

## WRECKLESS

In 1993, I was 21 years old. I lived life way too fast and didn't expect to live long, nor did I care to -- I was severely broken. That summer, I watched as a woman died. The worst part was that it may have happened because of me. I've often wondered if fate made the right choice that day when it allowed me to live instead of her.

It was an early summer morning in Nashville. As usual, I was late for work. After several oblivious minutes of the alarm warning me to get up, I woke. Quickly, I jumped out of bed and bolted out the door. My days were beginning more and more with a hangover. I knew Dad was waiting in his truck, probably still nursing his first cup of coffee. As I raced in the direction of his house, I calculated the minutes I would be late. Dad was also my boss. Our arrangement was that I would arrive promptly at 7 a.m.; however, I wasn't great at holding up my end of our agreement. Actually, I was terrible at it. From his house, we would commute to work together -- if he allowed me to work that day. There were some mornings that the smell of alcohol still lingered about me so strongly that he would send me home to sleep it off. Other mornings, when I was acceptable enough to accompany him to work, I would have to endure Dad's slow commute lecture.

That lecture was an annoying, often sleep-inducing speech from Dad about how precious life was. He contended that I should be investing in my future rather than the tip jars on beer-soaked counters, that spending my time in clubs and being deeply embedded in the Nashville nightlife scene would lead me into places I wouldn't want or need to be. My best friend, Josh, had been killed the year before by a gunshot to the head, and Dad used that example often. Sometimes I wished that Dad would just shut up. I never listened to his advice or the slow commute lecture. Usually, I was too preoccupied with trying to piece together the fragments of



memory from the night before. *How in the hell did I get home last night? Who was that girl in my bed when I left this morning?* In retrospect, dad was right; he was always right, but back then, I didn't have much faith in him.

Dad left my mother when I was three. Mother tried her best to care for my younger brother and me, but she was still just a teenager. When I was four, my brother and I were sent to an orphanage in Kentucky after Mom became too overwhelmed with two small children, living in the backseat of her old Lincoln. Several years passed, and one day, Mother made a surprise visit to see us. I was so happy to see her. My brother and I leaped at her offer to take us shopping for new clothes. When we arrived at the store, the smells of fresh leather and new clothes put us in a frenzied dance of joy. She instructed me to take off my shirt to try on a new "Dukes of Hazzard" t-shirt that I spotted when we walked into the children's clothing section. As I pulled my old shirt over my head, I saw Mother's eyes fill with rage. I thought I had done something wrong by the way she grabbed me by the arm, but she began gently rubbing her hand across the bruises on my body. "Who did this to you?" she yelled. I just shrugged my shoulders in confusion. Bruises were as normal at the orphanage as tears shed over lost parents. She quickly gathered me into her arms and hurried me out of the store. I never got that "Dukes of Hazzard" t-shirt, but I never had to go back to the orphanage either. That was a good enough trade I suppose.

Mother again tried her best to care for my brother and me, but she still wrestled with her own demons to the point that she wasn't able to manage her own relationships and my behavioral problems. At age 13, I moved in with Dad, who seemed surprised and somewhat in denial over my unpredictable behavior. I knew he loved me, yet he always made me feel uneasy through intimidation. My first memory of him when I was a child was of him severely beating a man he



had pinned to the ground, while the man's wife repeatedly stabbed dad in the back with two steak knives. The police took Dad away covered in blood. He believed that threats and violence could somehow "fix" me; it only made things worse. By the time I reached high school, I was beyond redemption. I came home late, drank too often, and fought a lot -- all of the usual indicators of a child in need of help, but help never came. I was arrested at 15. I had become the proverbial bad kid. I had become the kid that parents warned their kids not to be around, a rebel without a cause. At that time, I was unaware of just how damaged I was.

This particular morning, I knew Dad would be waiting in his truck for me to arrive, and by now, he'd nearly be done with his second cup of coffee. The fog was thick, which caused me to drive slower than usual. As if on cue, I drove over the top of a hill and found a car stopped in front of me with its left turn signal blinking. The two-lane road was too narrow for me to pass, so I inched up to the car in front of me and stopped. The red turn signal seemed to mock the fact that I was late. I looked through the open window of my truck and saw a little red bird atop a fence post singing his song to the world. As I watched him, I began to take notice of the beauty in my father's middle-class neighborhood. Neatly kept homes lined the two-lane road where I had spent my teenage years. They stood on spacious lots covered with mature oak, hickory, and maple trees. Thick green grass blanketed the small rolling hills softening the Tennessee landscape. Crepe myrtles, honeysuckle, and lilac scented the morning air that softly circulated through the cab of my truck. The thick canopy was high above the lawns shading the neighborhood and had an inviting brushing sound made by swaying treetops. On one side of the road just behind the homes, a river flowed. It swirled and gushed in its mischievous way as the low rising sun skimmed silently across its surface. On the other side of the river, I saw grazing Holsteins walking slowly through the fields as a young calf bucked his hind quarters into the air.



He thrashed his head up and down as he discovered the world around him. The façade of the world's beauty would be challenged that summer morning by life's other less-seen realities of chaos and tragedy.

As I snapped back to the flashing tail light, something caught my attention. I looked into my rearview mirror and noticed a car speeding over the hill 20-30 yards behind me. At first, I didn't see the driver, but then a woman's head suddenly peered up from behind the dash board. She had obviously been reaching for something in the floorboard of her car, and I could see by the surprised expression on her face that we were both thinking the same thing: This would not end well. Her speed, compounded with her late realization of the two vehicles stopped in front of her, did not allow her an opportunity to apply her brakes. At that instant, her life was moving too fast, and there was nothing she could do about it. As her headlights rapidly cut through the morning fog, I braced for the inevitable impact.

I was blocked in with nowhere to go. My eyes moved from my rearview mirror to the car ahead. I then noticed what the car in front of me had been waiting on. A large cargo van was barreling down the narrow two-lane road and would soon pass the car in front of me. I looked back into my rearview mirror and watched the speeding woman as she was about to collide with the back end of my truck. At the last second, she jerked her wheel to the left and steered her car wildly into the adjacent lane of oncoming traffic, narrowly missing my back bumper. Just as her car came up beside me, the van began to pass me. It was racing toward destruction and never saw her coming. The point of impact was ferocious. Crunching steel and plastic erupted into the silent fog with the force of a freight train. Revving motors, breaking glass and screeching tires thundered around us. Both vehicles raised their back ends off the ground several feet from the force of the collision like toy cars. As they slammed back down onto the pavement, hot radiator



fluid sprayed into the air. The smells of summer were replaced with smells of hot oil and burning gasoline. The van rolled backward several feet and caught fire where the engine used to be. The woman's car bounced backward and slipped down a small embankment into the soft green grass.

The little red bird no longer sang, the winds ceased, and the peaceful view I had enjoyed previously was replaced with an urgency of confusion and fright. My first thought was to help the woman in the car behind me. I tried to open the door of my truck, but I kept pulling up on the lock, while simultaneously pulling on the door handle. I knew the door wouldn't open this way, but I pulled on them as hard as I could. Then it registered to me, *Let go of the handle*. I took my hand off the handle and pulled the lock up. As soon as I pulled the handle again, I found myself lying in the pink radiator fluid that was spilled all over the road. I scrambled to my knees, eventually getting to my feet as I heaved my body down the trail of fluids and debris leading down the embankment to the crashed car. Pieces of sharp, torn debris were strewn everywhere. When I looked down the embankment, I couldn't believe the sight I saw. It seemed unbelievable that the wreckage that I looked upon was the same car that I had seen moments ago in my rearview mirror. It had become an unrecognizable sculpture of knotted metal. I ran through steam and fog down the steep embankment to try to help the woman in the car, but when I got there, the front fender was crunched into place where the door should have been. I looked down into the car, and the first thing I noticed was that her legs had been severed by the dashboard that now rested below her thighs. The steering wheel pinned her against the seat and her head lay sideways, covered in blood. I tried to pull on the tangled metal, but it wouldn't budge. It was as if a giant had twisted and mangled her into the car, which now displayed her within its grasp. I heard her moan slightly, so I said, "Hang on. I am going to help you!" even though I knew she couldn't hear me. Just then, a man came out onto his front porch with a phone placed against his



ear and yelled, "Help is on the way." He had heard the explosion of cars and immediately called for help. I backed away from the car and watched the lady, feeling as helpless as I had ever been in my life. I didn't know what to do next. Life caught me off guard. Her moans stopped after a few moments, replaced by an ominous silence. The world had never been so quiet.

She was gone.

People began to come out of their homes in robes and pajamas. A few other drivers who had just come upon the scene got out of their cars to investigate. I ignored them as I brushed past with my head down and my teeth clenched. I climbed back up the embankment and kicked a piece of wreckage out of my way. I walked over to my truck and flung myself into the cab, slamming the door shut with enough force to draw attention from the shocked onlookers. I did not know why I was so mad. The car that had been in front of me was now gone, and there was nothing but open road and the rest of my life ahead of me. I grabbed the gear shift and pulled it down into "drive." The truck released itself from the spot where it sat when that lady made her last decision on earth that beautiful summer morning.

The little red bird returned to the fence post and again, began to sing.

I got to work late that morning, but I got there. I later found out that the lady left two small children behind. Dad didn't stop telling me to slow down; but I still didn't listen to him. I don't think it was that I didn't want to slow down, it was more like, I didn't know how to slow down. The trauma of early life catapulted my behavior ahead of my thoughts, and I couldn't slow the slingshot of disaster from which I had been shot. Instead of slowing down, I seemed to pick up so much speed that I couldn't brake in time for the inevitable disaster of my own accident, which I caused later in life that hurt someone else -- because of my careless decisions.



Twenty-five years have passed since that morning, and I have been in prison for 10 years. I was forced to slow down. In doing so, I have often wondered if I squandered her sacrifice. The instantaneous choice she made to avoid me and instead put herself in danger has always been a mystery to me. People do bad things, but in that split-second decision she made, she taught me that when people are faced with the choice of choosing life or death for someone else they will sometimes choose life for a stranger over their own. She performed a selfless and sacrificial act for a complete stranger who couldn't get her out of her car, who walked away from her as she took her last breath and who continued to waste the blessing that life is. It's taken a long time for her sacrifice to really reach my senses. When it did, I realized that the world is suspiciously beautiful and indiscriminate in its harsh treatment of the life that exists in it. That life is an opportunity that is going to end, sometimes at any moment. I decided that maybe I should honor her choice to save me and place the same level of emphasis on making the most of my life. I think she would like that. I have made a conscious decision to live my life with purpose, and to share in it with those around me, a conscious decision to no longer be reckless.

I still learn from that incident all these years later. The most significant thing I have discovered is that no matter what we do in life, we must avoid the collision of hurting someone else.

Dad no longer tells me to slow down. He doesn't speak to me at all. I guess the pain that I caused him when I came to prison was too much for him to take, but if he did speak to me, I would ask him if he would like to take a long drive somewhere nice.

Dad, I'm listening.