

COPING WITH A WHIM AND A HESITANT VOICE

By J B Leftwich

There it was, on the internet, the address and telephone number of Buster L. Nackerson, my old classmate in high school, and sometimes buddy during those halcyon days in the long forgotten 'Thirties

On a whim, I picked up the phone and called old Buster and immediately got a weakened voice, distinctly marking an elderly man. And immediately, I regretted calling. I remembered Buster, whom I saw last at graduation, as a robust, dashing athlete.

Our coach eyed Buster with envy, but never was able to get him in uniform. He could shoot better than any member of our basketball team and run faster than any halfback. But Buster played only Future Farmer basketball because games for this B-team sport were scheduled during Agriculture class periods, before the school bus left the campus. Buster came from an area of the county where boys were expected to be at home to do the chores.

"Hello," the voice said.

"Hello, Buster, this is J B," I said.

"Who?" asked the voice.

I repeated my name, this time adding my last name.

"Oh," said the voice.

A little concerned that I had dialed a wrong number, I asked: "This Buster, isn't it?"

"Sure is," said Buster. "Who'd you say this is?"

I explained again, fully understanding Buster's puzzlement. Often, there is a delay between explanation and understanding when you're the age of Buster and me.

In Buster's case, I remembered, there always had been a slight delay. My good buddy, Fravel, often remarked: "There's not enough air in Buster's tires." Albeit, Buster was no honor student, he understand practical things and was well liked by members of our class.

"Remember in ag class when we decided to dock the lamb?" I reminisced.

Actually, what happened was Buster spent the night with me while we were studying in agriculture class how to prepare lambs for market. This included cutting off their tails. And, actually what happened, was nothing. We didn't dock the lamb because we lost our courage. The lamb was so pretty and cute that we turned it loose, tail untouched.

“Sure do,” said Buster.

“Well, tell me about yourself,” I said in an effort to keep the conversation alive.

Buster had not gone to college. Couldn't afford it and didn't want to. Thought it a waste of time. When World War II came along, he enlisted. Fought in Europe as a sergeant and got a battlefield promotion to lieutenant after most of his platoon became battle casualties. Came out as a captain winning a Purple Heart and a Silver Star. Returned home, got a job wiring houses, started his own business, invested and, if I judged the line of his report correctly, accumulated wealth.

The conversation lagged. Obviously, he didn't want my report.

“And your family?” I asked.

Buster ticked off five children, carefully detailing their credentials. Buster Jr. is a dentist. John got his Ph.D at Colgate and is teaching mathematics in a well known university. Susan is a lawyer, partner in a big firm in Dallas. Herman is a colonel in the army. Mike is a systems analyst of some sort. I didn't ask for further details about Mike. I just wanted to call Fravel and tell him that old Buster probably had more air in his tires than we had given him credit for having. Or a great talent for fiction.

Buster didn't ask about my kids, and I decided I wasn't going to win a family comparison contest.

I kept the conversation going a bit longer, but it was a monologue with me doing the talking.

Finally, I gave up.

“It was nice talking with you,” I said. “Glad to hear you have done so well.”

“Nice talking to you,” Buster said. Then he added:

“Who'd you say this is?”

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