

The Salvation of Theron Connor

By

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The desolation of the Oklahoma panhandle in the 1930's dust bowl pushes a starving farmer to an unthinkable act in an attempt to save his family.

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Once the winds began, they simply never stopped. It was like God himself had taken severe umbrage to Oklahoma, like he was trying to blow away the panhandle, like he was going to use the dust to scrape the hubris from the very skins of men who thought they could subjugate these Plains.

Theron Connor, however, was a religious man and was not ready to accept the idea that God would bring him to this great expanse of rich soil and then strip it from him out of spite. It was nature, that's all. The cycle of the seasons would re-establish itself and the corn and wheat would once again grow under his hand. He was certain of it.

Theron's wife Megan was not so sure.

"Joshua Wiggins is taking his family to California," she said one night as she set the tin supper plates with their meager helpings of cornbread and beans before Theron and their eight-year-old son Jesse.

"Joshua Wiggins has no faith," Theron said. "Nor backbone."

His meaning was clear: no Connor was abandoning this land. Connors were not quitters. Tomorrow would be like today, as it was yesterday. They will farm the land around them. They will persevere, the wind and black blizzards of dust be damned.

Jesse watched his father break his cornbread and use it to push his beans onto his spoon. He broke his own, dipped it in the beans, but then let his hand fall below the table, where his dog Orion, named for the only constellation the boy could identify in the Oklahoma firmament, ravenously took it in one bite.

"Whatever you give that dog comes from your own belly," Theron said without looking up. "Not enough for him and us together."

"Yes sir," Jesse said quietly.

Theron had gotten the dog for Jesse two years ago, when the land was still green, and the barnyard full. He felt the boy needed a companion while he and his mother were in the fields. Boy and dog had become inseparable.

Fact of the matter was, Theron had a grudging respect for the dog for being so loyal to the boy, to them all. He was a smart mutt, always alert, watching. The stray coyote never got near the house. But Theron also knew there could come a day when survival would have to trump loyalty. You could only eat beans

for so long. So he kept his distance from the dog, didn't interact with him if he could help it, and wished the boy hadn't attached as deeply as he had.

"Your food's your food, understand?" Theron said, then handed Jesse a chunk of his own bread. The boy took it and nodded. They ate the rest of their meal in silence.

The days passed into weeks, then into months, each a seeming repeat of its predecessor, the sky darkened by the dust lifted into it by the unrelenting winds until day and night began to have the same countenance. The land disappeared mote by mote, parched and powdered by the sun. Even the wood in the barn and the house began to split and splinter. From the fields, Theron could hear the snap of the wood grain as it let go, sounding like a distant shot through the constant gale.

Planting became futile. The ruts the plow left disappeared immediately, filled with the dust of the field adjacent, which was refilled by the one beyond. It was like the entire landscape was marching across the Plains, blown from nowhere, heading to nowhere. Seed failed to germinate. There was no water to soften the husk.

Returning from the fields became more and more difficult for Theron. As if the futility there were not enough, invariably he would find Jesse sitting on the steps to the house, weak and unmoving, with an increasingly emaciated Orion resting his head on the boy's leg, both of them seeming to be disappearing before Theron's eyes day by day. It was as if the wind were blowing them away as it did the land. If he could get past that, he then had to look into the wan and greying face of Megan, whose eyes, with each passing day, grew more and more distant, even the pleading they held within them just a month ago almost faded completely.

"We can't go on," she said one night, ladling beans across a nest of boiled tumbleweed on the tin plates. "We simply can't, Theron. We have little food left, and the well is all but dry. We are going to die in this place."

Theron looked from Megan to Jesse, the boy's arm around Orion's painfully thin neck. Frustration washed over his face.

"What would you have me do?" he said. "We can't leave, even if we wanted to. There's no money. We have no stores. We leave, we leave the only thing we have of value. The land is all we own."

"We can't eat the dust," Megan said. "We can't drink the wind. To my eye, there is no value left here, Theron." She looked from her husband to her son. "He is the only value that remains. Take us away from here, I beg of you, before we lose everything that truly matters."

Theron stared at his wife, his paralysis apparent. "I don't see how..." was all that he could muster. Nothing more was said between them.

After dinner, when the tin plates had been scrubbed off with sand because water was too dear, Theron tucked his son into bed. As Orion curled up at the foot of Jesse's bed, he emitted a small whimper.

"What's going to happen to Orion?" Jesse asked. "He's so hungry and thirsty."

"I know," Theron said quietly. "I know he is." And after a moment, "But I have to think of you first, son. And your mother."

"You have to take care of him," Jesse said. "You have to. He's my only friend."

Theron looked at his son in the dim light. He ran his fingers through the boy's hair, then rose and left the room.

A moment later, Theron returned, carrying a small bowl of water, which he set in front of Orion. The dog immediately lapped up all of the brown liquid, then licked Theron's damp hand in seeming appreciation before once again curling at the foot of the bed.

"Don't tell your mother," Theron said. "That was the last I could pull from the pump."

Jesse sat up and hugged his father, then rolled over to sleep as Theron took the lamp and left the room.

Later that night, Theron lay next to a sleeping Megan, his eyes fixed on an unseen point on the dark ceiling above him. After a while, he looked over at her, then rose quietly and went into the main room of the small house, closing the bedroom door silently behind him.

He lit the lamp on the dining table, and carried it to a chest against the far wall. Setting the lamp on a nearby chair, he opened the chest lid and rummaged through tablecloths, old

photos, mementos and the like until he found a small, oblong metal box. He set the box across his knees, opened its lid, and adjusted the lamp to provide better light.

Inside were several envelopes, each neatly marked in his wife's delicate hand: their marriage certificate, the title to the old rusted truck parked in the yard, the deed to the house and land. He pulled the last envelope from the box, running his thumb over the ink on its front that read, "Theron's Life Insurance".

Theron opened the envelope and read the contents. He found what he was looking for on the second page, read the paragraph twice, then folded the pages, replaced them in the envelope. He set the envelope on the top of the others in the metal box, and put the box back in the chest. Then he sat silent, unmoving.

After several minutes, Theron rose and went quietly to the closet beside the back door and reached in. When his hand returned, it was wrapped around a twin-barreled 12-gauge shotgun. He cracked it open, touching the two shells set into the barrels, then closed the breech as quietly as he could.

As Theron opened the back door, he heard his son's bedroom door creak. He looked across the dark room and saw the small face of Orion poking out of the crack in the door.

"Stay," Theron said, showing his palm to the dog. "You stay." Then he went out, resting the screen door loosely against the jamb.

Lamp in hand, Theron made his way to the barn, now greyed and withered like the landscape beyond it. The sting of dust flung at him by the wind was sharp on his face. He slid open the large barn door and stepped inside.

With movements swift and determined, he went directly to the far stall, long since empty of livestock, set the lamp on the ground and himself on a bale of hay at the back wall. He spun the shotgun around, placed the barrels under his chin and his thumb on the triggers. Then he closed his eyes and took in a long, deep breath. He held it for several seconds.

The weight of the dog's head on his thigh startled Theron, but he did not move. He slowly opened his eyes and looked down at Orion, who stared back at him, his tail sweeping slowly through the dirt and strands of hay on the hard-packed floor.

"Go." Theron said, his voice barely a whisper. "Leave."

Orion did not move. With his trigger hand, Theron reached out and nudged the dog's head.

"Go back to the house," Theron said. "I can't do this with you watching me." The dog did not move.

He shoved Orion's head from his leg, and pointed to the end of the stall. "Go!" he said, trying to add firmness to the utterance without raising his voice. "Go!"

But Orion reset his head on Theron's thigh, his eyes looking intently into the man's. Then he licked Theron's hand. Then again. Neither of them moved, staring at each other for what seemed to Theron a lifetime.

A quick inhale of breath caught the first sob in Theron's throat, but not the second, nor the flood of them that followed. Tears cut through the dust on his cheeks as he slumped back against the splintered stall boards. He let the shotgun slide to the ground, and placed his hand on the dog at his side. He wept silently and unceasingly deep into the night.

When Megan arose the next morning, she found Theron outside, standing in the bed of the old truck, tying down the dining room chest, his toolbox, and an old wooden crate filled with the tin plates, coffeepot, and a few other utensils and instruments from the house. Orion sat in the bed near him.

"What are you doing, Theron?" she said.

Theron jumped from the truck and walked to her. He took her hands in his.

"We done our best here, Meg. But there ain't nothin' left. You were right. Jesse's all we need worry about now."

"What changed your mind, Theron?" Megan said.

He glanced at Orion in the truck bed, then back into his wife's eyes.

"I learned last night that savin' a life is just a matter of will. We can't let fear or not knowin' what'll happen keep us from tryin'. We may not get far, but makin' the effort's all that's left us, I figure."

Megan smiled up at her husband, nodded once, then turned and went back into the house, calling her son's name. Theron watched

her disappear into the dimness, then let his eyes fall again on Orion in the truck bed.

"Good boy," he said.

An hour later, the winds came up again, blowing hot and hard, carrying the dust from miles away across Theron's barren farm in high, dark billows. It took less than ten minutes to bury the tire tracks threading off the property and heading west.