

The Accidental Survivalist

Dramatis Personae:

David Stephens - a man who finds himself muddling through a series of events that are later referred to as the end of civilization.

Cassandra "Sandy" Nollins - a nurse at the University of Iowa Hospital in Iowa City and member of Iowa National Guard Company A, 109th Medical Battalion.

Clifford "Cliff" Stentz - a drywaller from Mason City left homeless after the Valentine Outbreak
More will be added as the story grows.

~Prologue~

"Once upon a time, in a hole in the ground, there lived a Hobbit."

This was always my favorite story. J. R. R. Tolkien had resurrected from the ashes an entire genre for the novelist. Fantasy novels would hereafter be compared to the works of Tolkien making it the gold standard. If you go into the New York City subway system, at points you can see in the graffiti, "Frodo Lives!"

So I began a tradition. Every year, starting on my birthday, I would pick up *The Hobbit* and read through the story until I had finally arrived with Samwise at 1 Bag End and heard him say, "Well, I'm back." It was escapism pure and simple and in troubled times, much needed.

The thing that always fascinated me was the hole in the ground. It wasn't wet or nasty, or dry and barren; it was a hobbit hole, and that meant comfort. The vision of opening the round door and stepping into a home underground that was cozy, had room, and a nice fireplace would dance in my head. All it needed was a few lights, some old-time looking features, like a toilet with the reservoir hung high on the wall, and it would look, well, hobbitish.

Then something happened that would change my life forever.

I got my high school diploma.

Now don't laugh. It wasn't an easy thing for me to do. It wasn't that I lacked the facilities or talent; it was a sheer lack of effort. More correctly, I thought the studies weren't worth it. So I would sit through class, drawing this or reading a book, not doing a lick of homework, and acing the tests, most of them at any rate, and what ended up getting spit out of the public school system was a person who had no ambition, no drive, but liked a couple of things.

As life has its own way of dealing with things, so it dealt with me. On January 1st, at 2 am, my parents were driving home from a New Years celebration. They were drunk and so was the oncoming car. They collided head-on and my parents' car went over the rail into the ravine, plunging into the rocky creek far below. Neither survived and I found myself an orphan.

After that, I didn't know what to do.

So this is what happened:

Chapter I

The End of One Road

“The National Weather Service has now issued a tornado warning for Cerro Gordo and Hancock Counties. A tornado has been spotted on Doppler Radar east of Garner and is heading due west at 25 miles per hour. Seek shelter immediately.”

I didn't stick around for the rest of the message. I had that twitch I would get, the feeling that something wasn't quite right. Now I knew and it was time to head underground.

I went calmly down the stairs to the basement and headed for the old coal room. My parents had left me with this nice old house that used to have a coal furnace in it, so there was, in one corner, a room with solid concrete walls that was about 6' x 8'. It had a nice, wide doorway on the north wall. Still, it was the most secure room for a tornado. No windows, thick, beefy walls, and no clutter.

I got out the little am radio I keep down there and tried to tune into WHO out of Des Moines, but couldn't get anything for all the static. That confirmed one thing though; this was a mother of a storm. I turned it off quickly and lit a candle, just in case the power went out.

The power went out.

I looked up at the ceiling and said, “Nice timing!”

A huge, rolling thunderclap came right on the heels of my statement.

Okay, so the Big Guy doesn't appreciate sarcasm. I'll make a note of that.

I don't see what the big deal is anyways. All you do in one of these things is get in a secure shelter as far away from a trailer park as you can, because you know a tornado targets trailer parks. Then you wait.

And wait.

And wait some more.

And finally, when you are half asleep from sheer boredom, they sound the all clear siren and you go upstairs and check to see if there was any hail. Now and then you have a tree branch, or even a tree, downed, but a tornado isn't any big deal.

Come on, this is Iowa after all. We get them here. It's life. Same with hail, but that really messes up the crops.

Tornados are localized. Unless it hits you head on, or does a near miss, it isn't going to do anything more than some wind damage.

Now if you are unlucky, the tornado is a near miss and you get stuff thrown at you from the funnel. Nothing major here, just field mice, a garden tool, a Chevy Nova. The thing is, if you are inside and sheltered, you are okay.

Now if you are extremely unlucky, the funnel plows through what is rapidly becoming what is left of the house, you hear a racket to end all rackets, and then you look up and see the sky above.

If it's your time to punch your ticket, you at least get one heck of a ride.

The fact is, with preparedness being what it is, and construction being what it is; up here it is very rarely lethal.

So all this went through my head and I did some math and figured out after about an hour I should be in the clear, if the tornado lasted that long. Generally, they don't. Heck, less than 2% of them hit 200 mph winds, say, an F4.

I continued my line of thought here as a way of remembering my dad, who was terrified of the things.

The safest place to be in a tornado is a basement, and if you don't have one, the bathroom. In a trailer park, put your head between your knees, kiss it goodbye, then run for the shelter. Yeah, ok, get on with it.

The safest wall to be against is the one away from the inbound tornado. For a long time people thought, hey, I'll go to the southwest corner. I don't know why they would think that, because that's the direction tornados tend to come from. The wind will push in, and shove away from itself, so if you are in that corner, you are exposed. So my coal room was in the south east corner. You can't have everything.

Have a radio and an alternate light source. I got my candle and my battery powered older than the hills AM only radio. Gee, thanks Dad. Now I can make shadow figures on the wall while listening to static.

Have some water and food around, maybe a few other things. Whatever. I'm not going to get hit by it Dad. Even better. I'll go out and buy a lottery ticket when it hits me because the odds will be in my favor on that day. I figure someone will owe me big time.

I checked my watch. Still some time to go. I tried the radio again with no luck and so made some more shadow puppets on the wall. Look, an eagle. A beagle. A butterfly. A, what would you call that? Oh, an amoeba. That is one ugly looking blob. Why is it flickering?

That was when the sh*t hit the fan.

The rumble became audible at that time, and I realized that maybe Dad was right after all. It was time to duck and cover. I knew it was coming from the west, so I went to the east wall and kneeled down, bowing my head, and covering my neck with my hands in a sort of fetal position with neck protection. I figured my skull could take a blow, because Dad had always told me I was hard headed.

I grew louder and the rumbling was sounding something between a fast freight train and a howl like no other. It was getting pretty freaking loud.

And then it stopped.

I wanted to look around, but made myself wait it out for a few more minutes. After my heart slowed down a little bit, I realized that it was raining on me.

I looked up and saw that the ceiling was barely holding together, so I left the candle and radio behind and started to figure out how to get out of here.

The stairs were gone. Everything on the west side of the house wasn't there. I had to force my way

through the wreckage and try to push parts of what used to be my house out of the way without bringing the rest of it down on me. I managed, and then slowly climbed my way out of the basement and into the worst devastation I had ever seen.

I was standing square in the middle of a path of destruction about a quarter of a mile wide.

Nothing taller than four feet was anywhere near me.

I couldn't even find my car.

I began walking around in a state of disbelief as the rain poured and tried to figure out what had just happened.

Oh, there's my car. It's in the neighbor's swimming pool. Okay, I'll worry about that one later.

I stopped and looked down, shaking my head to try to clear it. When I looked up again, I noticed that sitting on the hood of the car was a full glass of orange juice.

Okay...

Discerning divine provenance, I drank the juice and sat on what was left of my Terrell and considered what had just happened.

I had been in a tornado.

It nailed me dead on.

The power is out.

Well screw buying a lotto ticket anyhow. I just won life's lottery and it wouldn't be right of me to expect anything else out of life other than this, to have survived.

I looked over at the ruins of my home just as the rest of it collapsed into the basement.

Okay, I can take a hint.

What are my options?

National Guard will be mobilized, that's certain.

Police should be patrolling soon to check on survivors along with the fire department.

Alright, I'll just wait right here.

I looked to the north and had an excellent view of two more tornados heading through the rest of the town, each rotating around the other in an obscene ballet.

Well, maybe the sheriff will show up sooner or later.

I looked south and there was another that decided he didn't want to play with the other tornados. It was heading south by south west.

Four tornados.

And I had survived.

Oh, David, knock it off. There were a lot of survivors here.

Not the guys in the hospital though. The tornado that was heading contrary to the others just hit it.

Well that sucks.

Okay, what do I need?

I held up my radio and looked at it.

Okay, that's covered. I should be able to hear them tell me how bad off I am without problems for about 6 or 8 hours before the batteries give out. The candle is under the house, along with whatever stuff I would have had down there. I have the clothes on my back, a cynical view of the world, and enough life left in me to bitch at guys that write statistical charts for insurance companies.

I guess that means I'll live.

Okay, I got a radio and I took my first step, deciding that I'm going to make it. Now what's next?

The factory I work at just got picked up. Whee! There it goes!

I had never liked my boss anyway.

Amazing. The roof was staying intact and just rolling along the ground with the tornado.

Okay, I'm homeless, jobless, and now clueless.

I shrugged.

Then rain let up and stopped.

I guess all I can do now is wait until someone shows up and tells me what I should do.

I double checked. At least the tornados are gone.

So I sat down on the car again and tried to drag up something that could distract me until somebody in authority did something.

You know, if I had a hobbit hole, I would be...

I looked up at the sky again.

"Well," I said, to no one in particular, "why the hell not."

I heard a noise and turned my head just in time to black out.

Chapter II

Insurance on Assurance

Mason City, IA (AP) - Mason City has widespread damage from 4 tornados which ripped through the city Tuesday evening. The death toll is uncertain at this time, but is estimated to be in the thirties, making it one of the most deadly tornado strikes in recent history.

The National Weather Service has called the storm of February an “aberration on the level of ‘The Perfect Storm.’”

The Perfect Storm, which was featured in the movie of the same name...

Des Moines, IA (AP) - The governor today declared a state of martial law for Cerro Gordo County, which was devastated by tornados spawned from what is being called, “The Valentines Day Storm.”

The tornados primarily hit Mason City, and weather experts are currently examining the damage caused to determine the intensity of the strikes. Early indications have led one storm chaser to declare, “I believe that there was at least one F5, with a possible F6.”

Climatologists disagree on the existence of an F6 tornado, which would have winds in excess of 300 miles per hour, while local weatherman...

Washington D.C. (AP) - President John Kelly today extended sympathies to the victims of the tornados which hit northern Iowa this Tuesday and declared a national emergency.

The declaration will enable FEMA to send people in to...

Mason City, IA (AP) - Iowa National Guard deployed into Mason City early today, putting into effect martial law and are enforcing a curfew of sundown.

“This is strictly a precautionary measure. We want to avoid any looting while the City recovers,” one sergeant explained, asking that his name be withheld.

Rescue efforts are ongoing as deputy sheriffs from the surrounding counties as well as volunteers from across the state and from Minnesota comb through the wreckage...

Mason City, IA (AP) - A riot was put down yesterday, as people were forced away from their homes, most of which had been declared unsafe.

Meanwhile, a fire blazed out of control on the northern edge of town, consuming 2 city blocks before it was contained. While the fire is still at this time burning, Mason City Fire Department Chief Callahan has stated that, “The fire is now under control.” He has also encouraged people to, “Find alternate housing if you can. Stay at a relative’s house until we have services in place.”

The mayor was unavailable for comment...

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I opened my eyes and saw that the ceiling was moving and was painted a nice shade of olive drab.

I decided to close my eyes and open them again, just to make sure.

It was definitely moving.

That color did nothing to improve my mood either, I can tell you that much.

After repeating this procedure several times, at varying intervals, the cutest girl that I ever did see came up to I while my eyes were open. Unfortunately, the camouflage outfit did nothing for her figure. Still, a dusky brunette smiled and said, "Welcome back."

"Shaynsh," I managed to gasp out.

"Just relax. I have a few questions for you. Can you answer them?"

"Yesh"

"Do you know what day it is?"

"Shorm ay?"

"Okay, how many fingers am I holding up?"

I checked. "Hoo, an a shum."

"She smiled a little wider and then said, "That's good. You took a nasty blow to the head, and we have been worried about you. We wanted to make sure you were stable before we moved you. Now tell me, do you know what your name is?"

"A-ih Hee-hen."

"I'm sorry, could you say that again?"

"A-ih Hee-hen. Ish in I alleh."

Her smile faded a bit as she tried to decipher what I was saying. After a little while, her smile really faded and she said, "I'm sorry, but you didn't have a wallet on you when we picked you up."

Oh, super. I've lost my home, my job, and I don't have any money. At least I have my health.

"Are you in any pain?"

I thought for a second before saying, "Ih ah ih-hehl."

"How bad is it, from one to ten?"

"Hore."

"Okay, if you need anything, let me know."

“Oh-ay.”

I watched her go, lifting my head up a little and decided that maybe females in uniform weren't such a bad idea after all.

Later on, as the pain was beginning to take hold, I tried to raise my hand up to wave down a nurse, but neither arm would move. I looked down, and discovered that my right arm was splinted from the shoulder all the way down, and my left had an I.V. running into it. I tried again, watching, and found out I just didn't have the strength.

So I decided that laying down might be the best thing I could do right now and closed my eyes and faded off.

I opened them again, hearing one guy say, “Should I run the siren?”

“Nah, he's going to be fine, let's keep the ride smooth and go with traffic.”

I closed them again as the man with the second voice leaned in.

When I awoke the next time, I looked around again, but this time without moving my head because for some reason it refused to move. There was nothing but shades of gray around me and I saw a couple of IV machines hooked into me. I tried to yawn, but even my mouth refused to open. There was the steady accompaniment of beeps and bleeps and even a few bleeps sprinkled in for variety.

I guess I had made it to the hospital.

I closed my eyes again.

The next several weeks repeated this pattern until one day; I awoke and was able to keep my eyes open. I was in a room and still couldn't move my head much, but I could enough to see where I was. I was definitely in a hospital, and it looked like there was somebody in the other bed. He looked at me and smiled and said, “Do you think you can stay awake?”

My mouth still refused to open, so through clenched teeth, I answered, “Yesh...”

“Okay buddy. I'll ring the nurse for you. Is that okay?”

“Yesh...”

So he hit the button and a voice talked to him from a speaker. I really couldn't make out the words, because the pain was starting to wash over me in a slowly growing wave.

My head and jaw hurt horribly, and my right arm looked like it was in traction or a cast that was suspended from poles on the bed. I was one hurting unit when the nurse came in.

My eyes opened a little wider when I saw her, and I tried to straighten up, but that wasn't much use. My Florence Nightingale from the National Guard was a nurse here!

She smiled at me and said, “Is there anything you want?”

“Air an I?”

“You are in Iowa City. They were concerned about your head injury, so airlifted you here as soon as we could. You have a very strong will to live.”

“Ain oo.”

“You’re welcome. Do you think you can write your name down for me?” She held out a paper and pencil.

“I ill eye...”

I moved my left arm and though it felt like lead, managed to make some chicken scratchings that, provided you were hallucinating, said David Stephens.

The nurse examined it and then asked, “David Steepes?”

“Eee hens. Eee hens.”

“Stevens?”

“Yesh, ish a ee ay.”

“With a ph?”

“Yesh.”

“Okay Mr. Stephens. My name is Nurse Nollins and I am very pleased to meet you.”

“Ee ott to shoh eatih ike ish.”

She seemed to have no trouble understanding me saying, “We got to stop meeting like this,” because she broke into a huge smile and said, “I think you are right. Now how is the pain, from one to ten?”

“Effen.”

“Eleven?”

“Yesh.”

“Okay, I will see what I can do.”

With that she left and after a short time, came in with something for the pain and a doctor arrived shortly after she left again.

“Mr. Stephens, I am Doctor Hopkins. We have been very concerned about you, but you are putting in one hell of a fight. Do you know where you are?”

“Io ah itee.”

“Very good. How many fingers am I holding up?”

And so it went on and on, him asking questions and me providing answers to accommodate him. After a while, I was giving him answers just to make him shut up and leave because whatever they

gave me, I was drifting off into a haze. I still felt the pain, it just didn't seem to matter that I did.

"Mr. Stephens, we would like to perform a CAT scan."

"Oh."

"We will set that up for tomorrow morning and make certain there isn't any brain damage."

"I eh oh."

"I see, you said no?"

I nodded and said, "Oh ay I oo at." and he seemed to get it.

The next day, I was finally apprised of my injuries. I had a fractured my radius and ulna once each, my humerus twice, and my face had been bashed in, apparently with a 2x4 that was found on the scene covered in blood. My jaw was a complete wreck with 7 fractures, and I could expect a long and painful rehabilitation. A social worker came in and explained that due to the nature of my injuries and the circumstances surrounding them, including the fact that I was a John Doe; the state was my custodian until I left and, provided that I didn't go against medical advice, that the state papers would cover my stay.

Then they had a few questions for me so that I could begin on the forms, which they filled out for me, but because of all the problems with communicating, it took a week to get the unemployment, insurance on the house and for further care when released, and state papers all done.

At the end of that week, the perpetrators were still at large.

With no family, I was pretty much alone, and that nurse Nollins noticed and began spending some time with me after she came off shift. Usually we played five card draw or 7 card stud poker, and I would work my left arm through the pain. We played for tootsie rolls that she brought in.

I learned her name was Cassandra, but she preferred to be called Sandy, and that she really liked tootsie rolls. I never could seem to win at poker with her, not that I could have enjoyed the spoils anyway.

They did the CAT scan against my wishes, but I didn't want to go AMA. They determined that what marbles I had remaining were functioning as bad as ever, and might have even improved a bit from the beating I took. I sure was educated about my former neighbors now.

And so on the Wednesday of the week following the Valentine storm, The doctor came in and had a sit down.

"I hear you are having trouble getting a place to live."

I nodded.

"I understand your social worker thinks that there are a couple of prospects for you."

Again I nodded. One prospect was a retirement home that wanted the good PR, the other was a homeless shelter back home that had taken no damage whatsoever. The second was full up, but I thought them trying to find a space for me was more than decent.

“Which do you want? The shelter or the home? Shelter?”

I nodded at the shelter.

“Home?”

I shook my head and gritted out, “Oh...”

The doctor picked up his chart and began making notations in it. “Mr. Stephens, there are some tests I would like to run to make sure you will be okay without having to come back to the hospital a lot. I’m scheduling them until you let me know that the shelter has a spot for you.”

When he left, I cried in gratitude.

Of course, the next day I was cussing through my wired teeth as I got poked and prodded.

But then Friday happened.

Chapter III

Clifford

Mason City, IA (AP) - Damage estimates continue in River City, while riots in the town have been suppressed. The police were aided by residents of Beje Clark, a halfway house for criminals, in restoring order. One resident of the facility, whose name has been withheld by request, said that “it seemed like the right thing to do.”

Warrants have been issued for 12 residents of the facility who have gone missing, while...

Des Moines, IA (AP) - The governor issued a warning today to those who would prey upon victims of the Valentines Outbreak.

“You should keep in mind that many lowans are armed, and that we will not take away the right of the people affected by this tragedy to defend their homes.”

Sarah Brady, a long-time spokeswoman against gun violence, said that “this is a sad time for those affected by these tragic events, and the dangerous policy issued by Iowa’s governor today points out that we need better gun control, to close dangerous loopholes. How many more people need to be the victim of gun violence?”

An NRA spokesperson....

Washington D.C. (AP) - President Edwards issued a statement today condemning the Iowa response regarding firearms. “If you tell a person that he can, he will.” An unnamed source high in the Edwards administration said “It is a sad commentary on society when we must arm ourselves...”

Mason City, IA (AP) - One man is dead and another in serious but stable condition in a shooting incident. An unnamed suspect was taken into custody by Cerro Gordo County sheriffs.

Wendell Thebes, 23, was shot twice in the chest and declared dead at the scene. He had a warrant issued for his arrest after he violated conditions of his parole while a resident of Beje Clark.

Oliver Young, 54, was also shot in the chest, and is currently at University of Iowa Hospital in Iowa City, where a doctor commenting on his condition stated that “he should recover, but a gun shot trauma of the sort inflicted here is very serious.”

The sheriff’s department has stated that the suspect is in custody, but 2 guardsmen and a deputy remain at the scene to take the place of the suspect.

“First indications are that the suspect was defending his home, and while we take the use of a firearm in commission of a crime seriously, we felt that placing a man there would further deter looters.”

The Iowa National Guard refused to comment on the incident, but assured people in a press conference that “All possible measures are being taken to ensure that there is no looting, and any incidents would be handled by the proper authorities.

Jane Reynolds, a resident of Clear Lake, said that “these are sad times we are living in...”

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I hummed along with the radio as it declared, “Monday you can stay in bed. Tuesday Wednesday hold your head. Or Thursday watch the walls instead. It’s Friday I’m in love.”

I like The Cure, and while this song was the kind of bubblegum music I don’t like, it was something familiar when nothing else was.

The first obvious sign of a problem was the checkpoint. There were guardsman manning the roads into towns and they asked for I.D. The driver produced his and a sheet of paperwork that covered me, but they had to call it in and verify things. It was an annoyance, but not a large one given the circumstances I was surrounded by.

While they were waiting for a reply, the driver tried, once again, to help me understand just how much time had gone by. It was nearing St. Patrick’s Day now, and while I had been aware for a week, I had been hospitalized far longer than that.

The doctors were surprised I had survived. The amount of damage I had taken was pretty severe, and I had written down the suggestion that by being knocked out, I had been limp and that might have helped. The doctors agreed, but one of them suggested I should go ahead and thank Someone for intervening.

So I did.

Finally the van got waved through and I was taken to Northern Lights Shelter.

The place had rules, like being willing to do a urine test, no drugs, booze, late night parties, over night guests, and so on. Donations had flooded in and I had to navigate around boxes stacked everywhere in order to make it to a couch. They provided me with razor, soap, a hot meal, a couch to sleep on, and clothes.

In spite of all that had happened I discovered that I was content.

I had to mash up his food into a mush that could be easily sucked down between teeth, so I ended up with interesting shakes like the macaroni shake and so on. My favorite was a hamburger shake. It looked like crap but tasted oh so good. The only drawback was that I had to reheat the cup several times. Soup was easiest though. Tomato soup got to the point where I vowed once I got his jaw unwired, I would never touch the stuff again.

By the time I got the wires removed, I had lost 30 pounds. I had found a successful diet that he wouldn't recommend to anyone I knew.

The problem was that I had lost a lot of muscle tone as well, except for my legs, which had stood up pretty well due to my going for walks around the neighborhood, always with 2 or 3 guys from the shelter.

The one guy that always was good for a walk with was Clifford. Cliff was the kind of guy that would always express his view, even though he was a liberal and in a minority in the shelter, but he would back up his beliefs. I thought he was rather foolish, but entertaining. The biggest thing was that I discovered, in spite of his beliefs being contrary to what I had experienced, he was very intelligent, and the only one whose company I enjoyed.

With construction booming, Cliff ended up getting a job hanging drywall. Good for him.

Eventually the casts came off and the wires were undone. I immediately went to a steakhouse and gorged myself on half a plate from the salad bar. My stomach had shrunk and it was all I could hold down, but it was so good.

After talking to the people at rehab, I took up Tai Chi, studying the Yang (pronounced young, but with a clipped ending) form. I found it relaxing and noticed my muscle tone improving from the half hour to an hour workout every day.

Once I was up to it, I applied for construction work with Cliff. He and I both worked long hours, usually on different crews, but it kept us both busy and out of trouble.

After a long while, the insurance company settled up with me and I got certified by the doctors to be recovered, though they said I would probably be able to forecast the weather better than channel 3 did. They also Okayed me to lift weights.

And so I got an apartment with Cliff so that we could save up more of our money and then paid the shelter in the form of a cash donation of \$100 for each week I had been there as a way of saying thank you. The woman who was in charge told me that I was welcome just to stop by if I desired, and so Sunday afternoons became a ritual with me going over there and shooting the breeze with friends I had made.

One night, I was surfing the web and on a whim, did a Google search on hobbit habitats.

I could not believe the number of hits I got on that very subject. It was over 80,000 and thus began the realization of a dream.

The style of architecture is called storybook, and it began back in the 30's, with people building fanciful castles and gingerbread homes. When Tolkien came on the scene, hobbit style houses

started becoming a big deal, and armed with that knowledge, I did a lot of digging over the next several months, drawing and redrawing concepts on my breaks at work and getting ideas on how I could realize this as an actual home.

Also, Clifford and I decided that a tornado shelter would make a great home, and he began to get interested in the project with me.

One day, in early fall, we were on the same job and began a running conversation while racing to see who could hang the most drywall before the end of the day.

Cliff began it with, "Dave, you know that house you keep doodling?"

"Yeah. I think I just about have it nailed down, but I still don't see how I can afford it. Spraying the concrete onto the forms, with them being so odd shaped, isn't cheap, but I don't know that I have much alternative." I quickly cut out an electrical box.

"Well what about using a culvert?" He was screwing his sheet into place.

"A what?"

"Culvert, like those big pipes they use when they don't want to build a bridge."

I stopped working for a second, then said, "Let's take 15 minutes, okay?"

So we stopped and went outside, both of us lighting up on the way out.

"Okay," I began, "What's this about culverts?"

"Well," Cliff began, "if you can find a concrete pipe big enough, I think you could use that instead of the other stuff you are talking about. I don't even think you would have to treat it or anything."

"No, I think you still have to treat it, 'cause of building codes, but that would mean like tarring on plastic sheets maybe."

He thought for a minute and agreed. "Maybe, but wouldn't that make more sense?"

I considered it. "I don't think that's the way I want to go, but I'll check it out, alright?"

Cliff said, "Fair 'nuff. You ready to admit you are licked?"

I laughed. "No way. I am so going to enjoy you buying my steak dinner."

By the time we were done, I had lost the race and bought him a steak dinner, but my pride wouldn't let me back down from him saying he could do things faster than I could. Him having about 5 years of experience doing this sort of thing should have given me a clue, but me not taking breaks, other than the one where we had been talking things out a bit, had helped me a bit. The margin I lost by was closer than he would have thought, but further than what I had wanted.

After dinner, I scoped out some sites and found that they didn't just make round and square tubing, but ellipsoid as well. I had an idea, and sketched it out quickly.

The plan was something like this. When you walked in through the door, you had about ten feet of

round tube that was made into an entryway/foyer type of thing, with a bench on one side and coat hooks on the other. The biggest advantage I gave it was setting things up so that it was like an airlock, with outdoor doors at both ends. I would put a floor in it wide enough for a hallway, which would allow for spaciousness and comfort without wasting much space. Benches, drawers and cabinets, and the coat hooks made the room look nice, especially if I gave it a wood/stucco finish.

Once you stepped inside, there would be a hallway with one way going to a kitchen, made of a large diameter elliptical pipe section, dining room, made the same way, pantry, and a large, domed living room with skylights made of tubes providing brightness in the dining and living rooms. A utility room went into the hill from the hall, containing the laundry, furnace, and other odds and ends.

I left the living room in the old style of dome construction that I liked.

If you turned the other way, you would come upon an office, a few bedrooms, and a bathroom or three. There was also another room set aside for storage and then I got the best, or worst, idea of all...

I found that there was a tube made that was big enough for a single stall garage. I made it a two car garage by making it longer, and then thought things through a bit more.

I decided to slope a narrow hall to the utility room, and ran drainage from every section into that room and put in a sump pump to protect the home. I thought it through some more and went ahead and made it two sump pumps with the second being set to trigger a little ways up from the first, so that the second would kick in only if the first couldn't keep up.

After a week of roughing this out, I showed it to Cliff.

He whistled after I explained a few things to Cliff. He whistled and said, "David, this looks awesome. I don't like the fireplace, but it looks like you have water running through the masonry.

"Yeah, it will heat the house without paying for natural gas, propane, or electricity," I said.

"That's pretty nice, but what if you used a windmill or solar panels?"

I thought for a minute. "Well, that would mean we didn't need to depend on power lines, so that's good. Hey, there was that case a while back where those guys had built a windmill and the power company wouldn't buy their electricity."

Cliff said, "What happened?"

I replied, "Well, they ended up paying an arm and a leg in legal bills, but it made it so that the electric company had to buy power from them if they were making a surplus."

"So how could you do this?"

"Well, I could extend the utility room and put a bank of batteries in there. The house would have to run on the power I made and I could pretty much be off the grid."

"Off the grid?"

"Yeah, I could rig a switch in it maybe so that if there wasn't power on the line, it would shut down the selling of the electricity. If you look at the skylights and put some water piping in there, we could soak

up some passive solar.” I quieted, thinking some more.

Cliff was doing some thinking of his own. “Dave, what if you put in a second bedroom wing, on the other side of the main rooms? You could have a duplex set-up without duplicating the utilities; everyone would have private space, maybe put in an extra room on either side for entertaining guests. If you could do that, I could probably scrape up a down payment.”

That derailed my train of thought. “Okay, let me think on that one for a while. I was going to say something else, but I need to think it out. The biggest thing I see right now is that you don’t like guns.”

Cliff nodded. “No, I think the laws are way too lax, but you have raised, in all of our talking, one interesting point.”

“What’s that?”

Cliff said, “That you would be willing to say no one could own a gun provided the criminals didn’t have any guns.”

I nodded. “Yeah, I said, and mean, that from the bottom of my heart. But you know that there are convicted felons, ‘unable’ to purchase any sort of firearm that use handguns to hold up liquor stores all the time.”

“I know, so I got to thinking about that. And I decided something.”

“What’s that?”

“Dave, I have no problem with you owning some guns, but make sure that they are safe in the house, gun safe, trigger lock, whatever it takes so that no one can use them.”

I considered for a long moment and nodded. “I think that’s doable. Let me think on this some more, and I’ll let you know what I think. Maybe we could go have dinner at China Buffet. They have some good General Tzu Chicken.”

“Done.”

So I went back to the drawing board, and made some more duplications than Cliff had suggested. I ended up with 3 doors, one off a patio area that went straight to the great room. There was a “powder room” and common entertainment room to one side and a dining room and the utility room split level to the other.

Each side then had its own breakfast area and kitchen (with a walk-in pantry) with the idea that we might keep separate schedules and if we wanted to throw a Super Bowl party you can’t have enough kitchen space to fix it all in. The entryway idea was done in duplicate, as well as each side having an office, three bedrooms, a bathroom, and a master bath room.

Off of each office there was a spare room that could be a hobby room. The intention was that on my side, I would have a locking security door and keep any weapon I purchased in it with the ammo. Cliff could do what he wanted with his side. Maybe it would make a good hobby room for him.

Sketching done, I picked up the newspaper and started leafing through it looking at undeveloped acreages that were for sale. I hadn’t had any luck before now, and I my winning streak continued.

So I called it a day.

The next morning, I was heading out to a new job site that was north of Clear Lake, and about halfway to Fertile, I slammed on the brakes of my rusted out Pontiac POS that I had picked up for \$500 and got out of the car.

There, on the east side of the road, was a dense growth of trees covering at least ten acres and it had no buildings that I could see on it. It also had a hillside that faced south.

And those trees! Oaks and Walnut trees thick as thieves and with huge tree trunks were bunched together. It was obvious to me that this had existed for a long time or it had been planted by the very early pioneers who settled into a new territory. I leaned towards the later, but the former was entirely possible.

It also had a big "No Trespassing" sign on it, so I made a note of where it was.

The trick would be how to maintain as many of those trees as possible while having the ability to put in the underground home and not having roots growing into the dad blamed thing. It could be done though.

I decided that I would call in sick tomorrow.

Cliff should too.

Good old Cliff the Drywall Hanger.

Chapter IV

Regis

I managed to convince Cliff to call in sick once I told him I had found the perfect property. He asked if it was for sale and I responded that, for the right price, everything was for sale. I checked the internet and showed him that land in Iowa went from \$1,200-\$3,000 an acre, and suggested that even if the farmer didn't want to sell it, if the price was right and we were sincere, he might be willing to part with it.

I didn't realize that information might be a bit dated.

For me, it was worth checking out anyway. All it takes is a trip down to the county recorder's office and pay a fee to discover who owns the land, as it is public record, and while you are doing that, you search for liens on the property, especially tax liens. No while some may object to paying taxes, I know I'm in that category, the state and the IRS want their money and are willing to take away land you own and auction it off to the highest bidder to offset those taxes. In Iowa, the process takes a while, so while I can understand, I don't have a whole lot of sympathy.

Hey, I don't make the rules.

As it turned out, the property was owned by a Regis Hutchings and there were no liens on file, meaning he had either inherited it or had managed to pay the bank back. Whichever was the case, I had no leverage I knew of, so the asking price would be high.

I found out where Regis lived and Cliff and I drove by, but didn't stop. From what we could tell, it

looked like he had two separate operations going, one was a hog confinement, and a rather large one from appearances, while the other was around 1,000 acres of nothing but corn. Seeing as the man probably didn't owe a dime to anyone, I knew the purchase of the land I wanted was in trouble.

Cliff shared my doubts only more so. He had done a bit more research into average land value and found out that in Cerro Gordo County, the land value was definitely high and going higher, with a 16% jump in price per acre from 2,001-2,002 to a whopping \$2,600+, and that was the average price.

So I suggested that the price of that spot, per acre, would be in the neighborhood of \$3,600 - \$4,000 an acre if they were offering it up for sale, which they weren't, so the asking price might be as high as \$5,000 if we could talk him into selling it.

Cliff finally burst out, "You aren't being realistic!"

"Cliff, I don't care if it's realistic or not. This is what I want. Hey, tell you what. I'll do the work, build the place, and I'll work it out like the one-and-a-half-plex we talked over, and you can rent your ¾ of the place from me for whatever the going market is for an apartment that size. I'll pick up all utilities and so on."

Cliff looked at me odd. "Do you really mean that?"

I nodded. "Hell yeah I mean it. Listen, the light bulb wasn't invented by a guy that sat there and said, 'It can't be done.' It was made by a guy that dreamed. Did you know that one of the most famous inventors, Franklin, went bankrupt and still continued his experimenting?"

"Yeah, but man, I'm telling you, you might have to settle on a different property."

I could grant him that much, however reluctantly. "I suppose. I am going to try though."

So I made a phone call.

An elderly woman answered the phone, "Yello."

"Hi. My name is David Stephens, and I-"

"Don't want none, got two of 'em already, don't call back now, ya hear?"

"No, no. I'm not a telemarketer. Could I speak to Mr. Regis Hutchings?"

"You aren't a telemarketer?"

"No ma'am, I promise."

"Hold on. REG!"

Oh dear Lord, lady, don't yell it into the freaking phone. I switched ears and tried to stop the ringing in the one that had taken the damage.

An elderly man got on the phone and spoke loudly. "Yello."

"Hi. My name is David Stephens, and I-"

“We don’t need any.”

Somebody just hit me with a 2x4. Oh, wait, someone already had. I ever find the SOB.... “No sir, I actually would like to buy something from you.”

“You aren’t one of those land developers, are ya?”

How to answer this one? “Yes and no sir. No sir, I don’t want to buy your land and parcel it off. Yes sir, you do have some land I’m interested in and I would like to build my house there.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone.

“Hello?”

He snapped, “I’m here. Who is this?”

“David Stephens, sir.”

“DORIS, DO YOU KNOW A DAVID STEPHENS?”

Cliff looked in from the kitchen at me, shaking with laughter he was trying to hold back while I gave the phone the dirtiest look I could manage.

“We don’t know a David Stephens.”

I sighed. “Sir, I want to look into purchasing a few acres of your land, I’m not certain how big the parcel is, but it isn’t being farmed.”

“Oh. Who is this?”

“David Stephens.”

“There isn’t a David Stephens that lives here. You have the wrong number.”

“No, I’M David Stephens. Is this Regis?”

“Well who do you want to talk to, this David fella or Regis.”

“I want to talk to Regis.”

“Well, this is Regis, who is this?”

“David Stephens.”

“Stephens eh? That name sounds familiar. Are you related to the Stephenses from California?”

“No, I’m David Stephens of Mason.”

“Who did you want to talk to?”

I took a deep breath. Dear Lord, give me strength. “Hutchings. Regis Hutchings.”

“You can’t be Regis Hutchings! I’m Regis, whose this?”

“DAVID STEPHENS!”

“Hang on. DORIS, DO WE KNOW A DAVID STEPHENS?”

I heard a faint “no” through the ringing ears and building headache.

“We don’t have a David Stephens here. You must have the wrong number.”

“No, I’m David.”

“Well why didn’t you say so?”

ARGH!!! “Is this Regis?”

“No, I’m Regis. Who’s this?”

“David Stephens.”

“I keep telling you THERE AIN’T NO DAVID HERE!!!”

With that, there was a click and I was hung up on.

I replaced the phone gently in the receiver, grabbed a hold, ever so gently, of the refrigerator door, and slammed my head into it as hard as I could.

Cliff was laughing so hard I thought someone would call the cops on us. The lady downstairs hit the ceiling of her apartment with a broom after a few minutes.

When he finally got himself under control, he managed to get out, “That went well.”

I gave him a nasty look. “Oh, shut up.”

Laughing again, he went off into the kitchen to finish supper.

Chapter V

Whose Line is it Anyway

Several months passed, with me having to put up with Cliff going, “Dave? He’s not here man...” constantly. I finally got to a position where I could laugh at that whole phone call. Sometimes I could be a bit thin skinned.

One day I decided to tune into WHO and listened to Jan Mickelson. I had discovered that he was one of the few people I enjoyed listening to with the talk show format. I learned a lot about constitutional law from him. Plus he would have guests that were good for a laugh, like Psychic Suzie. Listening to the two of them poke fun at each other and at callers, with the callers poking fun right back, was abso-freakin-lutely hilarious.

After that, I usually switched to something else, because they had a program called “The Big Show” that lasted an hour and a half that was nothing but farm market reports and “experts” from Iowa State

University agriculture extension office or Washington express how this climate or that law would impact imports and yadda yadda yah.

But then I heard something that made me smile. I felt guilty for the smile, but I smiled anyways.

It turned out that the price of pork had dropped so low that a lot of farmers were giving away hogs so they could write the expenses off as a donation. That's right; it was more expensive to raise a hog than you could get out of it when you sold it. To make matters worse for them, corn was at near record highs per bushel, but that was because a rain cloud had parked itself over southern Minnesota, Iowa, and the majority of Illinois, flooding them out.

Where I was at, you just about needed a rowboat to get to work.

The dam at Sailorville Lake was using it's spillway for only the third time in history.

I had leverage.

But there was more to it than that. I thought, after wrestling with my conscience for a while, that if I could buy the land, probably at inflated prices, maybe I could keep them from owing money to the bank. There wasn't a corn crop to speak of, and payments still have to be made on combines and what not. Maybe it would be enough to get him by.

So with mixed emotions, I said, "Hey Cliff. How do you feel about going for a drive?"

Cliff looked at me. "Where to?"

"Well," I said, "how about the two of us go talk with Regis."

"He's not here man." He busted out laughing.

"Yeah, Ha ha. You burned me on that one." I replied layering on the sarcasm so think you could cut it with a chainsaw. "Seriously, maybe we can do him a favor and he can do us one at the same time."

"Well, maybe. I have a date with Brenda tomorrow though. She invited me over to her folk's for Thanksgiving. Her mom makes this awesome stuffing. So we were heading out tomorrow for Mississippi."

"Have fun and don't get your feet wet."

So we ended up knocking off late. Sometime around 2 or 3 am, we finished the job and were free and clear until the following week. The boss had Okayed this beforehand with Cliff, who was nice enough to let me know sometime around 9, when I was about ready to smack him around.

So the next day, after sleeping in late, I dressed up a little, but casual, and went to the Hutchings farm.

I was greeted by a ravenous Chihuahua.

Now go ahead and laugh, but I hate those vicious ankle biters. The worst of it was, I wanted to make a good impression, so drop kicking it like a football was right out. Don't get me wrong, I really do love dogs, but not the toy breeds. Something is wrong with their wiring.

I knocked at the door.

“Who’s there?”

“David Stephens.”

“He don’t live here.”

Whatever I did wrong, dear and sweet merciful Savior, I sincerely repent of and it won’t happen again.

Inspiration took hold and I grabbed a hold of 4 pounds of remorseless fury. It took some doing to keep from being bitten, but somehow I managed it. Once I had the brute halfway under control, I knocked again.

“Who’s there?”

“Ma’am, I found your dog.”

The door opened so quickly that I almost fell over backwards. Out sprang Doris like a jack-in-the-box and I held the wriggling dog out at arms length as a peace offering. “SNUFFY!!!”

She snatched him right out of my hands, thankfully, and the dog gave me a look that seemed to speak to me, saying, “You b*st*rd. How could you do this to me?”

I just looked back at the dog with the expression, “That’ll learn you.”

Doris set the dog down and it promptly ran into the corn to get away from her with its tail tucked between its legs. I could sympathize.

At this moment I was rescued by a Buick that pulled into the driveway. A middle-aged couple stepped out, and the woman went to Doris, leading her back into the house, reassuring her that yes, she knew that Dave wasn’t there and that they would find Snuffy.

The man took my hand and smiled, pumping it hard in the way only those raised on the farm can. “Reggie Hutchings.”

“David Stephens.”

“Sorry about my mom. She and Dad are getting up in years. Think they have old-timers.”

“Alzheimer’s?”

“I know what I said. What can I do you for?”

“Well, I was driving by on S28 and saw a piece of land that had these beautiful trees on it and I thought that maybe I could talk to the land owner and see if I could see if it was for sale.”

“David, is it?”

I nodded. “That’s me.”

He smiled a bit and said, “Well, I might be persuaded to part with it. I can see where you got

confused. I'm Regis Jr."

"Oh," I said eloquently.

"Take a walk with me."

This is Major Tom to ground control. I'm stepping through the door. And I'm floating in a most peculiar way....

We headed out to a machine shed, and talked about the weather's impact and how the market had dropped out on hogs. I said, "I don't know much about farming, but someone once explained it to me like this: A normal 'good' year is where you take seven years in a row, none of them good, and average them out."

He laughed at that one and we had broken the ice.

"Reggie, I sympathize with you. I don't know how you guys do it."

"Dave, I just don't know what else there is that I want to do. I've been working this farm since I could walk, and it's a habit I can't get rid of. Maybe I'm a farming junkie. I'm glad you stopped by though. Let's talk turkey on this land. Want to see it?"

"I would like nothing more," I said.

We both piled into his Dodge 1 ton and headed out.

"So what's your interest in this land?" Reggie asked.

"Well sir, I lost my house to a tornado, and wanted to build a new one and that little acreage is so beautiful, I just fell in love with it. I would have to take out some of those old growth trees, but I think not too many, and with that south facing hill, I was even considering doing an earth home."

"Well, that sounds like a doable proposition. Dad was always afraid of some city slicker coming in and parceling up his land. To have it go to someone that appreciates what's there..."

We pulled in, stopping at the chain drug across the drive. He got out and continued his monolog while opening it up and bringing us into what I could only describe as a dream. "No take these trees for instance. Near as we can figure, they were planted to shelter some long gone home over a hundred years ago. They may even be as old as the state itself!"

"A hundred and fifty years?" I had guessed right I thought, but it still was staggering.

"Oh, some might be older."

"Wow. Oh wow."

"I hope you aren't planning on cutting them down."

Now I had to be honest, but I didn't have to like it. I walked with him to the south side and showed him what I had in store, working from memory. "Right about here I plan on putting in an underground dome, with a culvert extending this way and that way. I will probably have to cut into the land a bit more here, here, and here, but I think, all told, I wouldn't cut down more than 5 of these monsters.

Hopefully less. And I don't mind telling you I'm not the happiest about it. I was thinking of milling the lumber out of them and using them to finish the interior with, so lots of wood, warm and homey. I just don't want to hack and burn; these trees deserve a much better fate than that."

Reggie looked at me impassively, considering what I had said. I felt the need to explain further. "I kinda think like the natives on this, if you have to kill it, use the whole thing."

He nodded. "Nothing worse than shooting a deer, harvesting the antlers, and leaving the rest to rot. Speaking of which, would you mind if I hunted the land?"

I knew right there I had him. "Provided you don't leave the meat to rot, just let me know when and I'll make sure everyone's off. How is the market affecting you?"

"Well, it's hurting us pretty good," he said, "but I've been doing this long enough to know that we can weather it without selling this parcel off. Now I know you want the land, and you know I want money, so let's talk turkey. There are 23 and $\frac{3}{4}$ acres here, and it wants the attention of a man like you. Now can you tell me something that might interest me?"

"Sir, I believe I can call to your attention with forty-two fifty per."

"Well now son, this land has been in my family as long as I know, and something like that, well, there's sort of a sentimental attachment like. Now what you said has got me listening, but I couldn't bear thought of that without something to soothe the way. Now I know you are going to do right by this land, so that makes the parting easier. I say your offer is fair, but to soothe the ache in my soul, couldn't you find it in your heart to give a man, say, 5 big?"

I considered. I had offered, he had countered. What was fair and right? He knew by the look in my eye he had me, but I knew if I did this right, he would come down just a bit more from that. "Sir, I hear your words, and they wound me deeply, but I'm afraid that I couldn't help my fellow man anymore than forty-six fifty. Now sir, you've said I'd do right by this land, and that makes my heart sing, but I do ask you to help a man who lost everything he knew on that black Valentine."

"Well now sir, I can rightly say that I know who you are and how you suffered. I read the papers and am mightily pleased to see you hale and hearty, and I could not, in my right mind, accept anything more than forty-five." When he said that, he handed me the keys to the gate.

Can I get an "Amen!" from the congregation?

And then it hit me, he underbid my last offer. What can you do in a situation like that except shake hands and call the lawyer to make it final, binding, and legal? "Reggie, I'll make sure that the hunting provision goes from you down to your grandchildren. Final and binding to anyone who owns the land, provided you call first."

"You get the costs, and I'll get the coffee," he said, putting his arm around my shoulder as we walked back to his truck. "Of course, you never asked about utilities, so I'll save you some time. They ain't none."

And just like that, I had the land to build a dream, for \$106,875 plus fees.

It was cheap at twice the price, even if it was something along the lines of edge of town rather than 4 miles away.

I frankly think it surprised him when he was mailed a check drawn off my account.

Cliff was watching a show about the Exxon Valdez and its long term impact on Alaska. I didn't honestly know what to make of it. So long as ships sail, they will run afoul of things. On the other hand, the captain being under the influence at the time, so I had heard, made it a bitter pill to swallow. I guess that is what is meant when one says apathetic.

It's not about not caring, it's about not knowing how to feel because you are torn.

Finally, the day after Cliff had come back from his trip but called in sick to recover from his vacation, I came in after I had finished working. Needless to say Cliff was so enraptured that he didn't hear me come in. So I grabbed his jacket, turned off the TV, and threw the remote at him when he yelled, "HEY!"

I tossed him his coat and said, "Come with me if you want to live."

He grabbed his jacket and sulked some, but headed for the door, locking it up behind me. "You know your impersonation of Ah-nald sucks, don't you?"

"Yeah, come on."

And we drove there.

Exasperated, he said, "Oh, come on! You aren't still mooning over this land, are you?"

I pulled out the gate key. "Not anymore."

He blinked. He smiled. "YOU S-O-B! YOU GOT IT!!!"

And so I gave him the tour.

Chapter VI

There is Unrest in the Forest

I made two smart moves after the sale of land was finalized just before Halloween. I hired an architect who had experience with storybook architecture and I hired a general contractor who, I found out later, had studied to be an architectural engineer. Between the two of them, I had what could be considered experts.

The person who hired them couldn't be considered an expert by any stretch of the imagination, nor could you say the man was frugal. You could say he had a dream, but that might be a disservice to Martin Luther King Junior.

So the two experts had to deal with someone with an idea and make it practical.

After the land had been surveyed, and everyone consulted, and some of my father's doom saying finally listened to, the house plans were finalized. It wasn't quite a duplex, but the common rooms were few, so it was called "The Buck Seventy-Five House" by Fred, the architect, and the name stuck.

While all of this was going on, I found myself working very hard to try to figure out exactly how the

house could go into the site, and the biggest problem of all was that the best place to do it had trees. To be more specific, there was the mother of all trees.

MOAT was a Northern Pin Oak that stood about 95' tall and had branches that reached over 50' away from the trunk. When we measured how big around the trunk was I was astounded to discover it was just over 13' 4" around, making it 4'+ in diameter.

And it was right in the way of where the house would go.

Cliff and I nearly came to blows over cutting down any of the trees, and to me that was asinine to say the least, but even I had to admit that it would be a shame to cut down MOAT.

After we had argued over this numerous times, greatly straining our relationship, I was watching Extreme Machines on The Discovery Channel and saw something that made me yell out, "Cliff, get in here!"

He arrived just in time to watch hydraulics forcing a huge spade into the earth. There were many of these, and each spade created a part of a wedge that, once fully driven in, scooped the tree up out of the ground where it could be transplanted.

We looked at each other and I offered a deal.

"Cliff, you and I agree that MOAT is beautiful, right?"

"Well duh Dave. There is no way we could cut her down."

"So," I said, "We don't cut her down."

"But where are you going to build the house then?"

"Where MOAT is."

"Dave, have you been getting into my brownies? They said they could move a tree over 14" diameter, but I am pretty sure they can't handle a 4' diameter tree trunk."

"Oh ye of little faith. Cliff, I'll make a deal with you."

"Okay..."

"Cliff, if I can get MOAT moved, we are still going to have to fell the trees that are in the root system, okay?"

"You are cutting down trees, Dave. That's not good man; you would be contributing to the ozone depleting."

"Cliff, I'm not going to argue that with you. What I suggest is we go ahead and plant some new trees; say we, together, plant three or four trees for each one we cut down."

"But all those years of growth!"

I lost my temper. "THEY ARE GOING TO DIE ANYWAY!"

He sat there, looking at me like I had lost my mind.

I continued. "Everything that is born dies. All of it. Fish, tree, duck-billed platypus, all of them die. Now you can nurture and use that to your advantage, or you can let natural selection run its course and leave it there to rot!"

At this point, he was gaping.

"Now you listen to me," I went on. "You can help me or you can get out of my way, but I AM going to do this with or without you. This is what is going to be done. I will save MOAT, but the rest of them are not going to be hack and burn. I WILL use them to both finish and furnish the house and what can't be used for that will be burned in the fireplace to heat us or they will be sold as lumber. The property is NOT going to be pristine, but it WILL be MANAGED IN ACCORDANCE WITH GOOD CONVERSATION PRACTICES!!!"

I had rendered him speechless for once.

I still had more to say though. "This means dead trees will be removed, gardens will be planted, animals will be kept, and this will help the environment because there will be no transportation of goods that we can grow or herd."

I stood there, fuming at him, and he finally found himself getting angry and started in on me. "It's people like you that are what's wrong with the environment today. You sit there and say you are doing this and that, and what does it end up accomplishing? Depletion of topsoil through erosion, massive amounts of methane released from cattle herds. The subjugation of a land and peoples native to it to a growing consumerist gluttony that is only exceeded by your vast lack of knowledge of unintended consequences. It's people like you who gave the Native Americans smallpox, stole reservations that you gave them, subjugated blacks to the hands of a master, and-"

He suddenly stopped talking because my fist had found its way into his mouth.

And then the fur ball really got going.

When the dust settled, I had lost a tooth; we both had black eyes, in his case one that was swollen half shut, and were too exhausted and sore to move. Breathing heavily, he looked me in the eye. "Why did you hit me?"

"Don't you ever compare me to slavers again." I was already pushing myself up, getting ready to go again.

"I never meant-"

"B*LLSH*T!!! You knew exactly what you were saying."

We glared at each other for I don't know how long, and I finally relented. "Look, I'm sorry. Let me grab you a beer and I'll tell you what I'm doing and you can decide if that's what you want to be a part of. If it isn't, fine, but this ain't worth a friendship."

I grabbed us each two beers, one to drink and the other to hold against the worst of the wounds we had inflicted on each other.

"Okay. What are you doing Dave?" He was still madder than a wet hen, but he seemed to be

listening.

“Look, all I want is to have something that is like an old homestead. Self-contained, low impact and conservation minded. It’s not my fault the trees grew where they are, and you know as well as I do that they might be native species, but the trees there were planted. The land is all wrong for that to be anything but prairie land.”

And we stopped talking for a bit and between winces and gasps as we tried to get comfortable; we seemed to reach common ground.

Cliff began negotiations. “You are planning on moving MOAT and not killing it?”

“Yes, but other trees have to die to move MOAT,” I said.

He said, “And you are going to utilize what you fell.”

I nodded and instantly regretted it as my brain sloshed around. “Yeah, that’s the plan. Let me ask something. I’ve heard some laws require lumber companies to replant up to 7 trees for each one they fell. What if I replanted 10 to 1?”

“Well, let’s say 2 to 1,” he countered, “And then 1 each Arbor Day.”

“I can do that if you will accept my apology,” I said.

“Well, only if you accept mine too.”

We shook hands.

“Oh,” Cliff added, “Can we plant the property and try to restore the natural prairie while we are at it?”

“Not at the cost of a garden, but sure. Why not? Saves mowing anyways.”

And so with the great compromise of the mighty oak, we began working out things.

Oh, our relationship recovered. It was based on intelligence, and we did respect what the other brought to the table. Both of us had crossed a line, and it’s not important who crossed what first. It was a sensitive issue and somehow we had managed to get through it with nothing worse than a lingering bruise or two.

Winter set in and while we were unemployed, we got a lot of work accomplished. We measured out and staked with long, thin rods a giant circle, centered on MOAT that was 50’ in diameter. Everything that was a tree that wasn’t MOAT in that circle had to be felled. On top of that, we staked out what had to be excavated for the house and that had to have trees felled as well.

In all, 9 trees had to fall.

Cliff and I identified the species of each tree that was coming down, which is okay if you want to be general about it using the bark, and toted up an order for 4 shagbark hickories, 2 maples, and 12 oaks, mixed evenly between white and red varieties. These were to replace the ones we had to cut down and then some that were varieties suited to our area, and we would put them on the extreme southern border to provide some summertime shade for us.

Cliff got together with people and had massive orders of seeds for native Iowa flowers and grasses delivered to the apartment.

I managed to get the trees felled on my own. Cliff didn't want to help that week and I respected that. He helped with the trimming to get them to where a sawmill would pick them up and turn them into lumber. We were still left with a massive pile of branches, and I cut those up for firewood. Twigs were even held onto to be bundled into faggots for the fireplace, so that nothing would go to waste.

Cliff began to understand conservationism a little when I began that process, of how you use all of whatever you take and waste nothing.

By the time spring began to think about showing up and the ground had thawed, the excavation of MOAT was ready.

Now when you transplant something that big, you have to take a huge ball root with it. The diameter of our ball root was 40". To take anything less would kill the tree outright. I had things set up so that we took a little extra, and hoped that nearby trees would not suffer much if they lost part of their root systems.

Then there was the hole that got excavated to receive MOAT.

In the end, we basically had to call in house movers to accomplish the task, but accomplished it was, and it only took about 1 week from start to finish, with the root ball of MOAT being flooded with water the entire time. No one was injured, and the small empty pasture that we had on the property, situated between two low hills, now sported a single huge tree.

We will know by the end of summer if the tree made it.

To me, it was worth it.

To Cliff, well, the look on his face was like the ones you see on Christmas cards, the ones where the little kid sees Santa and is just pure joy.

Top soil from the entire project was placed into one large pile and tarped, because that soil I wanted saved. Subsoil had its own pile, untarped, and we actually got to do a little bit of removing bedrock.

That slowed things down quite a bit.

And after all of that, we had several cords of firewood, a tree to keep an eye on, and a huge hole in the ground that faced south.

And a lot of damage to the surrounding soil. Heavy equipment took out everything in the vicinity of the house that was once lush and green and turned it into a muddy mess, unless it was sunny, in which case it was just ugly.

Ah well, they say Rome wasn't built in a day.

Chapter VII

Eternal Summer

After the trees had been taken care of, I consulted with the contractor and the architect and we got

the schedule lined out along with what would have to be completed before I took delivery on the house. I wanted to do the interior finishing work myself, because I always enjoyed woodworking and it seemed to be the place to showcase my talent in that area.

The well was dug, power lines to a spot for a windmill laid in, and utilities were hooked up from the county. I wanted to go “off the grid,” but these things were required for zoning law. I wasn’t supposed to get a well dug but I did it anyways. It’s amazing what a well placed bribe can accomplish.

The next things was laying in the concrete. A balloon was inflated the size of the living room, rebar was weaved together for support, with some lengths sticking out into where the ground would be to act as a faraday cage. I learned from the tornado experience to ignore my late father at my own peril.

Next they sprayed on the concrete and let it cure. After that, holes were cut into the mess for the main entryway, skylights, and other connecting rooms.

After that, the pipes came in and we had most of them round, but some were elliptical. Those we went horizontally or vertically with depending on if it was a hallway or a room.

Connecting pieces had been custom made and resulted in another concrete pour once everything was all hooked up to ensure that the place was watertight. Rebar was everywhere due to the grounding effect I wanted, and it was a bit of a hazard.

Pipes and wiring were run under the floor joists, and each tunnel had a small drainage pipe to the cellar pantry. Sump pumps were installed, the entire assembly was tarred to make sure the water stayed out, a Radon system was installed, and then the earth was moved back over the house, creating a small hill. Topsoil went on top of everything with added fertilizer and organic material to improve the quality of it.

You would think the sod would be next, but it wasn’t. Windows were installed, and the “stonework” that would be exposed was put in by a extremely good mason.

Then, with the house 90% done and the time spent constructing 10% done, I took delivery.

Sod was installed and a garden laid out for the following year.

Finishing work was done by yours truly, one room at a time. Wood floors were predominate, with a wood stove in the kitchen to cook on and for show, the fireplace in the middle of the great room, and so on.

So you are wondering what happened next?

I’m happy to inform you I lived a long life and died peacefully in my sleep.

Now I know that isn’t exciting, but I wanted to point out a few things with my tale.

1: If you aren’t prepared, you are inviting disaster.

Tornados happen everywhere and all the time. There are times when they are more likely, both during the day and during the year, but they happen even in January.

I wasn’t ready. Sure I had a room to go to and everything, but I had no cash reserve I could access, no food stockpiled, and if I hadn’t been put in the hospital by some thug (who was never caught but

he will be held accountable), I would have been in big trouble.

2: It is never too late to get ready.

Well sure I closed the barn door after the horse had run off, but there were other horses in the barn. I had myself a shelter that I lived full time in with another family who helped with the land management. Maybe we didn't always agree, but we respected each other. Sometimes that's enough.

3: Things could have been worse.

Look at the aftermath in New Orleans and tell me I'm wrong.

4: Don't be afraid to ask questions.

There are stupid questions, contrary to popular belief. The stupid question is the one you know the answer to and still ask. Having said that, I would much rather people asked stupid questions than no questions at all.

5: Why did I end the story here?

Because for David, it did end here. He had TSHTF, but it wasn't the end of the world. He recovered and vowed not to be a sheeple and I think from the very beginning he wasn't, just ill-equipped.

6: What a dirty rotten trick.

I don't think so. I wanted just once to write a happy story, and I think I managed. Future stories may well be dark and sinister, but there is a lighter side to survivalism, so let's celebrate it.

Author's Note:

I had fun writing this. I had to do a little something for myself and picked up this story as a way of distracting myself from the other story I am still writing at this time, my view of The Ark. The feedback I got was much appreciated.

I had to find a style of my own, and think I have. Writing things in the first person is something I may have to continue doing, as it allows me to better identify with the character.

Yes, there is more in the works. I have more than one story in the planning stage and there is another which is going to be started soon. It won't have the rapid posting that I have been doing, but that is because I want to really take my time and find my voice. Style is technical, but to voice things, ah, now that is art.

Thank you one and all.

And in the immortal words of Monty Python...

"But I'm not dead yet."