metal rattling, but cut off. Only the two drivers heard it, but neither survived to describe it. Nobody at all heard the scraping, skidding, scattering debris except the rabbits and a few birds. One sparrow flew over, dipping briefly down through the cloud of steam rising from

the twisted wreckage of the big diesel. Somehow, both vehicles managed to stay on the pavement, despite having spun around each other somewhat, making the highway impassable.

Some minutes later, the scattered bits of plastic from body trim parts were all the warning the old farmer had as his pickup labored up the hill, pulling a loaded stock trailer. Already going rather slow, it wasn't hard to stop in the start of the curve halfway up the hill to avoid complicating things by hitting the big mess in the middle of the road. Rolling back down the hill a bit, he turned on his emergency flashers to warn drivers approaching from the way he came. Then he jumped out and began running past the mess to begin flagging traffic coming from town, just audible in the distance. In his mind, while the two unlucky drivers might be still alive, just barely, the greatest threat was more vehicles hitting what was left of those two.

The driver of the first car to approach saw the old farmer waving and stopped to set his own vehicle with emergency flashers blinking as a road block, then wisely got out of the car and stood on the shoulder. He paced back and forth a few yards away as he called 911, watching as the old farmer began calling out in the direction of the tangled mass to see if anyone responded. He found it very discouraging to see that blood from both wrecks was running together.

2

It was opening time, and Saturday was always busy at his truck lot. Only by chance did Connor glance up at the front window of the showroom on his way to the steps; in the reflection he saw a patrol car pull up behind him. He stopped and turned around. The officer getting out of the police car was his old buddy from way back in grade school. Indeed, their sons were also good friends, having gone to college and played football together. The boys had just graduated mid-week, and both had come back the previous evening to this little town with the starting quarterback for a night out at the clubs to celebrate. Had his son gotten into trouble?

There didn't seem to be anyone in the back seat of the patrol car, unless they were lying down, maybe sleeping it off. He waited at the bottom of the steps. His buddy had risen to the rank of patrol operations supervisor, but wore a rather plain and undecorated uniform. Real men didn't need a bunch of shiny brass bits to know who they were. Both men had aged with such values. However, as he drew closer, Connor realized the look on his buddy's face was completely foreign. It was cold, impersonal, the kind of face you wore when you were dying inside and couldn't let anyone know.

"Are the boys okay this morning?" he asked the officer.

"Let's go upstairs to your office." The reply was stiff, though not formal. Must be pretty serious trouble. What would his son cost him today?

He didn't care about the fancy 1-ton. As the most expensive rig on the lot, Connor would have gladly given up a dozen more before lunch if it could bring his son

back. He wasn't sure he believed any of it until an investigator showed up with a sterile cotton swab on a long stick, and wiped it against the inside of his cheek. At that point, he had retreated to that place inside, so far away in pain and shock that even the tears couldn't find their way back out to his eyes.

It was these still dry eyes that stared at the wallet in his hands, stared but didn't really see. It was the only thing they gave him from the wreckage, containing his son's driver's license, a couple of credit cards, and some cash. Connor kept hearing the echo of his buddy's response to the question how bad of shape was his son in: "We can't even be sure the remains we have are human."

The necessity of the closed casket only heightened Connor's sense of alienation. Sitting on the front row, through the tears which finally began to fall, he studied the life-sized, full color bust photo of his son, and realized he hadn't really known him since about the end of grade school. That was the last time they went fishing together, the last time they did much of anything together. The next month after that trip, the bank approved the loan on the truck dealership. Connor had never slowed the fast pace of hard work building the business since then.

The big church-house hosting the funeral was packed, with many standing outside. He glanced out the window, down the wide main drag in the old town to where his cousin was pastor of the Baptist church. A couple of blocks away, a bunch of people were marching down the street behind a ratty pickup. There were some black paper streamers hung around it. Another funeral? Then his tears began anew as he remembered someone else died in the crash with his son. The rest of the memorial service was a misty blur.

3

Actually quite old, the upholstery still looked brand new. It occurred to Connor he had never really sat in his recliner more than a few minutes at a time. For that matter, he'd never spent much time in the living room of his own home. Now, he just listened to the sounds he could make out in the near silence of human inactivity. Part of him begged for a distraction, any distraction, to forget the misery. For now, that part had lost the battle, and he embraced his sorrow.

For the first time in years, he didn't go to work when the dealership was open this morning. He had dismissed the housekeeper for the day, and it was a lonely house. He had never bothered to remarry after his wife died in childbirth; it had been just him and his son. Now... Instead of going to work, he sat quietly, sipping coffee. The phone near his cup rang. Of course, there was that other matter to take care of, as well. The screen on the face of the cell phone showed his lawyer's number as he picked it up on the third ring. Things the past week had happened all too fast, so he was not in a hurry about much of anything at this moment.

"Yeah?" Connor said in a quite voice.

On the other end was the familiar voice of the attorney who had helped him scrape up the funding for the truck business, even investing some of his own money as a partner. They weren't close buddies, but they were more than just

partners over a cash nexus. The lawyer provided his legal services pretty much without fee, got a new truck every three years as a retainer along with is profit share, and they never really disagreed over much of anything.

“That unusual funerary procession you described was them alright. The police report of this other party is pretty strange. These folks are apparently very poor, living in a semi-communal environment out the other side of the hills in a box canyon on some ranch. Some kind of ghost town there or something. The report stops just short of characterizing them as a religious cult. Not only were there no reports of trouble, the neighbors rather like them. Seems they are pretty handy with oddball repair skills, and they work cheaply. Few of them own vehicles, they don’t register their marriages with any state, and they never ask for welfare assistance of any kind. Were it not for a couple of disabled veterans there, and Child Welfare checking on them due to homeschooling, they would almost not exist, officially.”

Folks like that probably wouldn’t much care for lawyers. “Did you try to contact him? Would he talk to you at all?”

“I arranged to have the widower come to the land owner’s house to talk on the phone. No rudeness; very polite, actually. As you guess, the man said he’d rather talk it over with you personally, first. He said I was welcome to come along, but he honestly felt I wasn’t needed. There’s no reason to think it’s dangerous, but don’t agree to anything without consulting me; just listen.” Then he added, “They have us pretty much over a barrel.”

Connor needed to know how bad things could be. “So, Counsel, just how much over a barrel are we? Assume for a minute he got a really good lawyer himself and took it to court, got a sympathetic judge. We already have a problem with bad publicity as it is. The papers never did like me, and they are having a field day with this.”

The sound of shuffling papers could be heard in the background before the lawyer spoke. “Company truck, part-time employee who happens to be the owner’s son, drunk driving, pampered rich college kid... It approaches criminal neglect on our part. Insurance specifically does not cover drunk driving. I could drag it out, but the local civil court isn’t that busy. By this time next year he could be the new owner.”

That was putting it plainly. Connor responded, “I’m not worried about my personal losses; it don’t amount to much beside my son. But this would hurt a lot of other folks, not to mention yourself.” He thought for moment. “At this point, I’m not sure I care if I live, anyway – no, I’m not suicidal. You know better than that. It’s just that, if anything happens to me while I’m trying to negotiate in person, at least I won’t look so bad and I can clear the family name somewhat. As you say, it’s not like he can demand too much, because it’s all his to take.”

Not a ghost town precisely, the place had been used first as a movie set, then for a TV series, none of which got much notice. Connor remembered seeing the movie

as a matinée, then watching the TV series as a kid on some long gone local broadcast station. It was about the residents of a mining town back up in some draw. The movie company had actually drilled a well up near the top of the ridge and equipped it with a windmill to make sure there was always water in the creek bed for filming. When the filming stopped and the place was abandoned, whoever owned the land had kept the windmill working because of the obvious benefits of the year-round water supply.

Of course, trees had grown up along the water course, and where it fanned out over some flats, there were more trees and plenty of range grasses. Connor found the old gravel path leading back across the range land. It was marked mostly by human footprints, bicycle tracks and animal droppings; there were virtually no vehicle tire treads in the sandy spots. The owner of the place told him the folks living in the abandoned structures weren't any trouble, and did a lot of useful ranch work in lieu of rent. Sometimes he'd have his wife buy some extra dry goods, like big bags of flour, cornmeal and beans because he was worried about them. He let their draft animals mix with the herds and feed equally. They were pretty good about keeping watch for predators and rustlers, because he never missed any stock in the five or so years since they came. At any rate, he enjoyed their singing from their open-air worship services, and often joined them up in the draw in good weather.

Connor stopped atop a rather flat ridge, gazing down the gradual slope. He saw the wooded draw a quarter-mile away, where a couple of small camp trailers were just visible through the foliage. The trees stood thickly between rocky slopes, obscuring most of the buildings. It was rough enough he wondered just how they got those ancient trailers back in there, but then remembered they might well be left over from the days when actors would have demanded such accommodations. Even with a high-rise suspension on his pickup, he decided to stop a hundred or so yards from the trees, and walked the rest of the way.

Where the wide path ran between the trees, a couple of kids stopped their game and looked up at the stranger approaching. He slowed as he neared them, and noticed they had been playing with some homemade toys the likes of which he had never seen. "Howdy!" He tried to keep a friendly demeanor.

The larger boy stepped away from the toys and walked toward him, stopping about halfway. "Good morning, sir. Are you seeking someone?" He doubted any children anywhere else in the state talked that way, so free of slang, and respectful.

Connor told the boy his own name, and then the name of the man who was made a widower by his son. "Oh, yes sir. He's waiting for you. You'll find him under his awning, the second trailer on the right." The boy indicated the wide trail leading back through the trees. He thanked the young man as he strode away.

Despite the thick foliage, the layout of the place provoked fuzzy old memories from Connor's childhood. It was one of the few TV serials he had really liked, despite the hokey dialog and contrived story lines. It was the characters that kept his interest. Some of the buildings were gone, but he noticed that a pair of large

foundations were joined to form a wide deck, over which a cargo parachute had been spread like a tent, but with no sides. There was plenty of junk around the buildings, but no outright trash. Then he realized most of the junk was being recycled in some way when he spotted a narrow mule wagon partially loaded with scrap metal, neatly sorted. While most of the structures were clearly remodeled with mismatched building materials, much of it was expertly worked and painted – though often in garish combinations. He realized on second thought that they were garish designs, pictures and abstract patterns, including recognizable Christian symbols.

As he passed the open air platform, he saw that there were odd chairs and benches facing the other side. At the focal point a single chair that stood next to a small desk. The cargo chute wouldn't stop any rain, but slow it down a good bit. Given that the weather here was seldom really cold and nasty, it made sense to have what he guessed was an open air church. Then he saw the slightly larger old travel trailer, the only one with a framed awning, a rather expansive patchwork canvas cover over what seemed a good-sized front yard. This yard was tidy, but partially filled with three mis-matched work benches, on which were various hand tools, a couple of power tools, and nearby a pile of sliced up used tires. He also noticed a clothes line hung with a broad mixture of straps, mostly old car seat belts, and braided thin lines. He remembered now passing a very large but defunct salvage yard on the road coming out here. Through the hanging straps, as through a curtain, he spotted a man sitting in a portable chaise lounge, look down at something.

As he came around to the open path into the yard, he saw the man held a large book in his lap, a Bible.

4

Once Connor got a clear view of the man in the chaise, the word that came to mind was “hippie.” However, he noticed the long hair was well kept, and the beard was trimmed and neat, the neck shaved. Still, the t-shirt was tie-dyed, and the jeans had a bright trim at the cuffs. The man glanced up and closed his Bible. Connor could see now that the cover was a beautiful patchwork of different colors of tanned leather.

“I’ve never seen a Bible with that sort of cover,” Connor ventured to speak first.

The man in the chaise stood to greet him. “One of my hobbies is playing with leather, and I’ve done some bookbinding in the past. When the original hardback came apart, I replaced it.” He held out the patchwork Bible for Connor to examine.

Taking it for closer look, he noted the fine stitching. “Hobby? Looks more like high-dollar craftsmanship.”

The man smiled gently, with one end of his mouth curving up higher than the other. “I do alright with the heavier stuff.” He looked away and added, “Actually, my wife made that cover...” He trailed off a moment, then turned back. “I did the rebinding, though.” Some of the smile returned.

Connor's hands shook just a bit holding the Bible, and a tear clung hidden in one corner of his left eye. Looking up, he handed it back as if there was nothing on earth more precious.

Taking it back, the man laid it on a side table. With an upturned palm, he motioned to a folding chair with handmade cushions on it, "Please have a seat. Could I offer you some iced tea?" It was a graceful rescue from the tension.

Removing his straw cowboy hat, Connor sat slowly in the chair. "Sure. I'd like that."

The man went to a high table standing against the side of the trailer; atop the table stood a small refrigerator. Connor realized the place would naturally have electricity from the days when it was a film set, probably buried to keep from spoiling the Old West look of the place. The man took out a gallon jar filled with dark amber liquid. He picked up a pint fruit jar standing upside down on the table top, poured it full, then turned to ask, "Do you drink it with anything? I take it straight, but I may have some sugar here somewhere."

"No, that's fine." He searched his mind desperately for something to talk about. "This is a very interesting place you folks have here."

Returning with the drink, the man said, "We've been blessed beyond words just finding a place so well suited to our needs." There was no tension now when he mentioned her. "When my wife and I came out here five years ago, we had only two other families with us. Since then, others have found our brand of faith winsome, and they have joined us. Without burdening your ears in a long tale, I will tell you I serve as a pastor for this community." Handing Connor the pint jar, he returned to his chaise lounge.

Settling in, he resumed, "Of all people, I am aware how cultic this can appear to some, but I assure you our strangeness is of a completely different sort. We had a dream of recovering some of the tribal lifestyle depicted in the Bible. Not with the fanaticism practiced by others, but in a general application of the fundamental principles. We knew the world at large would hardly approve, and local governments can be particularly difficult. We surveyed rural counties across the southern tier of states, and this one seemed a winner. So far, that guess has proved accurate. We've been left in peace."

This was really good tea. Connor lowered his glass, twiddled his hat in the other hand and crossed his legs. "No doubt the rest of the world would be a happier place if more people were content with that."

"Yes, indeed. That's why I was hoping you'd be willing to come visit us, and we could chat without the watchdogs of justice." He grinned at this reference to lawyers. "I want peace for both of us. I seriously doubt you are expecting what follows."

Here it comes. Connor was surprised to find he felt no twitch of fear.

The man continued. "It requires no special religious viewpoint such as ours to understand that no material possessions can replace the life of someone you love.

You and I have both lost so very much, and I would be loath to add to your sorrows, any more than you would add to mine.”

The man paused to let that sink in. Taking a drink of his own tea, he turned a bit to one side and waved at someone across the creek who was riding a mountain bike along the far path. He smiled at the back of the rider who disappeared through the distant foliage. The man gestured with a sweep of his hand indicating the little hidden valley. Some of the film set buildings still stood where Connor remembered them.

“You see we live simply. It appears to most as poverty, but it is more a matter of how we view worldly goods. It would be easy to accumulate much more wealth with our arts and skills, but we choose to pursue a higher goal. Thus, I would hardly wish to enrich myself at your expense. You bear the greater cost already, knowing the charge for the deaths was the laid on your son.”

The man’s eyes and voice were gentle, completely lacking in anger or accusation. Connor’s own eyes were blurred with tears, but they weren’t bitter any more.

His host gestured with his hands as he spoke. “It is not our way to extract by force anything from anyone. We find the laws of man are perhaps more fit for restraining evil than for directing the affairs of decent people. In my eyes, you owe me nothing. Your presence alone is apology enough. I completely release you from all financial responsibility. My loss is one of the heart, not of property. Even the old car was worth more as scrap than I could have gotten selling it whole. Please instruct your attorney to draw up a release form, and I will sign it.”

True to his words, what the man had said was the last thing Connor expected, yet wholly unsurprising. His hand shook, and it was hard to sip from the raised glass, but he needed a moment to think. Lowering his glass slowly, he looked at his hat. “Is there nothing at all you need?”

“We take our needs to the Lord. Naturally, we allow Him to decide how to best to meet them, but we don’t even do any fund-raising. As your heart is moved by Him, we will accept any gift in His Name.”

Connor set the glass down on the end of the nearest workbench with a purpose, then leaned forward. “I went to church all my life. Thought I knew Jesus. I think need to start from scratch, and learn about Him from you.”