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## Chapter I

# Life's Sudden U-turn

“Plastic surgeons can do wonderful things these days.” Biting her trembling lower lip as she held the mirror in front of me, my mother was fighting back the tears as she spoke. The grotesque visage within the frame slowly came into focus; that was supposed to be me, but I couldn’t recognize “me.” One-half of this misshapen countenance was facing me, the other half staring off askew in another direction altogether. The glazed, sunken eye belonging to that disconnected half was sitting at a different level to the other eye. Instead of a nose, this alien face had a narrow, flat sliver of skin, with one “nostril” opening at its base.

Nearly all the facial contours that make us each recognizably unique — cheekbones and the like — had been smashed and distorted by massive impact. My nose had been largely torn off. Despite my medical training, I was not in a frame of mind for dispassionate analysis of my injuries. A numb horror fought for dominance with the infused narcotic medication clouding my consciousness. I couldn’t

speak because of the tracheotomy tube entering my throat. All I could weakly scrawl on the piece of paper in front of me was, “Looks like the man from Mars.” I sank back into the bed of the hospital I would inhabit for the next half-year or so.

The painkilling drugs were not the only thing making me mercifully hazy — I had not long emerged from several days of unconsciousness in intensive care. I was only gradually beginning to piece together, from what my family was telling me, what had happened to put me here.

For some 13 years I had been a family doctor. Now, at the age of 36, I had suddenly become an avid consumer, instead of a provider, of medical care. All the result of a split-second highway impact in which my four-wheel-drive vehicle had collided with a fully-laden fuel tanker at a combined impact speed of 110 mph (180 kph).

My wife had a serious medical condition at the time, which seemed to be partially relieved in steamy tropical weather. To help relieve, even if only a little, this distressingly painful syndrome, we had decided to move to Cairns, in Australia’s tropical far north, to “start over.” Our house and my practice in South Australia’s capital, Adelaide, had sold readily. We had already bought a house in Cairns and sent our furniture on ahead. Little did we know that it would take over six months before we would “catch up” with our possessions again.

The plan was that we would take our two cars up to Cairns via the central Australian outback. For the first leg, about 900 miles (1400 km), we would travel on the famous Ghan train, which took cars as well, to Alice Springs. We really looked forward to driving the remaining 1,500 miles (2400 km), especially the first part in the remote Northern Territory. We knew and loved the lonely outback highways; the vast



desert flatness stretching to the horizon, hour after hour with seldom a vehicle; the brilliant reddish-purple desert dawns silhouetting scraggly excuses for trees; the occasional eagle looking up from its feast of road-kill kangaroo.

It was a sunny day in May 1986 when we unloaded our cars from the train in “Alice,” as Australians call their famous Red Centre town. We were feeling really upbeat, thanking God for being alive. I would lead the way in our 4WD diesel-powered Holden Jackaroo (a rebadged Isuzu Trooper) with our 11-year-old daughter Lisa in the front. My wife would follow in our small sedan, accompanied by our 14-year-old daughter Lara. The Northern Territory, the closest thing to

an unspoilt “frontier” state in this wonderful country, had no speed limits. Normally I would have wanted to cruise that long, straight traffic-sparse highway as fast as the Jackaroo would want to go. But I thought that this time, being in convoy, I would use the vehicle’s hand throttle to keep its speed constant at a relatively staid 70 mph (110 kph).

The first hour or so rolled by, mile after mile of highway with nothing but flat sandy desert on either side, as far as the eye could see. It was the early afternoon, and my neck was aching a little from an old whiplash injury. Lisa was whiling away the time with some toys on her lap. I asked her to put a pillow behind my neck, and half-jokingly told her to wake me up if I started to seem drowsy.

The rest of my family, in the car behind me, saw the whole horror. A large fuel tanker was coming the other way,



*The wrecked vehicle in an Alice Springs salvage yard, in the same position as after the accident, resting on the driver’s side. The roof is still peeled back where it was cut open to extract the driver, several hours after the impact.*

in contrast to this road's normal loneliness, at 45 mph (70 kph). They saw the Jackaroo drift directly into its path. The police later told them that I must have fallen momentarily asleep. Had I nodded off a split second before or after, there would have been nothing to collide with. No other vehicles for miles in either direction. No ditches, no utility poles, no trees to speak of.

The fuel tanker driver, I was told later, tried to swerve out of the way, but the Jackaroo hurtled headlong into the massive vehicle, just off center. The tanker rolled over three times. The tanker had a huge weight advantage, and its driver, who was walking around immediately afterward, apparently only suffered minor injury. My vehicle flipped on its side, then spun around. In a split second, the one-year-old car had been converted into about \$200 worth of scrap.



*The underneath shows the solid chassis members of this small truck buckled under the force of collision with the much heavier vehicle, at a combined speed of 110 mph (180 kph).*



*The interior of the driver's compartment*

Almost all trucks on Australia's major highways are fitted with large "bull bars" to deflect passing "roos" and avoid damage, even when impacting stray cattle. The Jackaroo had one of these too, a massive steel construction that was now twisted back to be, on the driver's side, only about three

inches from the windshield. Photos afterward also showed that the vehicle's solid steel chassis members had buckled into "z" shapes from absorbing so much of the thunderous impact.

With all that grinding, sparking metal and thousands of gallons of fuel sloshing over the road around the car, instant incineration seemed natural to expect. Mercifully, though, both vehicles were diesel-powered — and the fuel carried by the tanker was diesel, too, which doesn't ignite readily.

### *Mercy in the Midst of Disaster*

With the wreck lying on its side, Lisa's passenger seat was now on top. After the side window above her frightened