



Text Version of Audio Story: Hook

I figured I would arrive in Cleveland about 7 o'clock that evening. I had a speaking engagement there the next day at noon. I drove about an hour from my home to where I could pick up Interstate 80, westbound for the Ohio line. It was pouring down rain.

As I merged onto the highway, I could see it coming through the fog and mist — the rumble of diesel and 18 wheels. From both sides of the cab flew a flag, in tandem, it was Old Glory flying from a Peterbilt. I followed him some 80 miles, finally stopping when he did, at a truck stop. I watched as he climbed down out of the cab. I realized instantly he had a disability. I put out my hand and he put out his, a prosthetic, mechanical clamp if you will. I handed him my card and asked if we could talk. He laughed and said, *"I guess that means you're buying lunch."* It was as if we were old friends.

My first thought was a Vietnam veteran. I was correct in my assumption. Besides a prosthetic forearm, Donald has a prosthetic leg. His truck is set up especially for him. He didn't have to go to Vietnam, you know. He was an only son and, moreover, he was a son of a soldier who died in the service of his country during the Korean War. And, as if that wasn't enough, he was the grandson of a soldier who likewise was killed in action somewhere over there in World War II. Donald was excused from the draft. So instead, he enlisted.

"I didn't just start flying flags on my trucks after September 11th. I've been flying them for 20 years. Not to love them, not to appreciate everything they stand for, would — it would be like saying everything we gave, we gave for nothing. It would be like saying I grew up without my grandfather for no-good reason. It would be like saying I lost my daddy as a little boy for no-good reason. It would mean that I left my leg and my arm in a jungle in Southeast Asia for no reason." He continued, *"My son Jeremy is now overseas with the U.S. Army. I fly those flags for him, too."*

It was, ironically, the day after Veterans Day 2002 when I met Donald. Donald remembered coming home to fellow citizens who despised him and called him names.

"They weren't very nice to me."

And, yet, in spite of that, in spite of all he has given, he wanted to make it very clear that if called upon by his country, he would put himself in harm's way again. He told me he would be willing to give his other arm, his other leg, for those flags flying from his Peterbilt. What my new friend, Donald, doesn't realize, he thinks it's all about those flags. If he knows, he's too humble to admit it — he is the flag. We shook hands, and he crawled back into his cab. He gave me a big smile and blast from the air horn. And soon enough, he found himself in a pack of trucks, eager to make up the time he lost talking to me. And somewhere up there in the distance, in the mist and the rain, an American hero slipped into the fog.

Donald reminded me of how incredibly lucky I am to be an American. He reminded me of how easily I forget and slide back into that place where I complain about every little thing that doesn't really matter in that place where I take things for granted. I had to give so little, if anything at all, for all I enjoy as an American. I don't find great stories, great stories find me. I've met a lot of people in this business, but I'll never forget the hook I shook.

From somewhere behind the radio with the music of Johnny X, I'm the American Storyteller.