



# Rosie

## A Tale of Redemption

inspired by my friend and his dog

by E.S. Kraay

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### Inspired by My Friend and his Dog

I met Carl in a bookstore.

Some people are flat out luckless. Makes no difference if they were born to royalty or if they were born to poverty. A luckless man is behind the count before he steps to the plate. Carl is a luckless man. He was not born to royalty. He was born to an addicted mother who earned what money she could from selling sexual favors, and all her income supported her habit.

Service in the Navy could have led to redemption, but it only intensified his growing addiction to alcohol, an addiction that became even stronger after a harrowing incident on the deck of an aircraft carrier led to PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder).

Carl left the service and made his way to Tucson via Denver and El Paso. During the journey, his luck improved when he befriended Rosie.

The bookstore is small, no bigger than a niche at Barnes & Noble. Stephen King is not among the authors whose books beckon browsers with the allure of Homer's sirens, but you can find titles by Richard Rohr, Joan Chittister, Anthony de Mello, Henri Nouwen and other spiritual writers. A typical day grosses less than \$100; a busy day exceeds \$500. The store is seldom busy. The music of John Michael Talbot, Tom Booth or maybe a Gregorian chant plays softly in the background. I find peace here among the books. My goal is to read every title. It will take me a few more years, but I will get there.

One November day as I worked my shift in the empty store, I looked up from the book I was reading when the door opened and ushered in a cold gust of wind and a potential customer. At first glance, I thought it was Jeff Bridges, the Dude, the Big Lebowski who walked in with shoulder length hair that framed a tanned face etched with deep lines. He nodded and strolled to the shelves in the back corner as if he knew exactly what he wanted. I soon understood that he was just another traveler like me, a guy come to buy books hoping that something he reads might bring him to greater understanding and a more meaningful life than the one he was living.

"Looking for a particular title?" I asked.

"Not really," he answered.

He browsed for an hour while we chatted about books – many of which we had both read – and things spiritual. His name was Carl. He claimed to be a third order Franciscan – something I knew nothing about – but later admitted he was not. "I almost made it," he said with a tone of remorse, but I couldn't clear all the hurdles."

As he paid for his books – over \$100 – he handed me his business card. It said 'Poverello House.'

"What's Poverello House?" I asked thinking it might be a restaurant.

"It's a house for homeless guys downtown. You should check it out. Nice meeting you." We shook hands and he left me alone in the bookstore. That is how I met Carl, and that is when I entered the world of homelessness. It is a world that most of us try to ignore and pretend does not exist. It does and much of it is not pretty.

Many of the men who frequent the Poverello House have been homeless for most of their lives. The shelters represent acceptable housing to them. They have become entrenched in homelessness and consider it a legitimate lifestyle free from responsibility. When I was a kid, we called them hobos. They were free-spirited and happy, like Red Skelton's famous Freddy the Freeloader. I don't think they are so happy today. Maybe they were kidding themselves, or maybe I was kidding myself.

The one thing I have learned about homeless men after spending time at the house and talking with the men is this: all homeless men smoke cigarettes; all homeless men have at least one unhealthy addiction in addition to cigarettes; and all homeless men have experienced one or more broken relationships. Carl fit the profile.

When Carl was a young boy, his family unit vanished before his innocent eyes, but the dissolution was no magic trick. His mother was an alcoholic, and one day, his father never came home. Count that as his first broken relationship. With no guidance beyond the example his drunken mother set, cigarettes and alcohol became the staples of life. Groceries were a discretionary expense. Booze first, cigarettes second – mandatory – then groceries ... maybe, but only if there was money left over, which there often wasn't. Income came from his mother's prostitution, and young Carl, not yet a teenager played the unlikely pimp.

The formula for failure was explicit and no one was there to divert his attention or to offer the guidance he desperately needed. His single effort to escape a life of regret by enlisting with the Navy failed when an accident on the flight deck of the USS Enterprise left him with PTSD. A quartet of failed marriages strengthened his need for alcohol. Liquor was the elixir that enabled him to battle the discouragement that continued to build around him. Like most alcoholics, he did not understand that his addiction would only make life worse.

He found his way to Denver where he opened a small café and a house where he rented rooms to men just like him who were trying to get sober, trying to wage the war but who lost too many battles.

The VA in Denver explained to Carl the potential relationship between his need for alcohol and PTSD. Still, like the men he rented rooms to, he was convinced he could get sober on his own and without help. His companion at the time was an old Cairn terrier who died and left him alone to the demons that were knocking at his door.

There were good days, but more bad days. As the bad days piled up, Carl called the animal rescue center in Denver and made a request for another Cairn terrier. He needed a friend. A fifth wife was not the solution.

The center called many times with potential companions, but no Cairns. Carl held his ground. It had to be a Cairn. Meanwhile, the bad days continued to accumulate and each one ended with an empty bottle and the promise of no relief.

If you have not been there, it is difficult to imagine the internal battle that rages over a man's soul, a man addicted to alcohol, yet who still maintains the courage and sanity to try to help guys caught in the same trap. The small home attached to the café became a flophouse for men just like Carl, men so far gone they gave up trying to find a way out.

Rosie was born in a shelter. She is a mutt, an odd cross between a Shar Pei and a pit bull. at least that is what the agency in Denver told Carl when he adopted her in 2003. She lacks a Shar Pei's wrinkles and is short and squat. Her rust colored coat is short. The agency named her Rosie because her toenails have a rose tint, almost like nail polish.

The only difference between a homeless man and a homeless dog is the fact that the homeless dog will die on the street with absolute certainty. Ten thousand babies are born every day along with 70,000 puppies and kittens. Sadly, four of five dogs and cats are abandoned to the streets or to shelters and nearly 60% of those are killed.

Those were the odds that Rosie faced the day she took her first breath. She too was a luckless creature born into poverty.

"Carl, you gotta come down and see this dog. Her name is Rosie ..."

"Is she a Cairn?"

"No, but ..."

"If she ain't a Cairn, I don't need to see her." Silence. Any other day, Carl would have hung up the phone, but this day, he waited. He didn't know why, but he waited for the caller to talk him into seeing the dog. She didn't respond, willing to let the silence build to a deafening roar.

"Alright," Carl said, "I'll come down."

The dog was small and the cage, dark. He could not get a good look at her.

"She's shy and skittish," the helper explained. "She comes from a place where they raise fighting dogs. She's only a couple months old, but she's been abused just like her parents and her siblings. She doesn't have a good pedigree, but I know you will like her. She won't go to anybody, but let's see what happens." She tentatively opened the crate and backed away with a gut feeling that Rosie and Carl had something in common.

When the small nose appeared at the opening, Carl dropped to his haunches and extended an open hand. He laughed as she awkwardly waddled up to him and sniffed his fingers.

"This is the cutest, freakin' dog I've ever seen in my life. She looks like she just came down from a shelf in a toy store," he exclaimed. The puppy licked his fingers and lifted her head.

Everybody loved Rosie. She quickly became the house mascot, and the careworn men who rented rooms began referring to the place as 'Rosie's House.' However, the struggling man who rented the rooms was relapsing and having more and more difficulty managing his unmanageable drinking.

Rosie grew up as a caregiver to homeless men in a homeless world and she was smart enough to avoid trouble when it brewed. While Carl cooked and managed the café, Rosie spent her time in his office.

Late one night while Carl sweated over a stack of dirty dishes in the scullery, one of the tenants wandered into the empty and closed but unlocked café. He was drunk and stumbled forward with his head lowered and his hands in his coat pockets. As he made his way around the counter, Rosie growled a warning to her friend, Carl.

“How’s it goin’, Edward,” he said as he wiped his wet hands on his dirty apron. “You ain’t supposed to be back here, you know.” Carl saw Rosie take a step out of the office down the hall. “Get back there,” he scolded her in a friendly way. She back-pedaled and found her place on the rug, ever watchful and uncomfortable with the evolving situation.

With glazed eyes, Edward mumbled, “I need some money.”

Carl turned away from the dishes and said, “How much money you need, Edward? You are already a month late in your rent, but I can help you out. How much money you need?”

An evil grin crept across the drunk’s unshaven face. “How much money you got?”

Carl smiled. “Look here, Edward. I’m willin’ to help you out, but how much money I got in that cashbox ain’t hardly your business. What do you need? A couple bucks for a pack of smokes? I’ll give you that.”

“Ain’t enough,” Edward replied with spittle dripping down his chin. “Need more’n a smoke. Need it all.” He pulled his arms from his pockets and waved a switchblade at eye level. “Need it all.”

Rosie recognized the danger as Edward stepped toward Carl. She exploded from the office, leapt as high as her short legs could take her and sunk her teeth into Edward’s hamstring. Edward howled like a wounded animal.

Carl quickly seized Edward’s wrist as the drunk’s arm swung downward to free himself from the little dog that caused him such excruciating pain. He stopped short of breaking Edward’s wrist but forced him to drop the knife. He twisted Edward’s arm behind his back and shoved him face first into the wall.

“Down, Rosie!” he sternly commanded. “Get back in there.” Rosie released her grip and trotted back to the office, growling her troll-like growl with every step.

Carl struggled to resist his primeval instinct to break Edward’s arm. He wanted more than anything to beat this man up. He despised any human that would intentionally hurt an animal. He leaned forward and hissed into his ear, “Walk out the door, Edward. I don’t care to see you again. Consider last month’s rent on me. Good luck with your life.”

Edward wept as Carl walked him to the door with his arm pinned to his back. “I didn’t mean nothin’ by it, Carl. I swear, but that mutt of your just took a piece o’ my leg.”

Carl wasted no more words and waited silently until Edward disappeared into the darkness. After he locked up, Carl returned to his room and finished an open bottle of Jim Beam.

An early knock on his door woke Carl up. He peered through the peephole on the door. The Sheriff waited outside with Edward. He directed Rosie to the closet. “You stay here and be quiet. Understand? You have to be quiet.” Rosie didn’t understand but sensed danger by the tone of her friend’s voice. She would be quiet.

“Good mornin’, Sheriff. Mornin’, Edward. Café won’t open for another hour or so.”

“We’re not here for coffee and donuts, Carl. Edward here claims your dog took a piece of his leg last night. That true?”

Carl, looked passed the Sheriff. Edward leaned forward on his crutches, grimaced and said, "Mornin', Carl."

"That's right, sheriff. My dog bit Edward. He came in here drunk last night and pulled his switchblade, not to clean his fingernails, though he could have put it to better use had he done that."

"You got a switchblade, Edward?" the Sheriff said over his shoulder.

"Nope, ain't got no switchblade, Sheriff."

The Sheriff crossed his arms and rested them on his fat belly. "I'll need to see the dog, Carl."

"Ain't here. After his scrap with Edward, she ran out of here and I ain't seen her since. Good riddance to that worthless mutt is what I say."

"Fair enough, but I'll be sending an animal control officer here to search the place and get a description. Can't be havin' a biter out on the streets. There's plenty of them runnin' wild already. You can expect someone to stop by later this morning.

"What about it, Edward? You gonna press charges."

Edward eyed Carl. "Naw, I ain't pressin' charges against him. Just the dog."

The Sheriff rolled his eyes at Carl. "Be seein' you, Carl when Edward files charges 'against the dog.'"

Carl waited on the front step and waved as the police car drove away. When he released Rosie from the closet, he dropped to his knees and the little dog licked his face while he gently stroked her back. "What are we gonna do, Rosie? I know you meant well, but it was the wrong thing to do."

He pulled the final pint of Jim Beam, the emergency bottle from his bottom desk drawer and took a long draught that burned his raw throat. He shook his head as if he could clear it, took another swallow and opened his cash drawer and lock box where he kept all of his money. He counted it twice, and each time came up with just under \$3,000 cash. He had no credit cards or bank accounts. His life and business were cash only. That was his total worth after opening the café and leasing rooms for nearly four years, three thousand dollars.

He looked at Rosie and patted her head. "What are we gonna do, Rosie?" She licked his hand. He figured that the bank would foreclose the small mortgage on the café and house if he just up and left. It wasn't more than a shanty anyway with little equity to speak of. Would the police try to catch up with a worthless drunk man and his little dog? He doubted it and concluded it was time for them to leave.

Carl filled his Navy duffle bag with the few clothes he had and tossed it into his rusted van. He packed a cardboard box with two plates, two dishes, two cups and two sets of utensils. He didn't need much. He didn't have much. Rosie's red water bowl and blue food dish were the last two items.

"Time to leave, Rosie." She jumped into the van and they headed south on I-25, destination unknown.

They drove through Colorado Springs, through Pueblo and Trinidad and on into New Mexico ... past Santa Fe, then Albuquerque, Truth or Consequences and Las Cruces. As the sun set over the desert they were rolling down I-10 and approaching El Paso. Tired and hungry, Carl pulled into the Cam lot Inn. The 'e' was not illuminated on the blinking neon sign.

From the looks of the place and the price -- \$29.95 a night -- Carl didn't bother to ask the clerk if it was okay for Rosie to stay in the room.

"Where can a guy get a drink and a burger?" he asked when he got his room key.

The kid at the front desk who was trying to hide his pimples with a thin and scraggly beard looked up from solitaire game and said, "I guess you ain't lookin' for a Burger King."

"Not unless you got a Burger King around here that sells whiskey."

The kid feigned a laugh. "Your room's out back. On the other side of the fence is a place called the 'Shangri La.' They got whiskey, beer and steak sandwiches. You play cards?"

"Now and then."

"They got cards in the back. Just tell them Red said it was okay."

"You Red?" The boy nodded. "But your hair is black. Why they call you Red?"

"Pimples."

"Sorry, kid."

After moving his gear into the small room and throwing some water on his face, Carl filled Rosie's red bowl with water from the rusted faucet in the tiny bathroom and filled the blue bowl with food.

"I'll be back. No barking."

Within a week, Carl was a regular at the Shangri La. In fact, he was spending most of his waking hours in the bar, and he was making money in the card games at night in the back room. On the third night, he brought Rosie with him. "Anybody got a problem with my dog?" No one did and Rosie became every customer's best friend.

"I like that dog," the proprietor said. His name was Sneaky Pete because he ran the card games without interference from the law. "Tell you what Carl, I got an unused mobile home out back that I'd be willin' to rent you for a lot less than you're payin' next door. You plannin' on movin' on soon? If you ain't, you might want to consider it. It ain't no mansion, but it'll give you more room and privacy than what you got now."

With no destination in mind, Carl took the offer and he and Rosie moved in and cleaned the place up. The days turned into weeks. When a man sleeps late, drinks much and eats little, relapse is as certain as the rising sun. His gambling luck started to go south and Carl was forced to keep a closer eye on his dwindling resources.

As Christmas approached, the three thousand dollars he had in his pocket when he left Denver had dwindled to just short of \$500. If his luck improved, he could make it through the winter. If not, January was certain to be a cold month.

His luck didn't improve, so he asked Sneaky Pete if he could work a few hours each week tending bar. Pete said okay, but when the booze Carl drank exceeded the booze he sold, Pete said it was time to make other arrangements.

"I'll let you work one more night, Carl 'cause you're a decent man and I like your dog a lot. It's Christmas Eve and me and the Missus'll be goin' 'cross town to spend the night with the grandkids. They're three and five years old. It's a good age for a kid to be at Christmas time. I 'spect it'll be slow. If it is, you can close up early. Whatever you decide is fine. I ain't gonna open up 'til the day after Christmas." Carl thought about his own grandkids. He didn't even know their names. He painfully wondered what their Christmas would be like.

“Merry Christmas, Carl.”

“Yeh, Pete,” Carl mumbled. “Merry Christmas to you, too.”

After the lunch crowd dispersed, Sneaky Pete departed with his wife as promised and left Carl and Rosie to close up whenever the time was right. A handful of regulars stopped by for a drink. Chief – who claimed to be an Apache – brought Rosie a bone he picked up at the butcher shop as a special gift for the dog.

“Ain’t got nothing for you, Carl, but I got this bone for the dog. Merry Christmas to both of you.”

A homeless man came in and asked for a drink.

“You got money?” Carl asked.

“Ain’t got no money, man, but I’d sure like a drink.”

Carl shook his head and waved him to the bar. He poured him a shot.

“Thanks, man. What you drinkin’?”

Carl raised his coffee cup. “Java. Black with nothin’ in it.”

The homeless man laughed. “How about sharin’ a drink with me?”

Hung over when he woke up that morning, Carl promised himself he would drink only coffee while he worked his final shift for Sneaky Pete, but when the homeless man invited him to have a drink, his will power collapsed. The two finished a pint of Wild Turkey as the evening shadows grew long.

Carl pulled a bottle of Midnight Express from the shelf. “Here, buddy. For you. Merry Christmas. You have to be leaving now ‘cause I’ll be shutting this place down for the night.”

The homeless man gave Carl a firm hug and left with his bottle.

Carl and Rosie sat alone in the silent bar for two more hours. The skinny Christmas tree Sneaky Pete put up in the corner and the single, white candle beneath the neon Miller High Life sign in the window cast their dim light into the room and the mirror behind the bar reflected it to create a surreal image as it silhouetted Carl slumped over his empty bottle of Jack Daniel’s. His head hurt, but not from noise. It was going on 8 o’clock and the streets were quiet.

He locked the cash register and when he stooped low behind the counter to hang the key in its secret place, his eyes focused on Sneaky Pete’s pistol. “Just in case,” Pete told him when he first revealed it. “Just in case.”

Carl had weapons experience from his time in the Navy. He placed the gun on the bar and stared at it. The barrel was black and smooth. He hefted its weight. Bullets stared at him from the cylinder like the eyes of a spider taunting its prey.

His thoughts drifted to another Christmas Eve long ago. “Not now,” his mother’s drunken voice chanted from the depth of his mind. “Not now,” she said. There was always later. He saw her slumped in the corner, a bottle in one hand, a gun in the other. He was only 8-years old and shivered violently. It was cold outside and they had no heat. His mother was wrong. Later was never good enough. It had to be now.

He cleared the overflowing ashtray from the top of the bar with a violent swipe of his arm. It shattered on the concrete behind the bar and the sound of tinkling shards lasted forever. He raised the gun barrel to his forehead and squeezed his eyes tightly as he began to apply pressure to the trigger. The hammer eased back slowly and as it did, Rosie softly whimpered.

Carl opened his eyes and relieved the pressure on the trigger. The hammer returned to its closed position.

At the base of Sneaky Pete's Christmas tree was a manger with a star on its roof. Rosie whimpered again. She lay in front of the manger with her head resting on her front legs. She was sad and frightened, not for herself but for her companion. She whined again, so softly that it was barely audible above the electric buzz from the neon Miller High Life sign.

Carl turned toward Rosie. Tears welled up in his bloodshot eyes and he slowly lowered the weapon. "Who'll take care of you, girl?" he said aloud. He returned the gun to its hiding place and walked around the bar. He dropped to his knees and sobbed "Who'll take care of you, girl?"

Rosie knew he was talking to her and her tail began to wag. "Come here, Rosie." He waved her to him and Rosie raced across the wooden floor and leapt into his arms licking the tears from his troubled face until Carl could smile again.

"I love you, Rosie and I will never leave you. Ever."

Carl left a note in the cash register. "Thanks for the chance, Pete. You are a good man. Time for me and Rosie to move on." He decided to leave the Christmas tree and the candle plugged in and their reflection twinkled in the empty bottle of Jack that remained a silent sentinel on the bar. His eyes were drawn to the manger and he whispered, "Thank you." He turned back and stared at the bottle a final time. He smiled to himself as he and Rosie walked out, packed the van and headed west on the empty highway.

It's been seven years since that night when Carl would have taken his own life had a little dog named Rosie not been with him. Carl has not had a drink since that Christmas Eve in 2008 when Rosie saved his life. The strength of a rescue dog isn't that a man rescues the dog from probable euthanasia at the pound. The strength of a rescue dog is that the dog becomes a lifelong companion who rescues the person who rescued her. The rescued becomes the rescuer who releases his companion from depression and melancholy, and even from alcoholism and suicide.

Carl and Rosie made a home in Tucson when they arrived on New Year's Day in 2009. The next morning, Carl attended his first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. Rosie at the manger that fateful night had aroused Carl's latent spirituality and he was drawn to attend a retreat sponsored by Franciscans. For the next six years, Carl and Rosie served together as managers of Poverello House, a hospitality house for homeless men. Today, they remain closely involved helping the homeless and alcoholic communities in Tucson.

Coda .... Something you should know ...

- Only one out of every 10 dogs born will find a permanent home.
- The main reasons animals are in shelters: owners give them up, or animal control finds them on the street.

- Homeless animals outnumber homeless people 5 to 1.