

# REDEMPTION GATEWAY BUILDING NARRATIVE

BY LUKE SIMMONS

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The garage door opened and the car pulled into the driveway.

“So, this is your place, huh?” asked Gary. “Looks great. Man, it’s so great to catch up.”

“Yeah,” replied Mark. “It’s been too long though. Feels like yesterday we were throwing Frisbees around the Quad and now we’re all grown up.”

Mark closed the garage door and the guys went into the house.

“Emily!”

“Gary! So good to see you.”

“You look great, Em. Haven’t changed a bit,” Mark exclaimed.

“Kind of you to say,” Emily replied. “Wish I felt like that. Remember the days when we had energy?”

“Yeah, those were the days,” Gary said. “Are the munchkins around?”

“No,” said Emily, “They went to bed a little while ago. They’re excited to meet you though. You’re pretty famous around here.”

“Yeah,” laughed Mark, “they sure like to hear ‘Gary’ stories. I spare them some of the gory details.”

“Good to know,” said Gary. “Maybe we’ll create some new stories this week. Speaking of which, what do you have on tap for us to do?”

“Mostly I just want to hang out and have some fun,” answered Mark. “But I do have a few places to take you. A few good restaurants and some of our favorite spots.”

“Nice,” replied Gary. “I want the authentic experience. I can go to Chipotle and Olive Garden anywhere.”

“No kidding,” replied Mark. “And there’s plenty of cookie-cutter stuff around here. Sometimes it feels like that’s all there is. When we first moved here, we’d drive around and get confused because every corner had a Walgreens on it. We always thought we were lost. But we’ve found some of the best kept secrets and we’ll show you around.”

“Cool. Tell me about some of these places,” inquired Gary.

Mark began, “Well, I was thinking tomorrow morning we’d head over to this place called the Olive Mill to have breakfast—it’s a great spot with lots of space to hang outside, and they make a serious olive oil waffle. Then we can go for a hike over at San Tan Mountain to work off breakfast and enjoy the sun. From there I figured we could play it by ear.”

“Sounds like a plan,” said Gary.

Mark, Emily and Gary spent the next hour drinking wine and catching up. After lots of laughs and a few closely timed yawns, Gary decided it was time to turn in.

“I need some beauty rest,” Gary yawned.

“You sure do, Big Ugly,” jabbed Mark.

“Very funny. Seriously, though, it’s great to be here. See you in the morning.”

The next morning everyone was up early—Gary from the time zone change, Mark and Emily from the excitement of hanging with their old friend and the kids, eager to meet Gary and hear his stories.

Gary and Mark relived a few of the kids’ favorite stories and then departed for the Olive Mill. Breakfast was as good as advertised and their hike helped them feel a bit less guilty about it. They headed home, played in the pool with the kids, and ate sandwiches outside before everyone sensed a nap was in order.

Once the afternoon coma was over and everyone was awake, Gary asked, “So what’s going on for tonight?”

“Well,” answered Mark, “I thought we’d all go to one of our favorite restaurants—Joe’s Farm Grill. It’s this cool place that used to be a guy’s house and now is a restaurant with big trees and lots of space for the kids to run around. There’s even a coffee shop next door if that jet lag is still getting the best of you.”

“Man,” Gary said, “I’m getting the royal treatment.”

“Only the best. I think if we leave in the next thirty minutes or so we should make it before the rush gets crazy.”

Everyone showered, changed and piled in the car, Gary being sure to give his new, small best friends a hard time as they buckled up.

“Hey, there’s a place I want to stop by and show you on the way,” Mark said as he pulled out of the neighborhood.

“Where’s that?”

“Our church.”

Gary's jaw dropped. "Your church? Since when do you go to church?"

"Yeah, sometimes I can't believe it either," Mark answered. "Never really thought of myself as the church type—still don't, really. But I like our church."

Gary, still in disbelief, said, "So when did this start?"

"Well, I guess it was about six months ago. This friend of Emily's from work invited her to come to church. I wasn't too interested, so she went the first time without me."

"Way to support your wife, bro," Gary teased.

Emily chimed in, "I was fine with it. It's not like that had really been part of our life much. But I still wanted to go. I've always thought that it would be a good idea to take our kids to church. I used to love going with my grandpa when I was a kid."

"I figured she'd go and discover why church is as boring as I remember from the few times I went as a kid. But she came back excited and thought I should give it a try. So we went back the next week."

"Man," Gary sighed, "I still can't get over the idea that you go to church. Crazy."

"I know," Mark said. "I went that next week totally skeptical. But when we pulled in, it felt different than I expected. People were friendly and Emily's friend introduced me to some people. The music was definitely not what I expected—it was actually good. I didn't know any of the words but it seemed like people were really into it. Then the pastor got up and taught a lesson from the Bible. He talked in a way that made sense and it was the first time in my life I ever looked at a Bible and kind of understood it. I didn't fully buy everything he was saying, but he made me think about what he was saying. It all went faster than I remembered and our kids had a great time."

"So just like that you became religious?" asked Gary.

"Not really," answered Mark. "I remember we got in the car and just kind of looked at each other. It was like we were both wondering what the other was thinking."

Emily laughed. "Yeah, I remember leaning over and saying, 'So ...'"

"And I told her I liked it more than I expected and that I'd be willing to go back if it's what she wanted," explained Mark. "So we kept coming back."

Just then, Mark slowed down and flipped on his left blinker. "Well, here we are."

The van pulled in and Mark had his pick of parking spots.

"Huh," said Gary. "This is a pretty cool place. Not what I expected either."

“I know,” replied Mark. “It’s not like all the cookie-cutter stuff we drive by. It feels different.”

The kids got out of the van and ran as fast as they could to the open space where they usually ran around after service. Their game of tag picked up right where it left off.

Mark, Gary, and Emily slowly walked around the church campus.

“See what I mean?” asked Mark. “This is kind of a cool place to see.”

“Yeah, I love the trees,” Gary said. “Haven’t seen too many of those since I’ve been here.”

As hard as Gary tried to just walk around and enjoy the scenery, the questions kept gnawing at him. *My college buddy is a choir boy now? What in the world? Why?* Finally, he couldn’t hold it in.

“So, Mark, I have to be honest. This is one of the biggest shocks of my life. I can’t believe that you go to church. It’s a little concerning, really. I mean, I’m happy it works for you, but I just thought you of all people wouldn’t get swept up into some kind of religion.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mark answered. “To be honest, I’m not totally sure where I land on all of it. I mean, the more I read the Bible the more I see some stuff that’s pretty hard to believe. But this church is always talking about Jesus—they always say, ‘all of life is all for Jesus’—and I have to say that he’s is pretty intriguing to me. I’m not even sure what I think about all of it and I’m definitely not swept up in some religion. But these people keep talking about a relationship with Jesus and that always makes me think. We’ve met some great people who really seem to care about us even though we don’t really know them. It makes me wonder ... maybe these people are right about Jesus. Maybe he is more than just a good teacher. I’m not sure, but I do know that it’s done some good things for our family. Anyway, just thought you’d like this place ... and get a kick out of the fact that ‘Michelob Mark’ goes to church.”

“Hopefully I’ll be able to pull my jaw off the ground and use it for dinner.”

Emily laughed. “Kids, we’re leaving in two minutes! Gary has some funny stories to tell you over dinner.”