

Starting From Nothing

written by
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alone

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Characters (in order of appearance)

C is our male lead

W is our female lead

SM is the seat mate on the first bus

S is C's supervisor on Independent Farm

M is the mentor

B is C's Boss, the restaurateur

L is the librarian

SC is the sous chef / old dishwasher at restaurant where C works

F is the farmer

V is the competing vendor

R is the regulator

D is the seller of C's new building.

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Chapter 1 Released

Ignoring the sun glaring over the prison walls, C finished his workout and wiped the sweat off his face. As he walked back to his cell, some inmates said goodbye and wished him good luck. Others asked him to send them money when he got a job. C slept well knowing he would be released after this last night in jail.

The next morning, wearing his own clothes for the first time in three years, C was led to the discharge room to get his other personal possessions. The clerk handed them to him in a shopping bag from a Publix grocery store.

C checked his phone. It had no service, of course, since he hadn't paid a phone bill in three years. He checked everything in the bag then complained to the clerk.

C, "Hey. There's only 22 bucks in my wallet. There was \$200 in my wallet when I was arrested!"

The bored clerk said, "Yeah. Yeah.", lifted up a form on a clipboard and pointed at the signature, "You signed the inventory of your possessions. The inventory says there was \$22 in the wallet."

C scowled, but couldn't do anything about it, saying only "But... But...Oh, forget it."

The clerk continued in his bored, flat voice, "The state will pay for bus transportation TODAY to any bus depot you wish IF you leave this city on a bus TODAY."

C studied the bus schedule, then said, "I'll go to NewCity. I don't know anyone in NewCity. But hey, I have no home here to go to anyway. I'm starting from nothing. I don't even have the money that was in my wallet when I was arrested on bogus charges!"

Clerk, "Too bad. So sad. To go to NewCity you will change busses twice. Here are your three tickets, all are good TODAY only."

C, "Can I have a few of those index cards?"

The clerk ignored the request.

C, "Come on. A few little index cards."

After making him beg, the clerk finally gave C half a dozen index cards chuckling as he said, "Here you go. Now you're starting with something."

C, sarcastically "Thanks."

C left the jail and walked four miles to the bus depot, carrying the Publix bag holding all his worldly possessions.

C was the last one to climb on his bus. The only seat open was next to a man saying a rosary. C looked desperately for another empty seat. There was no option but sit next to the weirdo. C sat down and turned away from the guy. They rode for a couple

hours without saying a word, though C eventually did turn to sit without his back to the guy.

As they passed another small town, his seat mate took out a large lunch. It had two sandwiches, two drinks, two bags of chips, two candy bars. C's mouth watered at the sight, but he said nothing. Then, of all things, the guy prayed, "In the name of the Father ... Bless us O Lord ...". C rolled his eyes. Then the guy turned to C and said, "Would you like half? You see, I figure, if my seat mate is not hungry, I'll eat the second meal for dinner. If my seat mate is hungry, I'll share my food and buy a dinner." C couldn't resist. He had to accept the offer. As he took his third quick bite, he didn't regret eating at all. The guy said, "Not too many people travel with a Publix bag as their luggage."

C, "Yeah well I just got out of jail. So, maybe you shouldn't talk to me. This stuff is everything I have in the world. I'm starting from nothing."

SM "With all due respect, You have a human brain. That means you can do amazing things. After all, you are a beloved child of God."

C wrote on an index card, "I have a human brain. I can do amazing things."

SM, "Excellent idea. Writing something down helps you remember it. And they can't take what's in your head. I learned that one from a Jew. You see, for centuries people have attacked Jews and taken their farms, their homes, their paintings, etc. So, Jews put a big emphasis on education because ... 'They can't take what's in your head.'"

C wrote on another card, "They can't take what's in your head."

When they rolled into a bus depot for C's first of two transfers in his three bus trip to NewCity, C rose to get off. He turned to his seat mate, said goodbye and thanked him for the lunch.

The guy stayed seated but said "We'll never meet again in this life so, let me say, I'll see you in heaven." They shook hands and C got off the bus alone.

Chapter 2 C meets W

Walking into the bus station, C saw a food court. He eyed the menus hungrily, but didn't dare spend any of what little money he had for food today. Maybe tomorrow. The seating area was crowded. He finally spotted a table for two with only one of the chairs occupied. Why not ask to join the woman at that table? The worse that could happen is that she would say no.

Moving the empty chair an inch, C said "May I join you?"

The woman barely looked up and said wearily, "Sure. Whatever,"

As he sat, C was amazed to see she had a black eye. Looking more closely, he noticed bruises on her arms. She looked emaciated, as if she hadn't eaten in a week. She was also exhausted; a worn out, haggard wreck. As he gazed at her, she made an obvious effort, sat up straight, smiled and said, "Hi! My name is W. Do you date?"

Confused, C could only manage, "What?"

She had immediately slumped a little, but again made a visible effort to sit up straight, smile and ask, "Do you date?"

C finally understood what she was asking. Having neither time nor money for such a transaction, he replied, "No thank you. Don't tell me you worked last night looking like that!"

Defiance showing in her eyes, she heatedly replied, "Yes, I did! I had a good, profitable night too! But don't try anything! My, uh, boyfriend will be here any minute to pick up me and the cash.

C, "You had a good, profitable night and still have the cash!?"

W. "Yeah, but you'll never see it. Try anything and I'll scream!"

C, "Relax, I don't steal. I EARN my money." C leaned back in his chair, making a show of being very relaxed.

She went, "hmpf" and folded her arms. They sat in silence for a while.

C "Why don't you leave? Get on a bus and go? You have the cash from 'a good, profitable night'."

She replied "I would be starting from nothing."

C "Could your life be any worse? You could go to a brand new city, start from nothing and have a great life. You've already proven you have what it takes to succeed." W looked puzzled. He explained, "The life you've been living is a hard life. You have proven yourself willing to do difficult things when necessary. That's an important ingredient for success."

She did not respond, but sat quietly, watching for her "boyfriend".

C continued, "I'm going to NewCity. I'll change busses twice. You could buy a ticket just to the next stop. Then buy a separate ticket to NewCity. Use fake names, pay cash, and your 'boyfriend' will never know where you went."

More silence.

C "We can save money by sharing a room."

She pointed at him, "Aha! You just want what all men want."

C "Frankly, from where I sit, you are a whole buffet of diseases I could catch. So, not interested. Look, \$22 is all the money I have in the world. We are both starting from nothing. I just figure we can help each other. I'll try to help you and I hope you'll help me. You can start a whole new, successful life."

She thought quietly a long while.

She assessed C's muscular build then asked quietly, "Will you protect me?"

C "Yes. And I will NOT hurt you. I already have my tickets, including changing buses. So I'm about to disappear from this town. You can disappear too."

She was intrigued, "You're not trying to get me to pay for your ticket?"

C, "No! No! C quickly pulled the tickets from his pocket, "See I already have my tickets. You can come with me to NewCity or go anywhere you want. You decide. But seriously, you have the chance for a whole new life."

She offered, "OK. Tell you what. I will go with you to NewCity and I'll pay for our room tonight IF you let me hold the \$22 you have on you until we arrive in NewCity."

C was incredulous, "What!?"

W calmly continued, "Show you trust me. Then I will trust you."

C grunted five different ways, but having someone pay for a room sounded a lot better than sleeping on the street, so the grunting finally gave way to, "Alright! You can hold \$20 of my \$22 AFTER you buy your tickets!" He would worry about getting a room for tomorrow night tomorrow night.

Chapter 3 Rats

As C & W walked off the bus in NewCity, they simultaneously said, “I am starting from nothing.” This provoked laughter and an offer to pinkie swear from W. C was bemused, but went along. It was the first time he ever saw W smile. Her smile was delightful, but did not make him forget to get his \$20 back.

True to her word, W found and paid for a motel room for them. C specifically requested twin beds. As they entered the room W exclaimed, “I promised I would pay for our room tonight. I’ve done it. From now on I live my life the way I want to live it. I make my own choices.”

C said, “Thank you for tonight’s room. Tomorrow morning you are free to separate from me any time you want. I’m free to separate from you any time I want. I don’t have anything to unpack so, tell you what. You take a shower while I try to get us some dinner.”

C smiled when he heard W double lock the door as he left the room. It worried him for a moment, but then his promise of dinner gave her a good reason to let him back in. Wandering through the alleys behind restaurants, C searched the dumpsters for something to eat. He finally found some edible food that the rats had not gotten to yet. He even found a couple napkins. He hastily ate it all. With his immediate hunger eased, he continued the search. Finally he hit gold, finding two closed take home containers with untouched dinners inside.

Arriving with the food back at the motel, C knocked on the door. W quickly let him back in the room, but looked worse than ever. He realized W was in drug addiction withdrawal. Helping her walk, C guided W into the bathroom. Clearly, from the look of the bathroom, she had already been vomiting while he was gone. Exhausted afterwards, she couldn’t get to her feet, so C picked her up and tucked her into the twin bed closer to the bathroom. Cleaning up her mess took another few minutes. Since W clearly couldn’t eat anything that night, C ate both the meals he had brought back then settled himself into the second twin bed.

W rested all the next day while C spent all day applying for jobs and looking for food. He found a corner where people were sometimes hired for day work. Even working for just one day would help. He was rejected. He was insulted. He was not hired.

C even tried volunteering for no pay at a sports concession stand, hoping to be fed, but was denied even one bite. So he resumed his search for work.

As the day dragged on, he entered still another restaurant to apply for a job. The owner said, “I don’t have a job for you. But I’ll tell you what I do need. I need the alley out back cleaned up. The rats are getting out of control. Clean up the mess back there and I’ll give you dinner.”

C went out to look over the alley. It was a terrible mess and stank to high heaven. Several rats ran boldly around and through the rotting food piled up in and around the dumpster. Turning to the restaurant owner, C said, "I'll clean this up for you tonight for two dinners and two breakfasts, all to go. Then I will come back tomorrow and set a trap for the rats. Going forward I want \$5 worth of food for each rat I catch and kill."

The restaurant owner agreed and C set to work cleaning the mess.

C brought all four meals to the motel room. W was feeling better and managed to eat an entire dinner. She told C that she had already paid for the next week at the motel. She would need a full week to get over her withdrawal symptoms. Then she would look for work. But they would already need money for rent when she started looking. So the upshot was, assuming they ate out of dumpsters, they had seven days to make some money or find a new place to live.

Relieved of his immediate worries about where to stay, C promised to continue to supply their food. In fact, he spent a few of his precious dollars to get her a six pack of Ensure liquid meals to get some nutrition past her queasy stomach.

The next morning, C went back to the restaurant where he had cleaned the alley. Traveling by way of alleys and dumpsters, he picked up a few wooden boards, some wire, an old rusty knife, a metal juice can, a steel rod, one old metal garbage can with a few rusted out holes, a dozen pop cans, half a gallon of paint, and one half eaten PB&J sandwich. After talking to the restaurant owner to confirm his \$5 food credit for every rat killed, C went back to the alley to assemble his trap. He needed to lure the rats up to a spot where they would then fall into water deep enough that they would eventually drown. The knife sufficed to cut apart the pop cans. The paint worked to glue them over the holes in the metal garbage can. It wouldn't hold water for long, but would be good enough to get started. He then poked holes into the centers of the top and bottom of the metal juice can and threaded the can onto the metal rod so that it could spin on the rod. Then the wire tied the rod across the top of the garbage can. Three feet of water anchored the garbage can and would drown rats that fell into the water. The wire tied the boards in place, creating a ramp from the ground to the metal rod. Last, but not least, peanut butter and jelly smeared on the metal juice can. Then he sat back to watch.

He was confident the rats were hungry because the piles of food had not been replaced since he cleaned up the alley the night before. And indeed, the rats were so bold that it didn't take long. While C watched, a rat strolled up to the garbage can and began to climb the ramp. Reaching the top, it sniffed the air. Able to smell the peanut butter, but unable to reach it, the rat jumped onto the metal juice can which promptly spun around and dumped the rat into the water. Water deep enough at three feet that the rat would drown. C watched for two hours and caught ten rats. He then showed the dead rats to the restaurant owner and he and W ate very well that day.

The next morning, C went to check on his rat trap, but it was gone! The restaurant owner claimed that some unknown stranger must have stolen it in the night. No, he would not pay C for any rats that might have been in the trap. C knew he was being scammed, but what could he do? What had seemed so promising yesterday was a total loss today. On his way back to the motel, he scrounged enough food out of dumpsters for them to get by.

Chapter 4 Independent Ranch

The next morning, C went and stood at the corner where people got hired for daily work, being careful to have his muscular arms exposed. A pickup truck with a horse trailer hitched on back pulled up and stopped. The driver looked C over and said, “You looking for a job?”

C, “Yes! I’ll do any kind of honest work.”

S, “Well, I need someone to muck horse stalls. Are you game?”

C, “Sure!”

S “For now, you’ll work as a day laborer for cash and lunch. If I like your work, it can become a full time job. Where do you live?”

C, “For now, I’m at the __ motel. I’ll get an apartment once I have a job.

S, “OK. I deliver and pick up horses at NewCity Stables every day. I drop them off at 7am and pick them up at 5pm. Meet me there tomorrow morning. Be ready for honest work.” The driver pointed at C and said, “7am! Sharp!”

C, “OK! 7am! I’ll be there!” C hurried to the motel and told W the good news.

W responded, “Good, I’m almost out of money for rent. What will you be doing?”

C, “Mucking horse stalls, whatever that is.”

W laughed, but would not tell him what mucking is.

S picked up C the next morning and drove them well out of the city.

As they drove through a gate where a sign proclaimed “Independent Ranch”, C said, “Hey. I see electric wires along the road, but I can’t see any wires from the road to your ranch. Are the wires underground?”

S laughed, “No. We don’t have to depend on some big electric company. We’re entirely self reliant for energy.”

C, “How?”

S, “I’ll show you in about four hours.

S pointed, “That, by the way, is the driveway to the big house where the owners live. We NEVER go there. Understood?”

C, “Understood.”

S led C to the stable and showed him where to get a pitch fork, a coal shovel and a big wheel barrow. C was beginning to comprehend what mucking was.

S explained, “The horses are about to be taken out for their morning exercise. While each horse is gone, you go into the empty stall and clean it. You put the dirty straw into the wheel barrow and put new, clean straw in the stalls. Horses are exercised four at a time. You have one hour to get four stalls cleaned out. I’ll be back in 4 hours. I want all the old, dirty straw gone and all sixteen stalls full of new, clean straw. Now you know what mucking horse stalls is.” S walked away smiling.

C called out, “Wait! Where do I put the dirty straw and where do I get clean straw?”

Turning back, S looked C over approvingly. He pointed at the back door at the far end of the hallway. “You dump the dirty straw into the truck at the back door. You get clean straw from the stack of bales just outside the back door.”

While C was putting clean straw into a stall a stranger, wearing an Independent Ranch shirt, stopped him, saying, “Hey! What do you think you’re doing? That’s hay! You’re supposed to put straw in the stalls, not hay!”

C, “What’s the difference?”

Employee, “Are you an idiot? Horses sleep on straw. They eat hay. Hay costs a lot more than straw. Follow me.”

Leading C to the back door, the employee pointed, “This pile is hay. You don’t touch it! That pile is straw. This is what you put into the stalls. Got it?”

C, “Yeah I’ve got it.”

C had all sixteen stalls cleaned and ready when S came back.

S, “Alright! You just might have a future here. Morning chores are done. Now we’ll have lunch and then I’ll show you how we are energy independent.”

After lunch, C and S walked to the truck that C had filled with dirty straw.

S said, “Get in the truck.”

S started driving the truck, but the engine sounded alarmingly quiet to C.

C, “What kind of truck is this?”

S smiled, “Our trucks have external combustion engines. They’re better for the environment. Instead of buying gasoline, we run our local trucks on biogas that we make ourselves. We make hydrogen for the over the road trucks.

C, “How do you make hydrogen and this biogas stuff?”

S, “We make biogas and hydrogen from the dirty straw you shoveled this morning.”

C, “Really?!”

S talked as he drove, “We use bio digesters to make our own power. We put in this dirty straw, our raw sewage from our bathrooms, grass, horse manure, and any rotten food we want to get rid of. We put in all that. We get out organic fertilizer and biogas.”

C, “But the germs in the sewage! You’re spreading disease!”

S, “Nah. The germs in sewage need oxygen to live, right? They’re called aerobic germs.

C, “If you say so.”

S, “There are germs in the manure that only live with no oxygen around. They’re called anaerobic germs. In the bio digester, things get going with the germs that live in oxygen, the aerobic germs. Then the oxygen runs out and the anaerobic germs take over.

When it's all done, the aerobic germs that need oxygen have pretty much died off. Then we take the fertilizer out and expose it to air and the anaerobic germs die off. We're left with organic fertilizer that's pretty much sanitary. Certainly as sanitary as any handful of dirt you pick up off the ground."

C, "OK ... so what is biogas?"

S, "It's the same gas you and I pass every day."

C, "You don't mean ..."

S, "Yes I do. Biogas is exactly the same gas we human being make in our guts. It's that natural."

C, "OK This I gotta hear."

S, "There are little belly bugs that make gas in our guts. The same belly bugs are in horse guts and come out in horse manure. Put those belly bugs in a tank with the right conditions and they will make lots of biogas. Think of it as diluted natural gas. We use it just like many people use natural gas and propane. The part you have to always remember is that biogas has no color, no odor. You can't see it. You can't smell it. If you don't hear it leak, the first you know about it being in the air is when it kills you." S gave C a direct look to emphasize the point. "You don't have to understand the whole process, but you do have to learn how to manage it. The problem is, we human beings typically do something poorly before we do it well. So you have to do EVERYTHING I tell you just the way I tell you and exactly when I tell you. Got that?"

C, "Yeah. I've got that." C thought a moment. "Maybe I'd rather muck stalls some more in the afternoons." Both laughed.

S let them through a gate into a huge pasture. "We have ten bio digesters. All scattered around this pasture." C saw ten large twenty foot tall, green fences.

C, "What are those?"

Chuckling, S replied, "Bamboo.

C, "Bamboo? Like in Asia?"

S laughed out loud at C's surprise, "Several types of bamboo are native to america. We use it as safety fencing for WHEN one of the bio digesters blows up. You do remember me saying biogas is dangerous?"

C, "You said it could kill me. You didn't say it could blow up!"

S, "You've heard of natural gas explosions haven't you. Same stuff, just diluted."

C, "But natural gas stinks."

S, "The government makes gas companies put the stink in the gas. Anyway, we use bamboo as our safety fencing. It's cheaper than building a wall, It grows back if damaged. And every now and then we harvest some bamboo to build things around the ranch."

C, "OK Makes sense. Clever, in fact."

S smiled, "Glad you approve."

S drove up to one of the square bamboo fences. One side of the square had two walls of bamboo. S drove between them along the side of the square until, at the end there was an opening into the square.

C, "What's this about?"

S, "You do ask a lot of questions don't you. Actually that's good. You'll learn fast that way. If, no, WHEN a bio digester blows up, the debris will go in all directions, so we want a full square around it. A gate would be a weak point. At the same time we need to get in and out. So, we make one side have two walls so we can have an opening to drive through, yet there is bamboo all around the bio digester. Looking at it from the sky, you would see the fence in the shape of a giant G."

As S said this, they turned the corner and saw the bio digester at the center of the bamboo fence. It was a plain 20 foot cube metal tank with a smaller concrete box on the side. S backed the truck up a ramp to the concrete box and dumped the dirty straw into the concrete box. He then parked near a door in the big cube. The door opened into a room at the bottom of the big tank. The room hummed with the sound of running motors.

S, "Our electric generators are here under the bio digester. This way, we heat the bio digester with the exhaust from our generator motors. Bio digesting works best if we keep it as warm as the inside of a horse's belly.

C, "Clever again."

S checked several dials, gauges, valves, "I'll explain this stuff later, IF you keep doing good work and we keep you on."

They drove back to the stable.

S, "We only use electricity when we have to. You see, we lose half of our energy turning it into electricity. Think of it this way. To get enough electricity out of a generator to move a car one mile, you have to put enough fuel into the generator to move a car two miles. So, if you get promoted to maintaining the power equipment, you will be dealing mostly with what they call external combustion engines, specifically Stirling engines and Organic Rankin engines."

C, "What are they?"

S, "The engines in cars today are internal combustion engines, right? They make little explosions inside cylinders, right?"

C, "Yeah."

S, "Well, Stirling engines and Organic Rankin engines are external combustion engines. Instead of making little explosions in cylinders, external combustion engines make a flame and use the heat of the flame to run the engine. We like them because they scrub the atmosphere of methane.

C "What? How does that work?"

W “There’s methane pollution floating around in the atmosphere. Right? So the air that gets sucked into a methane flame carries some methane with it. Methane pollution burns when it gets above 1,000° F. A flame of burning methane burns at 3,500° F, three times hot enough to ignite methane pollution. So methane pollution burns when it gets sucked into a methane flame. The pollution gets consumed and is gone forever. We scrub the atmosphere of methane. And by the way, we also scrub the atmosphere of nano-plastics.”

C “Sounds too good to be true. You don’t use any fossil fuels. When you use your biogas, you take methane out of the atmosphere. So, ... you reduce global warming by running your engines?!”

S, “Exactly right! And, everyone everywhere can reduce global warming by running external combustion engines.”

C, “Incredible!”

For a few weeks, everything went fine. S picked C up and dropped him off every day and finally started training C to operate the bio digesters. It wasn’t hard, but was complicated enough to be confusing. As they were adjusting the valves one afternoon, S had to step out to take a phone call. Having made the same adjustments for several days, C figured he would impress S by continuing the operation himself. When S came back in, he stared at the gauges, blanched, then shouted, “Run!!” C followed S at a dead run until they were outside the bamboo fence. Suddenly there was a massive explosion. The bamboo above ten feet off the ground was shredded, becoming a cloud of flying shards darkening the air above them. The bamboo shorter than ten feet bent toward them, but did not break, protecting them from the flying debris. S sat still and glared at C until their hearing recovered. Then they walked back to the barn because their truck was no more.

They talked for the last time as S drove C home.

S, “I told you biogas was dangerous.”

C, “You did. I’m sorry I blew it. Is there any way I could keep my job? I like making our own energy and scrubbing the atmosphere. It would be great if we could replace fossil fuels with biogas.”

S, “We can.”

C, “Nah. We could never make enough biogas.”

S “Oh yeah we could. Here are ten of our green energy sources available every year,” and he extended his fingers one by one,

“One) We mow grass along thousands of miles of roadsides and let it rot;

Two) We could mow grass prairies that become wild fire hazards.

Three) 36 million tons of empty corn cobs are left over from canning,

Four) We human beings make about 300 million pounds of poop every day,

Five) We throw away 31 million tons of yard waste every year;

Six) we throw away 30 million Christmas Trees every year;
Seven) we throw away 13 million tons of clothes every year;
Eight) We clean tons of seaweed and algae blooms out of our waterways;
Nine) We clean Red Tide and Sargasso Seaweed off our beaches,
Ten) last, but not least, we have the South's ace-in-the-hole.

C "What's that?"

S smiled, "Kudzu"

They both laughed long and loud.

Chapter 5 Skunk Adventure

C's job had almost gotten them financially on their feet, but without it, C & W had to give up their motel room. W had heard of an abandoned building where homeless people took shelter. When C and W walked in, they indeed found about a dozen people already squatting in the building; some of them friendly, some not so friendly. All the good spots close to the front of the building were already claimed so C and W were forced to claim space at the very back of the building, not far from the bed of a mangy dog who looked like he hadn't had a bath in forever. No one else wanted anywhere near the dog's bed because it smelled so bad. That gave C an idea of how to get the other people out of the building.

Wanting to research his idea and not having a working phone, C walked two miles to the closest library. The librarian smiled a beautiful smile and asked if she could help him. Her name tag said her name was L. C smiled back and asked where to find books on skunks. "Skunks?" she asked, "Do you have an infestation?" Not sure what that word meant, C relied, "I want to learn everything I can about skunks." She thought a moment, then said, "I don't think we have any books on the care and raising of skunks. Few people want a skunk in their home, you know." C smiled and said, "That's what I'm counting on."

The librarian looked confused, but recovered her composure and said, "Try books on farming. They are in the fourth stack on the left, skunk man." She smiled again with an extra twinkle in her eye. C wasn't sure how to take this unexpected nick name, but thanked her and went to the stacks. He spent all day learning everything he could about skunks: where they live, what they eat, when they travel, what gets them to spray, how long they spray, By the evening, he had all the knowledge he needed. He returned to their abandoned building, checked on W, then left on his mission.

Wandering the familiar alleys, he found an old blanket someone had discarded. With the blanket in hand, he went to a particular alley he usually avoided because it smelled of skunk. After his research, he was confident he knew where to find the nest. Holding the blanket in front of him, he stood near a wood pile and stamped his feet. In about five minutes, he was rewarded when a skunk came out of the wood pile and calmly looked up at this man blocking his path. C kept stamping his feet, careful to shield himself with the blanket. Sure enough, the skunk only put up with this for a couple minutes, then the skunk turned around, raised his tail and let C have it. C caught the spray with the blanket. Fighting the urge to vomit, C walked back several steps until he was out of range, then folded the blanket and ran as fast as he could, trailing the blanket behind him so his nose could stay ahead of the smell. When he got back to the abandoned building, C threw the blanket onto a pile of clothes near the front door and quickly retreated to the back of the building and went to bed.

All the spots near the front door were empty the next morning. Everyone but C and W were gone by the end of that day. Even the dog was gone. But when evening was coming on, the dog returned. He gingerly came in the back door and made his way back to his familiar bed.

C was feeling proud of himself for figuring out a solution to his housing problem so he talked to W about his many applications for jobs, every one of which had been rejected.

C, "So, what do bosses want in an employee?"

"Well", W answered slowly, "show up on time?"

C said, "Look, I have five fingers on one hand. Give me five things a boss wants and I'll be able to remember them." They eventually settled on: 1) show up on time; 2) be sober; 3) be dressed for work; 4) do whatever the job is; 5) do NOT cause trouble.

C, "I can do all that!"

W, "Yeah, but how does an employer know that you can and will?"

C, "Well, I can show up at the same time every day, sober and dressed for work. Not at starting time, because bosses are busy at starting time. So, I'll start at ten in the morning and ask for a job at ten different employers; the first one at 10 am, the second one at 11 am the third one at Noon, and so on. Ten employers a day will take me from 10 am to 8 pm. Each employer will see me at the same time every day."

C "If I show up every day at the same time to apply for a job, the boss will know I will show up on time every day once I have a job."

Figuring restaurants have a lot of turnover, C picked ten restaurants he was willing to work for and stopped in all ten every day. He still found himself rejected day after day.

Chapter 6 C meets M

On his fifth day of systematic job applying, B, the owner of one of the ten restaurants said, “Look. This is the fifth time you have asked for a job. How many times do I have to tell you, I don’t have any openings?”

Overhearing, M, a customer said to the owner, “Hey B, has this guy really applied five times?”

R, “Yeah. He has come in every day this week to ask again for a job! Always at this time of day. He won’t take no for an answer.”

M looked impressed then said to C, “Sir, may I buy you lunch?”

C, “Sure! Thank you!”

C quickly ordered a big lunch and watched for M’s reaction. Pleased to see that M had no objection, C added a piece of pie then asked M, “Are you hiring?”

Ignoring the question, M said “What are your plans?”

C “Get a job. I’m looking for opportunities. They’re limited because I’ve been in jail.” If he was going to be rejected because of his jail time, C figured let it be quick.

M “What were you in for?”

C “I posted something online the government didn’t like. This is America, so the appeals court threw out the charge, but it took three years and I lost everything. Now, I’m starting from nothing.”

M said, “What you did yesterday is not nearly as important as what you do tomorrow. You can start out from nothing and be successful. I did.”

C, “Sounds great! But it was easier back then. Things are hard today.”

M, “Yes they are. So, think! Figure out where the opportunities are today. Think about what people have a hard time getting today. Of the things that are hard to get, which ones can you help them get?”

C, “Hey, I’m willing to do any job available.”

M sighed, “Trust me. You only want a job until you can build your own business.”

M “The big difference between a job and owning your own business is: bosses inspect you; customers inspect the product. Produce a good product or service, be honest in selling it, and most people will not care about your past; your skin color; your age; whether you were ever in jail; whether you fill a quota; whether you are in a union. Most people will ignore all of that. They will focus on your product, not you.”

C took out an index card and wrote “Employers inspect you. Customers inspect the product.”

M, “Good idea! That helps you remember things, right?”

C was still writing, “mhhm”

M “When you get serious about owning your own business, be serious about doing your best and history, race, gender, none of that will matter. For example, think about the

chair you are sitting on. Which do you care about? Whether it will hold you without collapsing or the skin color of the people who made it?”

C “Whether it will hold me, of course.”

M, “See, you care about the chair, not the person who made it.

M, “Next thing you need to know is that knowledge is power. Like when I used to fix trucks, I didn’t have the power to fix trucks until I had the knowledge to fix trucks. Knowledge is power. Write that down.”

M, “Next, write down, ‘No man is an island’. Supplement your knowledge and skills with the knowledge and skills of people willing to work with you. You especially need a good accountant and a good attorney. Yes, they cost, and they can discourage you from good ideas, but you can focus on your business while they do the paperwork.” M paused, stared at C for a minute then continued, “C, when I started my own business, I couldn’t read or write. I got an accountant and an attorney. They read and wrote for me. I started out with nothing but my brain. I started out as a mechanic back when you didn’t need a computer to work on a car. I learned all I could. I got into truck repair. Because trucks are harder, trucks are more profitable. Knowledge plus a good work ethic made me good. After too many years of saving my money, I opened my own shop. When the economy went bad one year, I used my savings to buy an apartment building. Now I own several buildings and can afford to buy an interesting stranger lunch.”

M “Let me tell you about business. A small business is based on the free market approach. What Karl Marx called capitalism. In free market capitalism, no one is forced to do anything. No one becomes your customer unless you convince them to willingly trade their money for whatever product or service you offer them. So, in free market capitalism, the way to get what you want is by helping other people get what they want. You have to deliver good value. The way you succeed as a small business is you get a hundred people or so to be regular customers because they know they are getting good value from you. You have personal friendships with your customers and that gives you a solid business.

Large organizations on the other hand; governments, unions, big corporations lose the ability to have personal friendships with their customers. They become bureaucracies working to get what the bureaucracy wants whether the customers get what they want or not. Governments and unions in particular, often work on the basis of coercion. They love it when people’s options are limited.”

M “Look around. There are about 50 people in this restaurant. Each a unique individual. Some are honest. Some are liars. Some are good people. Some are terrible people. Some are smart. Some are dumb. Some are competent. Some are bumbling fools. Some would make good customers for your business. Some would not. You can’t tell

which is which by looking at them. You have to work at getting to know each individual person. But once you have enough regular, steady customers, you have a good business.”

C, “You do like to preach don’t you. Tell you what, let me take another lunch to my friend and I will willingly listen to some more preaching.” Just then, C’s food arrived. M laughed and said, “OK, I’ll let you eat in peace, then we’ll talk some more.” M quietly read his phone until C had almost finished his lunch. Then ,when it was time for C’s pie, M called the waitress over to order W’s lunch to go and to get himself some pie. Then M asked, “Where are you living?”

C “In an abandoned building at _____. I cleared it out by getting a skunk to spray a blanket and then leaving the blanket near the front door.”

M laughed long and hard “Love it. How did you know how to do that?”

M “Researched it in the library.”

M “Ah, a perfect illustration of knowledge is power. AND, the ability to learn makes your knowledge unlimited. That makes your power unlimited. That’s why I learned to read and write.”

M, “C, I know that building. I’ve had my eye on it. Couldn’t buy it while it was full of squatters. You keep living there. I’ll buy the building. You can stay rent free, if you keep the vandals out while I fix it up.”

C, “Cool. My friend W is staying with me. That’s OK, isn’t it?”

M, “As long as I don’t have any trouble, that will be fine. There’s a bar around the corner that I own. We’ll meet there every Tuesday night for dinner and drinks to keep each other up to date. Now let’s get you a steady income while you decide what kind of business you want to start.”

M called B over and said, “B, you need a sous chef. So promote your current dish washer to sous chef. C here is willing to wash dishes for you in the evenings if you pay him minimum wage and let him take home enough leftover food for two people at the end of the day.”

C, “Why evening shift?”

M, “Leaves you free to meet with people during the day time.”

B, “M, regulations say I have to throw left over food out.”

M, “So, instead of throwing it out, sell it to him for a penny. That’ll keep you legal.”

C, “IF I want the food.” All three smiled.

B, “I don’t know, M.”

M “How about a one week trial period with no pay, but he gets the food. If you want to keep him on, then pay him.”

M “This is free market capitalism in action. If you both freely agree, then shake on it.”

C & B shook hands.

M “Great. Remember B, This deal will only last until C gets a better offer.”

B took C into the kitchen and introduced him to the new sous chef, SC. It took only five minutes for SC to walk C through his dish washing instructions. SC took the opportunity to add that C should clear SC’s work station and carry his garbage out at least once an hour. C bit his tongue and agreed to everything SC demanded.

Chapter 7 Negotiating a Home

After pie, C and M brought lunch to W and all three toured the building then had drinks at M's bar to discuss terms.

M, "You have to keep vandals out and accept deliveries of construction materials when no workmen are on site. In exchange, you can occupy the back half of the third floor. That gives you seven rooms and a full bathroom. There is a working sewer line in the bathroom and the kitchen. The toilet, the sinks, the shower all drain with no problem, you just don't get any water when you turn on the taps. The pipes froze and burst last Winter. I can't fix the water supply quite yet. But, I will have all the doors and windows fixed tomorrow. Don't worry, you will have heat by the time you need it when the weather turns cold. I'm getting the boiler fixed right now. C, W, this is important, so listen carefully. There will be no gas service, no electricity, no water."

C, "No utilities at all?" You're going to be putting them in eventually, so why not put them in early?"

M, "Rehabbing doesn't work that way. If I do things out of order, it costs extra. Are you going to pay the extra costs?"

Defeated, C said, "No. I'll figure something out for the utilities. Seven rooms with complete doors and windows. Right?"

M, "Right. But no gas service, no electricity, no hot water, no water at all.

C, "Elevator?"

M laughed loud and long, shook his head no, then asked, "Do you accept these terms?"

C was thinking hard, "Yes, I accept these terms. I'll find a way to provide utilities myself. By the way, you will have a dumpster for them to throw things away, right?"

M, "Sure."

C, "Do I have your permission to take whatever I find IN the dumpster?"

M, hesitated, then replied, "Tell you what. If you see something you want IN the dumpster, ask the construction foreman. If he agrees that we can't use it, then you can have it. You have to store stuff you accumulate in your seven rooms."

C, "And we do not have to pay you rent. We won't have any utility bills. We will owe you no money at all, right?"

M., "That's right. You do not need any money to live in the back of the third floor in my building. You do need to stop any vandalism, not allow or commit any theft and keep out squatters.

W, "How long will this last?"

M, "Until I have finished rehabbing and am ready to rent or sell the building. Figure a year."

W, "So we have a place to live for a year, right?"

M, “Not quite right. You have a place to live until I need it. I expect to not need it for about a year. But don’t worry, I will probably be working on another building by then and, if you have been good tenants, you could move to my new building. That’s the best I can do for you.

W, “How much warning will we have?”

M, “We should know more than a month before I need you to move out.”

C thought another minute then turned to W, “Satisfied? Does this all sound agreeable to you?”

W, “It’s OK for now. This will be an improvement over how we’ve been living lately.”

M, “Good.” They shook hands all around.

M turned to W, “Want to make a quick \$500? Tuesday nights are open mike night here for stand up comedians. The one voted best by the crowd gets a \$500 prize. Want to give it a try?”

W, “Oh no. Not me. Thanks, but no thanks.”

M, “What’s the worst that could happen?”

W, “No ... no”

C (reading from an index card) “We human beings typically have to do something poorly before we do it well. Don’t let being bad at something stop you. Practice what you are bad at and you will get better.”

W shook her head no.

M, “Tell you what. I’ve got a list of jokes here. You just go up on the stage and read them into the microphone and I’ll buy an extra round of drinks for the table.

W looked at C who said, “It’s up to you. Don’t pay any attention to me being thirsty.”

W, “Really guys, I’d rather not.”

M, “Two rounds of drinks.”

C, made his voice sound like croaking, “I’m so thirsty. But you do what you want.”

W, “Alright, but drinks first. I’ll have a Shirley Temple.”

M, “What? No alcohol?”

W, “That’s right. No alcohol for me, ever. I’ve seen it used to manipulate too many people too many times.”

M, “Sounds like there are some interesting stories there.”

C, “Maybe, but she doesn’t want to talk about them. OK?”

M, “OK. Let’s get those drinks.”

True to her word, when the time came, W reluctantly, but clearly, read M’s list of jokes. She got big laughs and a rousing round of applause as she sat back down.

W looked at M and said, “That wasn’t so bad. You know. It was kinda fun. It’s cool making people laugh.”

M, “I’ll bring you another list next week.”

W, “OK. I’ll read another list.”

W didn’t win the \$500, but she looked forward to making people laugh again.

Chapter 8 DIY Water Supply

M must have moved fast. It was less than a week later that C signed for delivery of eight barrels of special water to fill up the boiler in the basement. C asked and got permission from the construction foreman to take the barrels as soon as they were empty. C went up to the roof to see if his plan would work. The roof was flat with a slight slant toward the back. One large gutter directed the water to one large downspout. Perfect. The roof was 50 feet wide and 100 feet deep. So a one inch rain would put about 3,000 gallons into the downspout. C figured: (50 feet x 100 feet x 144 sq inches/sq foot x 1 inch deep rain fall = 720,000 cubic inches of water into the down spout. Since there are 231 cubic inches in a gallon, 720,000 cubic inches makes a little over 3,000 gallons; for every one inch of rainfall. Since Newcity averages more than four inches of rain a month, C figured they would get enough water for the two of them even if they only caught half of what came down the downspout.

Back in their rooms, using wood from the dumpster, C mounted six barrels almost touching the ceiling. He ran a fat hose to catch rain water from the downspout and funnel it into the first barrel, which had six inches of sand in the bottom. The water would filter through the sand and then through hoses into the other three barrels. All told, he could store 300 gallons of water to last between rainfalls. Scraps of copper tubing from the dumpster connected the last barrel to the toilet and sinks.

C knew the water wasn't clean enough to drink. He would have to figure a way to purify it before they would drink it. Until then he would bring drinking water home from his work. But filtered rainwater was clean enough to be worthwhile.

Clean clothes were now an achievable luxury. They could clean and rinse a five gallon bucket full of dirty clothes by agitating the clothes with a plunger going through a hole in the lid of the bucket. Hanging the clothes on a rope hung in a spare room sufficed for drying.

It had been months since either of them had been able to bathe. Cold showers would be better than none. He tried to tell himself that cold showers were invigorating, but knew he had to find a way to heat their water.

Chapter 9 Acceptance by Association

Independent Ranch had taught him enough about bio digestion to be dangerous. But it also taught him that bio digestion could provide plenty of energy for hot water. He just needed more knowledge. So, C again walked the two miles to the library.

He recognized the woman at the counter as L, the librarian who had helped him research skunks. L looked up and smiled her best smile and said, "Welcome back skunk man." C decided to start with a joke, saying, "A man once walked up to a librarian and asked if she had any books on paranoia. The librarian looked over her right shoulder. She looked over her left shoulder. Then she leaned closer, opened her eyes wide, and whispered, "They're right behind you."

After L laughed, C asked her how to research bio digesters. She asked, "What's a bio digester?" C explained that bio digesters are tanks that use natural processes to turn grass into burnable biogas that can be used to cook food, warm a house, cool a refrigerator, make electricity. L frowned, typed into her computer, stared at the screen, hit a couple more keys, then finally smiled her beautiful smile again and said, "We have some resources for you. You'll find them in stack seven down the center aisle on the right. You can also do an online search on one of our computers upstairs. You just have to leave your library card with me while using a computer. That's library policy."

C winced and said, "I don't have a library card." L smiled kindly and said, "No problem. Fill out this form and bring it back to me and we'll get you a card right away." C wasn't sure how this was going to go, but he might as well try. He sat down, filled in the form and returned it. L smiled sweetly, took the form and started entering it into the computer. Then she stopped, stared at the paper. Her smile disappeared. She turned back to her computer screen, hit a few a keys and scowled at the results.

The librarian looked suspiciously at C and said coldly, "The building at that address is empty. No one lives there. You're lying to me!" She began to tear up the form. "No! Wait!", C cried, "I do live there. The owner is fixing up the building. I'm living there to keep it safe at night." L fixed C with a withering stare, "I will need proof that you live there. I don't suppose you have a utility bill. Hmm?" as she threw away the torn up form. C sighed and replied, "No, of course not." L sniffed, "Of course not. And of course you cannot use the computers nor take out any books." Defeated, C asked, "Can I sit and read a book in the library?" L snapped back, "Yes, IF you can read." With that, she turned and retreated to a cubicle behind the desk, all her friendliness and helpfulness gone. C walked alone down the center aisle and finally found stack seven. He had his pen and index cards with him and so was able to write notes. After two hours, he had the information he needed. As he left the library he said, "Have a nice day." to L, but she ignored him.

Back at his job, C obediently left his dish washing once an hour to carry out the kitchen scraps. One day, CS picked up a handful of carrot tops and said, “Did you know? If you bury the orange top of the carrot and let the greens get sunshine, you can grow new carrots from these scraps.”

C, “Really?”

SC, “Yes, you can grow a lot of foods from scraps: carrots, potatoes, onions, avocados, strawberries, tomatoes.”

Walking by, B laughed and said, “C, if you grow fresh, organic vegetables, I’ll be your first customer!” C thoughtfully eyed the scraps he was throwing away.

C was looking forward to Tuesday night. M usually bought two rounds of drinks. Two rounds a night was all C wanted. He and W saw M coming out of an office as they arrived. W immediately asked M for her list of jokes and began reviewing them.

C turned to M and spoke slowly because he was unsure whether M would do him the favor he was about to ask.

C, “M, you remember how you told me ‘Knowledge is power. The ability to learn makes your knowledge unlimited. That makes your power unlimited.’ Remember that?”

M, “Sure do. And I meant it!”

C, “Well, remember how I researched about skunks at the library?”

M, “Yes. Where are we going with this?”

C, “Well, the library won’t give me a library card because they don’t believe I live in your building. Is there any way ...”

M, “Don’t worry about it. I will pick you up here tomorrow, no ... Thursday morning at 9 o’clock. We’ll go to the library together and get it settled.”

C, “You sure? ... OK! Nine o’clock Thursday ... Thank you!”

M, “Thank you for being the kind of man that wants a library card.”

W arranged to be the first one to read jokes. She was anxious to hear laughter again. But when the moment came, she was suddenly overcome with nerves. She walked slowly and hesitantly up to the microphone. Cleared her throat and read the jokes without taking her eyes off the paper. But her voice was loud and clear. At the third joke, she had to stop and let the laughter die down before reading the fourth. That gave her confidence and she finished the set with a smile on her face.

C was finishing breakfast when M pulled up Thursday morning. Cold restaurant leftovers did not make for appealing food, and he worried about eating unrefrigerated leftovers, but that was a problem for another day. At the library, L frowned when she saw C walk up, but maintained her professionalism and asked if she could help. M immediately spoke up, “I am M. I own the building at ___. Mr C here is currently living in the building while I rehab it. Give him a library card.”

L, “Oh, Mr M, it’s an honor to meet you. I will take care of this for you right away.”

L handed C the form without noticing that C felt about 2 inches tall. C filled it out quickly and had his library card within 10 minutes.

M asked C, “All set?”

C, “Yes. Thank you. In fact I’ll use it right now. I’ll see you Tuesday night.”

M, “OK”. Then he turned to L, “You have a nice day young lady.”

L said, “Thank you sir!” with her brightest smile.

C went immediately to the computers and researched local produce prices.

Once he was sure he could make a living supplying fresh produce to local restaurants he found three books on gardening and headed for the check out. L had recovered her sweetness and helpfulness and was all full of smiles. She was eager to talk about how C knew Mr M, but C just took the books and went home.

C especially wanted to read the book about growing food from scraps. But the more he read, the more disappointed he got. Gardening had a different procedure for each type of food. It got complicated real fast. When C came to the part about spindly stalks he gave up. He would have to think of another business to start. Or would he? C pulled out his deck of index cards and read each one until he came to “No man is an island. Supplement your knowledge and skills with the knowledge and skills of people willing to work with you.”

C needed a farmer willing to work with him. The farmer could do the growing and C could do the sales! Where could he find a farmer available and willing to work with him? Someone willing to be a partner, splitting the income instead of getting a salary up front. He would talk to W about it.

Chapter 10 Finding a Farmer

C opened the conversation over dinner. “W, I can make a nice business selling fresh produce to local restaurants. But I need a partner to grow the food. Where do I find a farmer willing to work with me?”

W, “I don’t know about farmers, but when you were standing on that corner hoping to be hired, you were willing to co-operate with anyone.”

C, “True. True. I don’t remember any farmers at the time, but there could be one going there now.”

The next morning, C packed up a lunch big enough for a man who hadn’t eaten in days and walked over to the corner where S had hired him. There were about 20 people standing around in small bunches. C walked up to the nearest group and told them, “I need someone to teach me farming over lunch.” and held the bag up. They all shook their heads no, so he moved on, and on. He found one woman happy to take the deal, but she had no idea what spindly stalks were so it was clear she didn’t know farming. He walked up to one man sitting alone on the curb. The man barely moved when C sat next to him. C introduced himself and made his offer of lunch.

The man perked up at the offer of a lunch; eyed the big bag in C’s hand and stood up saying, “My name is F, let’s walk somewhere away from this crowd while I eat.” C let F take the lunch away from him and led F away from the others and towards M’s building.

F looked in the bag, grabbed a roll and ate while he walked and said, “I am a farmer. At least I was a farmer until the government shut down the economy because of Covid-19. I had the crops, but wasn’t allow to deliver them. Eventually, the bank had to foreclose. Now I’m nothing.”

C leafed through his index cards and read, “You have a human brain. You can do amazing things.” then continued, “You remember how to grow crops, right?”

F, “Yeah, I suppose.”

C, “All you need is space and materials, right?”

F, “And time and a lot of work.”

C, “Well, I have space and time. We can get materials. I can sell the crops. I just need someone to grow the crops. Will you help me?”

F “What’s in it for me?”

C “Lunch! I can’t pay you money. But it would mean a lot to me if you would help me out.”

F, “Well, I will answer your questions until lunch runs out.

C, “OK for a start. So, what are spindly stalks anyway?”

F laughed then replied, “When you grow plants from seeds, sometimes the stalks grow real thin and weak. Have you ever seen a new born calf that can barely stand up?”

C, “Yeah.”

F, “Well its kinda like that, but a plant. Calves usually get stronger on their own, but plants need you to fix it or better yet, prevent it from happening.”

Satisfied, C said, “You asked me a while ago what was in this for you. I offered only a lunch because I needed to know the content of your character. So here’s what’s in it for you now. I am living in a building with a flat roof. You could grow crops up there and I’ll sell them. We’ll split the profits. Until the money starts coming in, you can live in your own room in my building and I will supply you with food.”

F, “That might work. Where are we getting the supplies?”

C, “Beg, borrow, and scrounge. Mostly scrounge. I scrounged that food you’re enjoying.”

F, “Gotta admit, it’s pretty good food.”

C, “Here we are!” as they arrived at M’s building.

F “That’s the skunk house! I’m not going in there!”

C smiled and said “Trust me.” and led F around back.

As they walked into C & W’s living area, C introduced F to W. F immediately sat down and fully opened his lunch.

C excitedly laid out his plan for a roof top garden, “We have 50 feet by 100 feet of flat roof. That’s 5,000 square feet! We can build raised beds. We’ll put fences around and over the beds to keep out birds and rats. I’ll wheelbarrow in dirt and mulch from landscapers. They might even pay me to haul it away for them. We’ll start with the crops that you can harvest just one month after planting.”

F laughed, “You have no idea how much work it would be to haul enough dirt to the roof to plant a garden. Let’s walk before we run. In fact, start with mushrooms. They are easier, faster, and much lower cost to grow. If you wanted to push it, you could grow \$100 worth of mushrooms in a five gallon bucket at a cost of about \$10. When we have some cash coming in from the mushrooms, then we can move on to growing green plants.”

C took F to look over the materials he had collected out of the dumpster.

C, “You said we could use five gallon buckets. We already have 20 of them!

F just smiled this time, “Hey W, do you want to eat paint?”

W, “Ewe! No way!”

F, “We can’t use these C. We need buckets made of food safe plastic. And we need them absolutely clean, no residues! We can buy buckets or beg, borrow and scrounge them from restaurants. Most restaurants get some foods in buckets.”

F was pleased to have his own room with a window and a lock on the door.

But all his doubts were erased when he saw that C even had a brand new, 5 inch deep foam pad to be F's mattress.

The next day, C got up early so he could go to the library and return the gardening books and still get to work on time. W was sitting down to her cold breakfast of restaurant leftovers when F arrived home.

W, "Just getting home? Were you out all night?"

F smiled, "No. I'm getting back from morning Mass."

W, "Really? People really go to Mass on week days?"

F, laughed, "Every day, in fact!"

W wasn't sure how she felt about having a room mate who was a religious fanatic, but C needed a farmer and F had seemed fine so far.

W, "So, you're a farmer. What do you think of C's water supply system?"

F, "It's a great idea. People have used rain barrels for water supply forever. I have to admit, filtering it with sand is a new one on me. Clever guy your C. Even if you don't want to drink it because we get the water after it rinses the roof."

W, "People really do this? Raised up like he has these? How long before these barrels come crashing down and spill all over?"

F, "That's your worry? Tell you what. I'll add another 2 by 4 under each barrel. Will that make you comfortable?"

W, "Make it two 2 by 4s."

F grinned, "OK"

As F was finishing up adding the 2 by 4s, W asked, "F, why do you go to Mass?"

F, "There but for the grace of God go I."

W, "What?"

F, "It's an old saying we have. Think of the meanest, stupidest, saddest person you ever met. I can be just as mean, just as stupid, just as sad. I need help from God, grace from God if you will, to not be like that. When I see someone like that, I remind myself that 'There but for the grace of God go I'.

W, "So God tells you what life choices to make?"

F laughed, "Wouldn't that be nice. No. I make the decisions, some right, some wrong. God helps me live out the right ones, IF I let Him. The problem is, while God is always ready to give us help, even God can't give a gift unless the gift is accepted. Going to Mass is a powerful way to ask for and accept help from God."

W, "I can get help from God without going to your Mass."

F, "Good for you. I wish I was holy enough to not go to Mass. But the reality is I need all the help I can get, so I go to daily Mass to become the person I choose to be and not be the person I could be. I want to be the kind of person who can talk to a beautiful woman like you and treat her like the lady she is."

W blushed. She couldn't remember ever blushing. Suddenly the mood had changed from new acquaintances chatting into awkward silence.

F, "Uh, I'd better go get to work. See you later."

W absent mindedly, "Yeah. See you later."

F left. He went to look in the construction dumpster. The only useful thing he found was a broken wheel barrow, with the wheel in good shape. After separating the wheel, he started looking for old pipes and joints. He knew that eventually, he would have enough parts to build a make shift wheel barrow. It might look ridiculous, but he could carry a lot more in a wheel barrow than he could in his hands. When C got home, F told him about his plan. C laughed and showed F a pile of pipes and joints that C had been accumulating. Together, they had a working wheel barrow built in a couple days. C was impressed with F all over again.

Chapter 11 M meets F

C brought F along as he and W walked over to the bar for their Tuesday night dinner with M. Arriving early, the three of them sat at M's usual table. F said, "Watch this!" and walked over to a table of four men. F opened by saying, "Good evening gentlemen. Have you ever seen anyone do this?" F took a napkin, put six dots on it. Then he pulled a mirror out of his pocket and, looking in the mirror, drew one line going between and around the dots. The strangers were suitably impressed. F then continued, "I'll bet any one of you that you cannot do what I just did. I'll give you twice the time it took me." All four took the bet. All four failed. F walked back to W and C with an extra \$20 in his hand and said, "I'll buy the first round!"

W asked, "Did you have the twenty bucks in case you lost?"

F, grinning, "No."

W, "Scoundrel!", but she also smiled.

C suddenly felt very nervous about M's reaction to F. M walked in looking relaxed and happy. When he saw F seated with W and C, his expression changed to confused. He sat down and C didn't wait for him to ask a question, but spoke up right away, "You said build a team." Then he pointedly read off an index card, 'No man is an island. Supplement your knowledge and skills with the knowledge and skills of people willing to work with you.' So, M, this is F, a new team member."

M chuckled, "Well played. Nice to meet you F. So how do you fit in?"

F, "I'm a farmer."

M gave C an amazed, questioning glance then turned immediately back to F and gave him the questioning look."

C jumped in, "You said to start a business. I ...", he glanced over at F then started again, "WE are going to supply fresh mushrooms and fruits and vegetables to local restaurants. F will grow them. I will sell them."

M, "In my building?"

C, "Of course."

M, "Mushrooms?"

F, "They are the easiest, fastest, and cheapest money crop to get started with."

M, "OK. But stay in your seven rooms until you prove it works. If you start to build a business, you can expand, but on the third floor only. If you want to grow into other parts of the building, we'll talk."

C, "That works for me!"

Chapter 12 DIY bio digester

C checked the dumpster in the building every day. He continued accumulating pipes and valves that the work men had torn out and thrown away. He tested each one and kept the ones that worked. He also took some heavy duty plastic sheeting and some almost empty cans of plumbers' goop. C told W he was gathering parts for a bio digester.

On the job, C asked B for permission to take home used cooking grease and garbage food scraps. B readily agreed. SC was curious and asked what C wanted the grease for. C explained that grease would work especially well in his bio digester.

SC, "What's a bio digester?"

C, "A machine that uses garbage to make biogas. I need biogas to make hot water."

SC, "What's biogas?"

C, "Think natural gas, except diluted."

SC, "How are you going to build this bio digester thing?"

C, "I'll take a barrel, seal it up except for a pipe out the top that will let the biogas out to get burned when I need heat. Then I fill the barrel, ... "

SC, "You seal the barrel, then you fill it?! Great plan."

C, " ... leave it alone for a couple weeks and poof, I'll have my own sustainable energy source."

SC, "POOF?! Just like that? I never heard of such a crazy thing. What you gonna fill the barrel with?"

C, "Oh, used cooking oil, grass, leaves, things like that, pretty much any thing organic and soft. To start it fast, though, I need some cow manure."

SC, "Cow manure!" And SC walked away laughing loudly.

When the construction crew foreman told C that they were going to clear the overgrown lawn, C offered to dispose of the grass, leaves, etc. for half of what the foreman expected to pay. The foreman agreed, so C gathered the yard waste into a barrel as the first fodder for his bio digester.

C did exactly what he had told SC he would. Then C connected a hose to the output pipe and fed the hose into a plastic garbage bag. A second hose would take the biogas to a stove for burning. Good old duct tape sealed the bag tight around the hoses.

Next he would need a propane burner. So, C walked down the alley of a camping equipment repair shop. Picking through their junk pile, he found an old, rusted out, propane camp stove. Just then the shop owner came out the back door,

She immediately shouted, "Hey! What are you doing in my stuff?" C replied, "I'm recycling to save the planet." The shop owner laughed in spite of herself. Then said, "What have you got there? A stove? Do you know how to use that?" C, "I'll figure it

out.” She shook her head then said, “Go ahead take that old stove. Just be far away from here when you blow yourself up with it. And DON’T COME BACK!”

As he walked home, C looked the stove over carefully and was happy to find that the supply hose already had the all important FLAME ARRESTER safety feature. Back at home, C was happy to see that the fittings and a little plumbers’ goop easily connected the hose from the bio digester to the stove.

C & W arrived on time, but found M already waiting for their regular Tuesday night dinner.

M was getting nervous about having a bio digester in his building, but C convinced him that it would be safe. M agreed to let C build it but insisted that M would look it over and approve it before C put it into use.

W had waited as patiently as she could. She nervously, but eagerly broke into the conversation.

W, “So M, do you have my list of jokes?”

M, “What? Oh! Yes, got it right here. Felt good making people laugh didn’t it.”

W, “Yeah. It really did.”

When W’s turn came, she almost ran to the stage. She read her jokes loud and clear then milked the audience for all the applause she could get.

When she finally got back to their table, M said, “Great job! Now you’re ready to bring your own jokes next week.”

W, “Wait! What? But! ... OK! Challenge Accepted!”

The bio digester was almost ready. Now, all C needed was some cow manure to get it producing quickly. The next day, C took a bus out to the countryside then walked until he found cattle in a field. He offered the farmer five dollars for permission to gather up some cow manure. The farmer took the five dollars and pointed C to a particular field. C read a sign on the fence that said, “Entrance to this field is free. The bull will charge later.” C turned to the farmer. The farmer said, “Don’t worry about that. This field is empty right now.”

C took his bucket onto the field and looked for a fresh pile. Suddenly, the farmer called out, “Get out! The bull’s coming!” C looked and saw a bull charging at him from a far corner of the field. C ran for his life and vaulted over the fence. He immediately turned to punch the farmer. The farmer laughed and handed C his five dollars saying, “Here, keep your money. That’s the best laugh I’ve had in ages. Come around to the barn and we’ll get you some manure from mucking the stalls.”

C was tempted to smack him anyway, but the five dollars meant a lot and the farmer had warned him while the bull was still far away. Besides, he really wanted that manure to get his bio digester started quickly. Before getting back on the bus C sealed his bucket of manure as well as he could, but even so the bus ride back got him constant dirty

looks from the other passengers. But he finally got home with his bucket of manure intact.

C decided that if he ever had to start a bio digester from scratch again, he would use human waste even though it would be a much slower start up than with cow manure.

As soon as C got home, he emptied the bucket into the barrel bio digester covering the yard waste already in there. He added water and the used cooking oil as he had learned at the library. Once the bio digester was full and stirred, he tightened the barrel lid, sealing it completely.

With his bio digester assembled and loaded, he checked it every day. After two weeks, the plastic garbage bag had puffed up to about half full.

C then lay a board wider than the bag under the bag. Spreading the bag out flat on the board, he laid a second board on top of the bag. The weight of the upper board would squeeze the biogas through the hose to the stove.

To test the stove, C set the burner on the sill of a window, then turned the stove valve to “high” and let it flow until he was confident all the air in the hose was cleared. Then he held the flame of a match to the burner. The match burned out, but the stove did not light. Figuring the gas had not yet cleared air from the hose, C tried again. He got a tiny, pitiful, flickering flame on just one side of the burner. He turned off the valve, and sadly watched the tiny flame flicker out. Why didn’t he get a circle of flame around the entire burner? Research had suggested the possibility of clogged openings. So C got a pin and poked at each opening in the burner. The first try produced half a circle of flame. A little more poking and he finally got a full circle of flame every time he lit the stove. He and W finally had the ability to cook and they could do it without needing to rely on an energy company!

But what about the explosion on Independence Ranch? How could he know his bio digester wasn’t leaking dangerous methane? After all the gas is clear and has no smell. C worried all night, but finally had a solution. He would assume the barrel was always leaking and counteract the danger every day. He would capture any leaks and blow them outside! Duct taping together several pieces of plastic sheeting, he encased the whole bio digester in plastic. Then he placed a small electric fan to blow room air into the bag and ultimately out an opening through the window. He would create a bellows system to accomplish the same thing without using electricity ... some day.

W wasn’t going to wait for some day. As soon as C and F had the burner set up in the kitchen, she filled her largest pot with water and dumped it in the bathtub as soon as it was hot. It took a couple of hours, but she eventually got her long soaking, hot bath. C and F were happy to follow her when she finally came out. After all, a hand-me-down warm bath was better than a cold shower.

M was impressed when he inspected the bio digester. He would have to think about how to use bio digesters in his buildings to replace fossil fuels. Now confident that his supply of cooking gas was working and safe, C used his last barrel to assemble and fill another bio digester so he would be ready when his first bio digester stopped producing. He would improve the design as he got more experience with the whole process.

C and W excitedly prepared breakfast the next morning. They didn't wait for F to come back home. The soup was much more enjoyable after they heated it using the biogas burner. They talked of getting pans and having fried eggs and bacon and toast! Eating cold leftovers from the restaurant was eating to survive. Real, hot breakfast food would be food to enjoy.

Chapter 13 DIY water purification

Not written yet

Chapter 14 DIY Refrigeration

Not written yet

Chapter 15 DIY Hot Water

C forgot everything else when he saw a hot water heater standing next to the dumpster. He asked the foreman about it and was told that there was nothing wrong with the hot water heater, but the building code would not allow them to leave it. It had to be thrown out, not because it didn't work, but just because it didn't match the building code. C knew any gas water heater can be made to work with biogas so he quickly put the water heater in F's home made wheel barrow and hauled it to their rooms. He hooked it up to the water barrels and tried heating water with biogas. The flame sputtered and went out repeatedly so he disconnected it. This time he would do his research not at the library, but at the camping supply store.

Putting some money in his wallet, he walked to the camping store, but walked in the front door this time. The owner didn't seem to recognize him so C didn't remind her of their encounter in the woman's alley.

C started to wander through the aisles, but the owner soon came up to C and asked, "Can I help you."

C, "I need to convert a natural gas hot water heater to burn biogas."

The owner, "Sure! We have kits for converting to burn methane and/or propane. They are pre-packaged with everything you need. Just adjust the volume for biogas." That night, W had a hot bath without boiling water over and over on the stove. And C had his first hot shower in months !

W peppered C with jokes all week. She had researched them online. Now she was testing them on her friend. She was also practicing her delivery, figuring out when to pause and how to emphasize particular words.

W, "C, Why was Cinderella kicked off the soccer team?"

C sighed but played along, "I don't know. Why?"

W, "Because she ran away from the ball."

C laughed, "OK that's a good one, tell it on Tuesday."

C, "W, I've got a serious question for you. I knew farmers got up early every morning but where does F go every morning?"

W, "Daily Mass! Can you believe it?"

C, "Really?"

W, "It's weird! Are you sure we can trust him? I never locked my bedroom door when it was just you and me, but I'm locking it now."

C remembered his reaction to his seat mate on the bus and understood her discomfort. What was surprising was learning that she had not locked her bedroom door when it had been just the two of them. It was cool that she trusted him so completely.

When Tuesday came, C & W arrived early, but found M already waiting for their regular Tuesday night dinner. All W's bruises had healed. She was no longer gaunt. Her hair was thickening. Her natural beauty was starting to be visible once again.

When her turn came, W walked confidently onto the stage. Told all her jokes without looking at her paper. And walked off to a standing ovation. When they announced that she had won the \$500 prize she ran and hugged the waitress who ran the open mike.

Chapter 16 Starting a Business

The next day, C arrived early for his job at the restaurant to talk to B.

C, “B, do you remember when M said our deal would only last until I got a better offer?”

M cautiously, “Yeeesss?”

C, “And do you remember when you said if I started I grow produce, you’d be my first customer?”

M, relieved, “Yes!”

C, “Well, I’m starting a side business growing produce. I’m ... we’re starting with mushrooms. Do you want a new source of fresh mushrooms?”

B, “Sure! I’ll look up some recipes that use mushrooms. What kind are you going to grow?”

C, “What kind do you want?”

B, “Lion’s Mane and Oyster”

F did indeed beg, borrow and scrounge food grade buckets. But he payed full price for his ingredients and the spawn/seed to plant his crops. It took a month to inoculate/plant his first crop. Two months to have his first crop ready to sell. B was delighted with the quality, so C and F put all their profits into increased production. C told B that they would expand into selling mushrooms to pizza places that do not compete directly with B.

The next Tuesday, W was late for their weekly dinner. F picked out a table of five for his mirror writing trick. They all readily took his bet. F was feeling really good. But then all five beat his time in mirror writing. Suddenly he had to come up with \$25! Then one saved him saying, “Keep your money. We heard about you! We’re dentists!” The whole table burst out laughing. F scurried back to his table and quickly sat down.

W surprised the three men. She made a dramatic entrance in a new dress and full makeup. It was the first time any of the men had seen her putting her prettiest foot forward. C and M were impressed. F was absolutely befuddled. As the others began to chat, F struggled to get his mind restarted.

When her turn came, W confidently walked up to the stage and gave her jokes from memory. Her performance was excellent, making the whole room roar with laughter over and over. She even recovered her composure when she got heckled.

A drunk at a back table, “Take me home and I’ll teach you some exciting jokes!”

W, “Anyone who would take you home, has no sense of smell!!”

When W sat back down, the drunk came over, “Drop these losers and join me. I’ll buy you a real drink.”

F, “You can’t talk to the lady like that.”

Drunk, “Who’s gonna stop me? ... You wanna take this outside?”

F yelled, “Yeah!” as he started to stand up.

C put his hand on F’s arm, getting him to sit back down while C said, “Remember, F, you let him have the first swing. That way he pays all the medical bills. (speaks to the Drunk) My hospital charges \$9,000 a day. What does your hospital charge?”

Drunk, “Uhh, I don’t know.”

C (laughingly to F), “Remember the last guy you took it outside with? He’s still making monthly payments!”

The drunk slunk out of the bar.

The cap of the evening was that W again won the \$500 prize for the night. Excited, she told C and F that she spent her first \$500 prize on the dress and make up. With this prize, she would buy a phone for each of them though they would have to pay the monthly subscription costs.

Two days later, W came down with the flu. F insisted on nursing her through it. He fed her. He held her hair when she vomited and cleaned up after wards. One time when she woke up, she caught him sitting at her bedside saying a rosary.

W, “F, why do you say the rosary?”

F, “Think of a kindergarten teacher. One day, the class is rowdy; interrupting each other, ignoring her, being mean to each other. It’s a bad day. But towards the end of the day one little boy comes to her just to give her a hug and say “I’m sorry I was naughty. Thanks for being my teacher.” Suddenly that teacher has had a good day. Now, God has a lot of bad days watching us humans. I want to be one of His kids that gives God a 20 minute hug every day.”

W, “OK. That’s nice.” And she drifted back to sleep.”

Chapter 17 Shut Down

True to his word, C limited his selling efforts to pizzerias. He lined up six who were ready to try his mushrooms. When one of his new customers canceled his standing order with his old provider, C's troubles began. As more pizza places became aware of this new source of produce the established supplier, V, became aware of C also. V was the largest produce wholesaler in Newcity. He was local, but his produce was not. V sold produce shipped in from other states, even other countries. He was not going to put up with this upstart competitor.

V resolved to squash the new comer, telling his drivers, "What's the use of regulation if you can't stop any Tom, Dick, or Harry from competing with you?"

V stopped by to visit R, the chief food inspector at city hall.

V, "Do you know food is being grown in a filthy, half rehabbed building? I wouldn't be surprised if they have to wash off cement dust. How can Newcity allow such dangerous food to be sold here?"

R, "Where is this happening?"

V, "At ____."

R, "What!?! That building doesn't even have an occupancy permit! This will be corrected by tomorrow night!"

Sure enough, at 9 am the next morning, R and a crew of inspectors swarmed all over M's building. The inspection was already done when M arrived an hour later and met with R.

Once R left, M sat down with C.

M, "My building passed with flying colors. I could have even gotten a pass on having it occupied except for your mushrooms, your bio digester, your hot water heater, your water collection system.

C, "What do I have to do?"

M, "Let me simplify it for you. According to this report, you, W, and F all have to move out and abandon everything you have here."

C, defeated, "I figured that. How much time do we have?"

M, "Look C, you have been a great partner in this project. You have kept my building and supplies safe. You have signed for deliveries when I needed you to do so. You have not allowed any vandalism or theft. You have not given me any trouble. So, I want you here. The building still needs watching. So, I will bring in a house trailer and set it up so you three can live in it until I get an occupancy permit."

C, "Will the trailer have three bedrooms? We have to have three bedrooms."

M, "No! It has two bedrooms. Look, the cost will come directly out of my bottom line. I'm only providing you with a trailer because you have proven yourself worth it. I'm

not going to double my expense because you guys are shy. Do you want the trailer or not?"

C did not want to go back to worrying where to sleep every night.

C, "Yes. Yes. We want it. Do I have to tear out my bio digester?"

M, "Yes. It all has to go"

C, "What about our mushrooms?"

M, "They have to go. The health department won't let you sell them anyway."

F, "We can grow them to eat ourselves, can't we?"

M, "I doubt it."

F, "I will research the health regulations and find out."

C, "Why the hot water heater? It's practically brand new!"

M, "Modified to burn biogas by a non-union member."

C defeated, "OK It will all be gone by tomorrow night."

M, "My guys will rip it all out. I have to be sure it's done right."

C glanced at M with surprise, then said, totally defeated, "As you wish."

C, "Do you have another building where we could grow produce?"

M, "I might. Let me do some research of my own."

When C told B there would be no more mushrooms for a while, B was not happy.

B, "Well, I guess I could buy from V, but you always provided me fresh, excellent produce. Get back to growing as quick as you can C, and I'll buy from you again. Right now, you've got a lot of dishes waiting for you."

C smiled and said, "OK boss."

Chapter 18 Starting with Something

At the next Tuesday dinner, M asked C to come for lunch the next day. At the lunch M took C into his private office.

M, “C, It’s tough having to start over, but this is not like last time when you started from nothing. You are starting this time with a strong reputation, including with me. Because of your reputation, I believe I have a good solution to your current situation. I want to know if you want it.”

C, “OK I’m all ears.”

M, “I know a guy...” C interrupted with a mocking, “Really?!” and a smile.”

M just gave C a knock-it-off look and continued, “... who owns a building that might be perfect for you. And I think we can get it for you.”

C, with enthusiasm “Really!” as he focused on each word M said.

M, “The building is half finished, has no utilities and is ugly as sin.”

C, sarcastically, “Sounds wonderful so far.”

M, “It is for you, because it’s a poured concrete building. That’s what makes it so ugly and that’s what makes it good for your produce growing. You don’t have to worry about rotting wood from the humidity of growing plants.”

C, “Cool. So how do I afford this building?”

M, “I will buy the building as is. Then I will sell it to you on contract.

C, “on contract?”

M, “Yes. We make a custom contract for the sale with whatever provisions we want.

C, “OK Have your lawyer write it up and I’ll sign it.

M, “I appreciate your trust in me but this is business. Yes, we are friends, but you want your own lawyer and your own ideas. That way, you don’t get mad and ruin our friendship years from now if things go badly for you.”

C, “OK so give me the broad outline of how this contract would work.”

M, “I buy the building with my money. I sell it to you on contract for more than I paid for it. I still hold title, but I can’t sell it to anyone else. You get the building without needing a mortgage.”

C, “Why do I pay more?”

M, “Because it’s such a great deal! You don’t have to put any money down! I’ll give you a year of no payments, then you pay me monthly payments until you own the building. It’s worth paying a little extra because without this deal, you couldn’t buy the building at all. Realize, you paying a little extra makes me willing to do the deal.”

C, “How long do I make payments?”

M, “That’s negotiable between us and our lawyers. The point is no money down and adjustable payments. I want you to succeed and am willing to take the risk that you might fail.”

C, “Why would I fail?”

M, “I don’t expect you to fail or I wouldn’t do this for you. Before I decided to do this, I talked to your customers. B says you are a great dishwasher. You recognize the importance of the job and do your best. He also says you brought him great produce at a fair price and never hassled him when he rejected some of it. Everyone says you are honest, reliable, and trustworthy. But could you fail? Yeah! For example, you could get hit by a truck.”

M, “Understand C, this is not charity, this is free market capitalism in action. I want to set this deal up so we both get what we want. I make some money and you end up with your own building where you can live and grow your produce. You have proven yourself a good person to do a little business with so let’s do big business together.”

C, “What about the costs of fixing up the building?”

M, “I’ll finance those too.”

M, “By the way, R was impressed with what you did in my building even though it wasn’t according to code and he had to make you remove it. He was especially impressed by you using Do-It-Yourself green energy. He said if everyone everywhere did what you did we’d end global warming! So, R, the head inspector, has agreed to guide you in your work on the new building so it will all be done right and you won’t have to worry about being shut down again. ... So, ... do we have a deal?”

C, “Enough that I’ll learn the details.”

M, smiling, “Perfect answer! Go find yourself an attorney ... a real estate attorney.”

Having no idea how to find an attorney, C went back to the library. Seeing L at the counter, C avoided her, going directly to the computers instead. He had just written down the contact information for a couple of lawyers when L came and sat beside him.

She sat quietly studying him for just a moment, then took a deep breath and said, “Library policy says I have to hold your library card while you use the computers.”

C looked at her and realized she wasn’t looking down at him any more, but was treating him with respect. He quickly gave her his card and apologized for not dropping it off before coming to the computer. She took the card and said “thank you” very nicely, hesitated before saying, “I want to apologize for how I treated you before. I have since heard about your Do-It-Yourself green energy and would love to learn more about it. Do you think you could tell me if I bought you dinner sometime?”

C thought a moment then answered, “OK How about Friday night. I’ll pick you up here at closing time.”

L, “That’ll be great. Thanks skunk man!” and she returned to the counter.

As C picked up his library card, L gave him her biggest, brightest smile and said, “Friday night!”

C had no idea where Friday night might lead to, but he was certainly willing to find out.

Chapter 19 Proposal

M suggested W audition at a local comedy club. F immediately offered to accompany her. As they arrived, F seemed more nervous than W. He knocked the chair over when he tried to sit. W calmly walked to the mike, gave her monologue from memory, smiling throughout. The manager congratulated her and offered to pay her for a 15 minute set before a live audience in two weeks!

F immediately invited W to a celebratory dinner, but did not lose his nervousness even though the audition was over.

As soon as they were seated at a restaurant,

F, “W, will you marry me?”

W, “Oh, F, I’d love to, but you deserve to know about me and my past.”

After some hesitation she continued, “Before I met you, I was ... um ... sold.”

F, “What?”

W, “My body was sold.”

F, “Wow. Didn’t see that coming.” He leaned back, froze and stared at her for what seemed like an eternity. Finally, he said, “Well. No girl dreams of growing up to sell her body, so who pulled you into it?”

Relieved, W replied, “A former boyfriend. At least someone I thought was a boy friend. When I was almost of legal age to drink, he bought me drinks and taught me to get drunk. Then he introduced me to pot. A couple months after that, he got me hooked on hard drugs. Then he sold me. Now you know.”

F, “You deserve to know my secret too. When I was just of legal age to drink, I used to enjoy beating guys up. I’d deliberately provoke some city dude to challenge me to a fight and have an excuse to beat him up. I stopped when I got a little older and almost lost a fight or two. Now I know your secret and you know mine. I can live with yours if you can live with mine. So, I will ask again. W, will you marry me?”

W, “Yes! Yes! A thousand times yes!”

The End