

# **Open Your Eyes**

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# Prologue

It's kind of sad, really. I went through the first twenty-six and a half years of my life with my eyes shut. Then a twenty-one-year-old, blond-haired, blue-eyed bimbo was the one who finally got me to open my eyes and see. Well, Debbie was not really a bimbo but she did have blond hair and she did have blue eyes. And she was pretty. We dated for about a month before we drifted apart. Like I had been drifting for my whole life before then I guess.

I didn't think I had led a sheltered life. I did do eight years in the military where I got to see the world on the taxpayers' dime. Matter of fact it was just after I got out of the military that I hooked up with that girl that changed my life, even if she never knew that fact.

When I lived at home on the ranch I just did what my folks told me to do. When I was in school I just did what my teachers told me to do. When I was in the military I just did what they told me to do. And I got by just fine. And I never had to make any of my own decisions because there was always someone else to do my thinking for me.

Was it even my own decision to join the military? My grandpa did and my father did so it just seemed like I should join too. I guess it was still my decision but I just drifted into the military. I guess I just drifted through my whole life then I met Debbie and we started to go out on a few dates. She must have been a very smart gal or she sure had good intuition or something because she had me figured out after the second date.

On our third date, I asked her what she wanted to do that evening. That is when she lit into me. No, that's not fair, she instead just started to talk to me about me, something no one else had ever done. First, she told me that I was the guy and I should take charge and decide

what we should do. She said it was fine to ask but about her preference but that was not what I really wanted. What I wanted was for her to make the decisions for me. We just sat and talked for maybe an hour or more. She asked me many things and honestly, most of my answers were, "I don't know." Or sometimes "I don't care."

She even asked me about some current events which I knew nothing about. Then she asked if I even knew who the current the President was, that I did know. We went out a couple of times after that but I think she wanted someone who could think for himself and who gathered enough information so he would know enough to make logical decisions. At the time I was not that guy. I think I am now. You see I changed after a met and dated Debbie. Not the next day but I did change. For the better, I think.

# Chapter 1

I was thirty when my folks died. I was not living at home but did not live too far away. I was in the closest bigger city about a hundred miles away. I was much closer than my sister who lived near Boston. My sister Jamie was well-to-do I guess you could say. She was a little over a year older than me. She was a go-getter and she had gone to college. She had a successful job and a successful marriage to a successful man. They both flew back for the funeral but did not stay long.

Jamie and I did talk about the ranch while she was here. The ranch was only one hundred and sixty deeded acres though our parents had leased about another thousand acres on which to run the cattle. And there was currently about three hundred head of cattle.

You would think that all meant there was a lot of money involved with the land, the cattle, and all the equipment. But there was also debt. Between their deaths and the funerals, I did a whole lot of thinking. I had made a decision and I talked to Jamie about it while she was here. I asked if she would sell me twenty acres of the empty land in one corner of the property. She said yes. Actually, she said she did not want to and did not have time to deal with the dispersal of the land, equipment, and cattle. She asked me to take care of everything and after the debts were paid from the sale of everything I could have that twenty acres for the work I would have to do. Any money left over we would then split fifty-fifty.

While Jamie was there she did take some mementos home with her. What was left she said I could either have or just sell with the property.

I sold the cattle right away. I did not have the time to deal with them. It was a lot of cash but it was not quite enough to pay off all the remaining debt. Most of the debt was medical bills. Over the next several months I sold off much of the personal property and ranch equipment. I spent several weekends cleaning up the place. The buildings were all old. When I talked to a realtor I was told the house no longer was up to code and as it sat the county would not allow it to be inhabited and that would have to be stated in the listing. The agent said the house was not in good enough shape to be even considered a fixer-upper. I got a second opinion from another agent from a different agency and they said much the same thing. I had also gotten an estimate from each as to the suggested selling price minus the twenty acres. The price they each came up with was very similar.

I went to the county and had the land split so I could have the separate twenty acres. I also had a lifetime easement included so I could put in a long driveway along the edge of the property going back to my twenty-acre parcel. Then I listed the property. I had kept Jamie informed through the whole process. She was fine with everything I did. Actually, she thought I had gone through more work than she would have done.

The property did sell eventually. All debts and fees were paid and Jamie and I split the remaining money. There was a little equipment still on the property that was not included in the sale. I had stipulated that I needed two months before I would remove that equipment. The new owners had no problem with that because they had only bought the property for an investment and currently had no intentions of building a house or renting out the property. It would just sit vacant.

When I had the cash in hand I spent it fairly quickly. I had a well drilled on my twenty acres. Then I hired someone to do the cement slab for large steel building that

would include my living quarters and a large garage. I also had a septic tank and leech field installed. The pipes for well water and drainage were incorporated into the slab and stubbed out in hopefully the correct spots. I continued to work at my job a hundred miles away and hoped everything would go smooth because I was not there to watch over the process.

The slab was done and about three weeks later the company that sold me the steel building arrived and put up the shell. It was fall and I did go out and plant a few fruit trees but only a few because most I would plant in the following spring. Then the building just sat there over winter.

The inheritance money was now just about all gone. I did have some savings of my own from my time in the military and the time since when I was working steadily. Using that money I bought a complete solar power system for my house. At first I was going to do the solar install myself but instead, I had it done by a licensed installer while I kept working to pay for it.

With the addition of the solar power I now had power and water all the time at the property. I had also moved the couple pieces of equipment from the old ranch into my new garage/house. In the spring I did install a heavy-duty gate with very heavy duty posts at the beginning of my driveway. My house could not be seen from the county gravel road. I had never had a real driveway put into my house. Mostly it was just an old field drive that followed the property line. I did nothing to improve it and by the end of spring, it did not look like a driveway at all with all the weeds growing up in the rutted drive.

Over summer I spent weekends and two solid weeks of vacation time working on finishing my house. The outside was done by the steel building company but the interior was just a big empty space. I put up stud walls, ran wiring and plumbing, installed sheetrock, painted and then

installed appliances. By fall the house was about done and I was broke. But now I owned a completed new house free and clear.

I had picked this spot because a creek ran past here and it was the only wooded land on the old homestead. About five acres of my twenty were wooded. The creek ran steady all year long though at a reduced amount in certain seasons and depending on rainfall during the year. The house sat plenty high above the creek so flooding would never be an issue. I had only lost two of many fruit trees I planted last fall and the rest I had planted this spring.

Now when I left the house I always used a heavy lock to lock the new gate leading to my property. Few people even knew the house was back there and those that did know likely thought it was just an equipment shed.

So why did I spend all my money on a house that was too far away from my job so I could not even live there? When it was far enough away so even on weekends it was unhandy to visit? I think I had a good reason but only time would tell me for sure if I made a good choice.

Fall was here again and winter was coming. During the summer and fall, I did go to my house at least two weekends each month. Gradually I brought some of my possessions to the house and I also gradually furnished it with mostly garage sale and thrift store finds. I did splurge and bought two new mattresses to go on the thrift store bed frames. Also as money was available I bought food and other common supplies which I left in the house.

I did keep heat in the house over the winter months. Not much heat but I found a setting on the two non-electric gas heaters so the house would not drop below about fifty degrees. The windows on the south side of the house did provide a considerable amount of passive solar heat too. The roof overhang was perfect for keeping the sun out during the summer while it was high enough to let the

sunshine in during the winter. The single five hundred gallon propane tank was still over half full when spring came and the weather warmed again.

With spring I did some additional work out at my “ranch”. I had done little during the winter so I was able to build up a little money in my savings account again. I watched personal online sale sites and was able to buy a second five hundred gallon propane tank for only two hundred dollars and with a borrowed trailer and some muscle I was able to load, haul, and unload the tank myself. On my next trip, I brought the required pipe and fittings to hook up my new-to-me propane tank.

I had to wait a month and half until I had enough money to have the propane tanks both filled. It was mid-summer then when propane was at its lowest price which worked out perfect for me. We didn’t get as much rain this summer and I had to go to the “ranch” every weekend so I could water all the fruit trees. I watered heavy each time and never lost any more trees.

The extra propane tank and fill were my big purchases for the year. I did add little things to the house including mundane things like additional food and items like toilet paper. I also did some minor landscaping and I did a bunch of trimming of the existing trees near my house. I was happy because I was making steady progress.

Things were not so good away from my ranch. The so-called great economy we were enjoying was starting to fall apart. The Federal Reserve said things were still going great but did drop interest rates again. They had already dropped rates a total of one and a half percent over the last year and they did not have much more that they could do. This time it was another quarter percent. Rates were now only one half of one percent. There was talk of them bringing back Quantitative easing where they just print more money from thin air. They had got away with it once but many people questioned if they could do so again.



Consumer credit hit another new record high again. Nothing new about that because it was always setting new highs. People just did not have enough money to pay their regular bills and were being forced to use credit card debt just to get by another month. Everyone knew that would not end well. Recession was in the air and many wondered if it would just be a recession or something much worse.

## Chapter 2

Iran was making noise again as they did every so often. I admit I did not think it would amount to much. But I was wrong (not an uncommon occurrence). They were again saying they would close the shipping lanes near their shores unless sanctions were removed from their country. They had said this in the past but apparently, the years of sanctions were having dire effects within their country. I guess they thought they had nothing to lose so they attacked.

They hijacked three full oil tankers and then they sunk two other empty tankers. Shipping was closed down and the price of oil shot up to over a hundred and ten dollars per barrel instead of the fifty to sixty dollars per barrel where it had stabilized for the last few years. Gas prices doubled in the United States and the average citizen just did not have the money to afford gas at the new higher prices.

We didn't have a carrier task force near the Middle East at this time and likely that is why Iran picked this time to start the trouble. We did, however, have a couple of other ships nearby, a destroyer and a missile cruiser.

Our President told Iran to release the three oil tankers that they had hijacked and return all their own ships to port in the next two days or we would take direct military action. Iran did nothing and at midnight their time we attacked military sites and ports in Iran. We used cruise missiles first and followed that with many bombers; mostly the bombers came all the way from US soil. Israel also took this opportunity to assist us in the Iran attack and even Saudi Arabia contributed some to the attack.

For a war, it did not last long. Apparently, our President had spoken to his counterpart in both Russia and China before we took any military action. At first, they made no public comment on the attack even though they both were supposedly allies with Iran. Three long days after the attack was over both countries said the attack was justified to open the international shipping lanes.

Iran was hopping mad but just the one night of intense bombing had severely reduced their military capacity. Iran was almost jumping up and down ranting but other than that they appeared to be mostly impotent.

It took a week before oil started to slowly go back down in price again. I guess everyone wondered if the one-day war really would only last one day. Gas prices were even slower to fall again. After a month gas prices were still way over half again what they were before the big rise. The result was a big hit to our very shaky economy.

I really don't think the short war did it because we were almost in recession before anything even started but those high fuel prices sure hurt. When the quarterly GDP figures came out they were negative and most of that time period was before the one-day war. Jobs were being lost and unemployment was on a steady rise.

I was still working and I really went into frugal mode. I saved every penny that I could. With some of that money I bought additional food. I figured with the Federal Reserve now going full-out with their Quantitative easing and also cutting interest rates another quarter percent, I expected inflation to hit soon. Print more money and it just about had to lose some value.

Unfortunately, I was proven correct. Prices on just about everything were going up. Nothing was worth any extra, it was just the dollar was worth less than before. When the next quarter's GDP numbers were released it was official and America was in a recession because we

had two consecutive quarters of negative GDP. No one was surprised I don't think.

The economy was playing out just about as I had expected. Not that I was super smart but I had taken to following everything closely that was happening and I could see things were not as rosy as the media and politicians were constantly telling us. I was not alone and I watched many websites for alternate versions of the news and speculations by economists. That is why I had spent all my money on that house out in the boonies. And that was why I had stocked it up with food and other supplies. I had just planned ahead in case I was proven correct about my assessment of our faltering economy. I took no pleasure in being right.

Once the media and our government could no longer hide the fact that we were technically in recession and everything was more out in the open, it seemed to get worse faster and faster. Unemployment had been hovering at record lows and now was rising faster than ever. Prices on consumer goods were going up but things like real estate were falling. The stock markets fell but not as much as I expected. Then I realized that the markets real value was falling because the value of the dollar was dropping and it was dropping faster and faster as it fell.

World trade was dropping off at an alarming rate. It was not just the United States that was in economic trouble. It was the whole world. Every country was tied economically with many other countries and so each one was dragging the others down.

Then my hours were cut at my job and I was one of the lucky ones. Many people were being laid off at my job and just about every other job too. I was spending my money as fast as I could, buying mostly food but some other supplies too. Money was seemingly worth less every day so the best advice was to spend it as soon as you got it.

Inflation was becoming hyper-inflation. Wages could not go up fast enough to keep up with inflation. Eventually, it just did not really matter if you were working or not because money soon had very little value. When the place I worked shut down and I was out of a job I went directly to my bank and cashed my final check and closed my bank account, taking the money as cash.

I went to my apartment and packed everything up that was there which wasn't much because I had moved almost everything to my house in preparations for this time when I would move. I left the city and made a stop at the last small town before my house where I filled my truck's fuel tank and spent most of the rest of my money at the little grocery store. I did still have an emergency stash of money at my house. Next, I stopped at the local post office and rented a post office box and did a change of address so I could get my mail here. Then I drove to my ranch. I closed and locked the gate behind me when I arrived. I would not be leaving any time soon.

## Chapter 3

It was now late spring but it was early enough so I could still plant a garden. When I had done some landscaping I had went back to the now-empty place my folks had and there I “borrowed” some mostly decomposed manure to spread at my place where I had planned a garden in the future.

I had taken an old small tractor with some implements as part of my inheritance with Jamie’s blessing. That is what I left at the original ranch after the final sale until I could build my large garage/house and have a place to put it. The tractor was in my garage and the implements were stored outside. The tractor made short work of making a garden plot and incorporating the manure. I had planned ahead and I had bought enough garden seeds for at least three years.

I had also taken many old hand tools of all kinds from the ranch before it sold. I now put some of those to work as I planted my first garden. It was the first garden at my own place but I had helped my parents plant a garden every year that I lived with them. I was not a master gardener but I did have some experience.

Besides the garden, there was also the creek near my house. When I was a kid I used to fish in that creek. There were a few trout that could be caught in some of the larger pools. The creek eventually flowed into a lake several miles from my house. The lake certainly contained fish but the lake was also fairly close to the nearest small town. When people got hungry that lake would be fished very heavily. I would leave the lake alone and just hopefully take a few fish from the creek within a mile or so of my house.

Besides my own fruit trees that would require a couple more years to produce I fully expect to use the fruit from the now-empty ranch where I had grown up. It is vacant and it would be a shame to let all that fruit go to waste. And it is within walking distance.

I knew every source of food would likely have to be exploited by everyone if this bad recession turned into a major depression or a complete collapse.

I had a television at my apartment but I had just left it there when I moved out. I really doubted I would have any reception here at my house anyway. I did have a couple of radios and listened to them every day to keep up on the news. The news on the radio was all bad. Sounded like there were countless riots in just about every major city. The radio never really said what the riots were about though the food stamp EBT cards were mentioned. With the very high food prices, those people on food stamps would only be able to buy a small fraction of the needed food every month unless the government dramatically increased the monthly amount on the cards to keep pace with the rapid inflation. I doubted that our government had the ability or the will to do this and maybe that was what led to some of the riots.

The National Guard had been deployed in most big cities it sounded like already to help quell the violence. With the now low employment and the huge inflation, I bet even those people who were still working were having a very tough time keeping food on the table. Starvation would quickly make people desperate and starving desperate people would be capable of almost anything, including horrible things. That is why I built this house way out here.

My garden was growing fine as I had hoped and expected. I did have the pressure canner that had been my mother's and I had almost countless canning jars from the same place. I did purchase many boxes of canning lids

so I should be set up for several years. I did also have two electric dehydrators that I had bought for cheap at thrift stores. I would use those for the fruit and maybe some of the garden produce. I had read up on using the dehydrators on the internet. I had discovered those dehydrators had many uses. My mom had never owned one.

My off-grid house worked just fine. And my garden was producing as much as I hoped it would. I have always been a meat-and-potatoes guy so I had planted a large section of the garden in potatoes. The meat I hoped would come from the hunting I would do when fall arrived. I did have a bunch of canned meat that I had bought along with all the other food I had stored. The stored food was great and had always been a good idea for everyone but its real purpose was just to keep you fed and allow you the time to grow, harvest, or kill your own food.

I was able to catch a few fish in the creek just like I had done as a kid. I did not try to catch them all because I knew there was not very many in the small creek. I caught a few mainly just to vary my diet. One of my stored items was a four year supply of inexpensive vitamins. They did not cost much and I figured they sure couldn't hurt any so I was taking one a day. At least when I remembered anyway.

Well, I am now doing my first ever canning. I had watched my mom do it all the while I was growing up. I had also got a book on canning and had read that before I attempted to do it the first time. I am canning everything in just pint jars because it is just me here to eat stuff. I even used a few half-pint jars for some stuff. Quart jars were just too big I figured and might lead to some waste. Food was too precious to waste.

By the time the garden was about done producing the fruit was getting ripe and I was kept very busy. Through the years my folks had planted many fruit trees.



At this point, some of the trees had declined and were barely producing anything but with all the trees there was a ton of fruit. Lucky for me they all did not get ripe at the same time. But they were getting ripe too fast for the two dehydrators to keep up so I processed and froze a large amount of the fruit (mostly apples). I just froze them in big bags and I would dehydrate them later. I did have a freezer plus the smaller freezer above the refrigerator. Most of the freezer space was empty anyway except for frozen bottles of water. The frozen water was there just to supply a mass to retain the cold in the freezers.

All the dried fruit I just put in quart fruit jars. I could see what was in them and could open them and take out what I wanted then seal them again. It kept the bugs and moisture from getting to the fruit and both the jars and lids were reusable again and again. Finally, the trees were done and I picked the last of the fruit. At first, I thought I would immediately dry the big bunch of frozen fruit but then I decided there was no hurry. They would keep fine frozen for quite a while. Also in the winter if I ran the dehydrators it would put additional heat and moisture into the house. Always a good thing in the winter months.

Fall was here and I picked many acorns from the stand of oak trees about a mile or so from my house. I had read up on eating acorns and what to do to use them. It was easy enough. As a kid, I had tasted acorns and they were very bitter. I discovered that if you soak them in a couple or more changes of water the bitterness went away and acorns were then quite tasty. The only bad part was getting them out of their shells but really I had nothing else to do anyway. I often toasted the acorns in the oven on a cookie sheet while I had something else in the oven. The acorns were mostly stored in the freezer. I thought they might go rancid from the oils in them if they weren't frozen. Whether true or not they stayed fine while frozen.

When it got cool enough outside I started hunting. There was an old rule about waiting until after the first frost before shooting rabbits. I don't think that old saying held water but I waited until after a frost anyway. Why take any chances? There were many rabbits around, mostly jacks. I had no trouble eating rabbit and I hiked far and wide hunting them. I did make sure I did not shoot them all. I could hunt for miles in every direction and the exercise did not hurt my any.

## Chapter 4

I ended up with many rabbits in the freezer. Then I switched to deer. It was cold now and I was using heat in the house every day. I had no trouble killing a deer and I shot many in my life on the ranch. We had always processed our own meat so that was nothing new to me either. This time I tried making some of the meat into jerky. My mom had never done that as far as I remember. But like with many things I had planned ahead and had read up on making your own jerky using the oven.

My first batch was small just to try it out. I thought it turned it fine and made a bunch more out of the deer meat. Later I shot two more deer during the winter months. All three of the deer were bucks so it would not be as much of a drain on the deer population. About half of the meat was turned into jerky. Running the oven even at the low two hundred degree temperature for making jerky still did a lot as far keeping the house warm.

Between my garden, the old ranch fruit trees, and the meat from hunting, I was setting pretty in the food department. I still had a fair amount of store-bought food left yet too.

The winter is normal here. I keep the house very cool to save on the propane. I have discovered some free heat besides the passive solar that comes in through the windows. I don't use much electric power and on sunny days I have power to burn because I went over-size on the solar array. So in the mornings, I wait until the battery bank is back up to full and then I plug in a standard electric heater. It uses the solar power that would normally just go to waste once the batteries are at full charge. So I get

about five thousand BTU's of heat for most of the day. As the sun starts to drop I shut down the electric heater. The five thousand BTU's of heat isn't a huge amount but it helps and it's totally free. I don't run it on cloudy days or anytime the batteries are low.

According to the radio, I have things great compared to many people in America. With not much to do in the winter other than hikes or rabbit hunts, I listen to the radio a lot just to pass the time and allow me some contact with the outside world. That world is pretty messed up right now it seems.

The radio does not go into detail much about just how bad things are but they can't help but give out some bad news. Apparently, prices are very high and the high fuel costs are hurting many people. People cannot afford to heat their homes. On top of that local governments do not have enough money to plow the snow off the roads at all or very often depending on location. They have been forced to raise wages a huge amount to get people to work and they still have the large cost of the fuel for the plow trucks.

Snow was not a problem here. We got snow off and on but it always melted within a week. On one nice warm day before Christmas, I drove to the little town near me. It had been about three months since my last trip and I needed to get my mail. I never got hardly any mail but I thought I needed to check it after so long. I drove in illegally because I had no truck insurance anymore. I don't know if anyone had insurance anymore or even if it was still offered. I brought my cash money with me.

The drive was certainly uneventful and that is what I had expected. No one was near the small lake when I drove past which was not a surprise either because it was winter after all. It was a Tuesday and I drove directly to the post office. I got there around eleven in the morning and I was hoping they were open. On the radio, I had heard

about the postal service closing some offices and shortening hours in all remaining offices. Mail delivery was also being cut way back. In some rural areas, it was down to once per week and some were expecting additional cut-backs.

Luck was with me and the post office was open. I had remembered my key and was able to get my mail. There was not much mail there and seeing it I decided I would wait until late spring at least before I picked it up again unless there was something that brought into town before then.

I did a quick sort through the mail while sitting in my truck. It was basically all garbage or at least no longer pertained to me. The last time I had gotten my mail I had looked through it while here and that time I had gone back in to buy a money order to pay my yearly property taxes. I had mailed it after also buying a stamp for three dollars. The county did not know I had a house on my property so the taxes on the land were very low. I did not worry about filing income taxes in April because I had made very little money this year and taxes had already been taken out of the little I did make.

I did not bother going to the grocery store. The one gas station looked like it was still open and I slowed way down when I drove past. The handwritten sign said gas was seventeen dollars per gallon but the sign looked old and was likely out of date. I just drove back home again locking the gate behind me when I got there.

So went the rest of the winter. The radio station that I listened to was still transmitting but seldom had any real national news on it anymore. Maybe it was just too depressing for them to report and really what difference would it make anyway. Everyone knows times are really bad and not getting better. What else is there to know? Did it make any difference if the radio reported that seventeen more people were found dead in some city back

east today? Or a severe snowstorm would be hitting Chicago tonight?

I don't think there is any air travel anymore. I know for a while the radio had said that air travel was being cut way back because of the expense and lack of passengers. The radio had not mentioned air travel now for some time. I'm sure road travel was cut way back too. Who could afford to travel when gas was likely now twenty bucks a gallon? I wonder just how much truck shipping was happening. I assume food and fuel shipments would have to continue or many people would surely die. The radio never said anything about that either. Maybe they did not even know.

My cell phone had quit working a few months ago. I even wondered if the landline phones were still working. When my phone still worked I had talked to my sister a few times. She just said that things were really bad. I had offered for her and her husband to come live with me but Jamie had said she did not think they could even make it out here anymore. She said they had waited too long. I told her she was welcome if they did decide to try and make it. She thanked me but seemed very sad. That was about the last time I talked to her. She knew where my house was so they could show up any day. I did not think they would show up here though. That fact made me quite sad. I think the whole world is full of sadness now.

I am tired of winter. I think February is the worst month. It is still winter but you are over the hump and know spring is coming. We did get a little more snow so far this winter than usual which is great because we can always use more moisture. I've always heard that snow contains a lot of nitrogen so it is good to improve the soil. I don't know if that true but it sounds good and makes you feel better about getting snow. It is boring now that the radio station is off the air.

Now I can say spring is here but it is not warm enough by a long shot to plant the garden. I did haul more old manure from the old ranch over here to enrich the garden soil more. I worked it in and while doing so I enlarged the garden a little more. I had brought the old ranch fuel tank over here and had filled it with diesel fuel for the tractor just after I had the house built.

I have decided to go into town. The potatoes I saved for planting look really bad and I don't think very many will work for seed. I kept them in the coolest spot in the house so I know they were cool enough but they still look really bad. I'm going to see if I can buy some in town. Whether I get any or not I will still plant all these rough-looking ones too.

So with all my remaining money in my pocket, I'm off for town.

## Chapter 5

It was a wasted trip because the grocery store was closed. Actually, I did not see any place still open. Even the post office was closed and not just for the day either it appeared. I looked at the lake when I went past and saw no one there and I wondered if it had been fished out. That was my best guess.

About three miles from home I saw someone walking ahead of me. They looked like they were drunk. I moved into the other lane so I could give them a wide berth and just before I passed them I saw them fall down. They had long hair I noticed and I thought maybe it was a woman. Against my better judgment, I stopped to see if she was high or drunk. I was betting on her being drunk, if it was a her anyway.

When I walked up to her she was face up and looked dead. Her face looked awful with just jutting bones with skin over them. She was carrying a small pack on her back. I was almost afraid to touch her neck to see if she was alive because she looked so frail. I touched her neck and found a pulse. I left her and went back to my truck. I opened the passenger door, picked her up, and set her on the seat then buckled her in so she would hopefully not fall over. When I picked her up it felt like she weighed maybe fifty pounds or something. She was tall, maybe a couple of inches shorter than me but must have been just bones.

I drove home and she never woke up even when I carried her into the house. I figured she would be dead by morning if she even lasted that long. I took off her backpack and her jacket. That's when I found the pistol in a holster on her belt. I took her belt off too along with her



shoes and laid her on the spare bed. Then I covered her up.

I had no idea what to do with her. I went and got a wet washcloth and pressed it to her forehead. I did this for a long time and re-wet it a couple of times, finally bringing a pan of water in the bedroom with me. She never stirred at all. I admit I checked a couple of times just to see if she was still alive and was surprised each time when I still felt a pulse.

I left her and made some quick soup that I took out and put in the sun oven to warm. Then I went back inside and continued with the cool compress on her forehead. I almost jumped out of my chair when her eyes opened. She saw me and her eyes got big then she tried to move but I easily held her down.

“Easy. I’m no threat and it wouldn’t matter if I was because you are so weak. Just lay still for a minute. Concentrate on just breathing. Nod your head if you understand me.”

She did nothing for a minute then I saw her nod slightly.

“I have made some soup. Do you want me to get it for you? Just nod.”

She nodded a little faster this time.

“Your pack and other stuff is on the floor near the bed. Yes, your gun is there too but please just leave that stuff for now. Trust me for now until you get some strength back. I’ll leave now to get you that soup.”

I saw her eyes follow me as I left her. The soup was plenty hot when I checked it and brought it inside. I put just a little in a bowl with a spoon and took it into the spare bedroom.

I could see that she had moved though she was lying still when I went back into the room. On a hunch, I looked at her stuff and I saw the gun was gone now.

“Okay, I see you are stronger than I thought. Please don’t shoot me even if the soup tastes bad. Do you want to sit up and feed yourself or should I feed you so you can point the gun at me the whole time?”

It’s possible she tried to smile but I wasn’t sure. She then appeared to be trying to sit up.

“Hold still a minute. I am going to touch you and lift you up to a sitting position. Don’t worry you only weigh about five pounds so I will have no trouble.”

She did not resist and I easily lifted her up then held her with one hand while getting the pillow upright behind her for support. She took her hands out from under the blanket and laid the pistol next to her. I held out the bowl and she slowly grabbed it. The bowl did wobble some but I could see she was working to hold it steady.

I held my hand under the bowl to assist her in holding it steady. She seemed to approve. Then she slowly started to eat. After the first few spoonfuls, her pace picked up. I guess she liked it. The soup was gone very shortly.

“I have a lot more of the soup but I don’t know if you should eat too much at once. Just nod if you want to try eating more now or we can wait and you can eat more later.”

“Maybe I better wait a little bit. The soup was good.”

“She speaks! Maybe you should lay back and rest. I can help you down again if you wish.”

She tried to slide back down by herself but it did not work very well. Without asking again I just gently helped her.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Rest and I will check on you in an hour or so.”

I left but peeked into the room a half-hour later and she appeared to be sleeping. Some later when I checked she was still asleep. Then a while later I went into the

room but this time I knocked first though I did not wait for her to answer. She was awake.

“Ready for more soup?”

“I need the bathroom.”

“Okay I’ll help and you lean on me as much as you need to.”

She was obviously a little stronger as she slid her legs off the bed. I put an arm around her and took most of her weight and led her to the spare bath. When I saw she could stand by herself I switched on the light and shut the door as I left.

Several minutes later I heard the door open and she took a step out while leaning on the door jamb.

“You have electric and running water?”

“All the conveniences of home. Want to sit at the kitchen table this time?”

“Yes, that would be great. Ah, I might need a hand.”

I said nothing but held her weight again as I led her to the kitchen. She sat in the first chair we came to at the table.

“I’ll be right back with the soup.”

I went back outside because I had put the soup back into the sun oven to keep it warm. It was very warm and I was glad I had a potholder as I carried it back inside.

“It was cooking in a sun oven outside. I’ll dish some up for you but be careful this time because it is hot.”

I grabbed a clean bowl and filled it with the soup this time. After setting it in front of her I got a glass of water for her too. I then sat across from her and watched her eat until the bowl was empty.

“More or wait again?”

“I think I better wait though I want more.”

“I think that is a good plan.”

“So why did you bring me here?”

"I guess because I could not just let you die on the road. I thought you would just die at my house though and I am surprised you made it."

"Been a long time since I had any food. What was the meat in the soup?"

"It was rabbit this time. Sometimes I use venison in the soup but I like rabbit best."

"And there were real vegetables too. You have that much food?"

"A bowl of soup is not very much food. But I do have a little bit of food here."

"And the power and water?"

"I have an off-grid home. Is the power off in town?"

"Yes for a couple of weeks now."

"Where were you going on the road? That road doesn't really lead anywhere."

"I just was walking and hoping for a miracle. I was out of options anyway."

Her head was starting to droop and without asking I got up and helped her back to her bed. I think she was asleep before I left the room. I checked on her about an hour later and she was still sleeping. I was in the kitchen later snacking on some dried apple pieces when she walked in and sat down at the table.

"You're getting stronger. Need more soup? There is about a single bowl left."

"If it's okay I would love some more soup."

"Coming right up."

I popped it in the microwave for a minute and brought it over to her. I also dumped some of the dried apples in a small dish and set next to her along with a glass of water. Then I sat across from her. She ate some soup and then held up one of the apple pieces and looked at me.

"Dried apples."

She nodded and tried a piece before going back to the soup which she soon finished. Then she picked at the apples.

"You can have more food but I am reluctant to give you too much at once."

"This has been more food than I have eaten for quite a while already. I better take it slow. My name is Betty."

"I'm ...". It took me a minute to remember my name.

"I'm Dave. Pleased to meet you."

"You hesitated. Is your name really Dave?"

"I have lived here alone for a year and have only gone to town twice for very quick trips to the post office where I only talked to the postman once. I saw no one in town when I went in this morning. I'm not used to talking to anyone."

"Wow, a hermit! And yet you brought me home with you. Do you need company that bad?"

"It just did not seem right to let you die without at least trying to save you."

"So many people have died."

We were both silent for a while then she spoke again.

"Thank you for saving me and thank you for the food. But I am not willing to give you more than thanks. I will use the gun if I have too."

"I took the cartridges out of your gun."

She got a strange look on her face.

"No I was kidding and your gun is fully functional as far as I know. Your welcome and you are also welcome to stay here until you are ready to leave. If you do stay then after you are strong enough I would expect you to work. At this point, you are no good to anyone, even yourself until you regain your strength. At any time you wish you are certainly free to go."

"And you are not keeping me here because I am a woman?"

“I’m not sure how to word this. You have obviously been on a starvation diet for some time. Too long a time. You are, ah, not real attractive in your current condition.”

She looked at me and then of all things she burst out laughing. Still laughing she finally was able to speak.

“You have not even seen a woman in a year and still I am not good enough for you. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“Ah, maybe I better go check the solar system.”

That made her laugh even more.

“As you can see you really crack me up. I think we will get along just fine.”

And so we did.

## Chapter 6

In just a week Betty was feeling much better and she was looking a little better. I was pumping the food into her and I also made her take a vitamin every day. By two weeks she was chomping at the bit to do some work and she was keen on working in the garden. She apparently had some gardening experience. Finally, we both decided it was warm enough and we planted the garden. Actually, she had started some things in the house a couple of weeks earlier.

Before we planted the garden I hauled in more of the broken down manure and enlarged the garden quite a bit more. We had to grow enough for two now. Though I still had plenty of seeds left I told Betty that we would have to let some of each plant go-to-seed so we could save the seeds for next year. At that point, she looked over the empty seed packets and said two of them were hybrid seeds and likely would not reproduce true to the original plant. I had to have her explain that to me before I understood what she was talking about.

I was extremely happy when we saw small potato plants growing from the ugly looking potatoes that we had planted. A couple of weeks later we saw that most of them had grown. I was a happy man that I could have potatoes again. We worked every day in the garden. The much larger garden required a lot of work. But we didn't just work either.

To build Betty's stamina we went for long hikes and later we did some running. I showed her the old ranch place and all the fruit trees there. She said she had wondered where all the fruit had come from after I showed

her the large number but very small trees that I had at my place.

She had never eaten acorns and found she liked the nutty taste. On one of our hikes, I showed her the large stand of oak trees where I had gathered the acorns last year. I taught her to fish in the big pools of water in the creek. She taught me different ways to cook the fish.

She also showed me a few wild plants that she knew were edible and that actually tasted pretty good. One of those was found along the creek where there were occasional stands of cattails and she showed me how to harvest, what parts, and when that should be done for the best taste. The cattail roots could make a substitute for potatoes if we ever lost a whole crop.

The garden was growing and we started to be able to harvest some of the early plants. Soon other plants were ready and we started canning. This year some things we canned in quart jars instead of just pints. We still used plenty of the pint jars though too. Betty cautioned me on opening the canned produce to try and save the lids so that they might be reused. Though I had quite a few in storage neither of us knew when more might be again available.

Like last year as the garden started to come to an end, the fruit started to get ripe. My trees even had a few on them this year though very few yet. The trees at my folk's place did a great job once again. When Betty asked if there were any other vacant places nearby that might have fruit trees I decided to check. I left very early one morning and checked all the ranches near my place. Near meaning within three miles or so. I found that every place I checked was vacant but not all of them had fruit trees. Several did and I picked some fruit and brought it home. Over the next week I made a couple of trips to pick fruit and Betty accompanied me on one of those trips so we could bring back more fruit than I could carry when alone.



We had the two dehydrators going day and night and still, we had to freeze most of the fruit. Luckily the freezers at this point were pretty empty because it would still be a while yet before I started hunting again. We had very little meat left and I might have to hunt a little earlier this year.

Finally, the fruit was all picked from every tree I had found but the dehydrators never stopped because we started drying the frozen fruit to make room for the wild meat I would hopefully bring home. We dried most of the frozen fruit and only left a little to use for baking. Though I did have baking supplies I had never used much with just me here. Betty was a good cook and had been baking bread for quite a while already by that point.

Before I started hunting I went and harvested a lot of the acorns. This year I brought home over three times as many acorns as last year. Betty had come up with recipes to include the crushed acorns in some of the items she baked. After the fresh acorns were processed Betty tried making some pancakes using about half crushed acorns and half regular flour. We both deemed the experiment a success and she made that recipe about once a week after that first try. Seeing that I harvested even more of the acorns.

From all the hiking we had done we both knew that getting a deer would not be an issue. And when I went hunting that proved to be correct. The first deer we froze all the meat except for what we used over the next couple days. With the good producing large garden along with all the fruit from several ranches, we had plenty of stored food to keep us. I would shoot at least a couple more deer over the winter months to carry us over the summer. Much of those deer would be turned into jerky.

While we had plenty of food, the store-bought food I had stored was now mostly gone. Some things like flour I did have left but very little of anything else. Though either

Betty or I would try the radio every once in a while there was never anything on it. The one station had quit broadcasting a long time back. This fact led us to believe that things would not be getting better for a very long time.

Betty suggested that we go to nearby empty houses and see if any contained any food that we could salvage. I said that would be stealing and while Betty agreed with that she also said it would be a shame for any available food to go to waste. Also, she did say that we should disconnect all the electric service just in case the power did come back on so there would be little chance of any building starting on fire from an electric short. Mice would still be using those buildings and could chew the wiring in many places. Also, she said I could try and drain all water lines to prevent them from bursting when it froze hard this winter. She made very good arguments and finally, I agreed we should at least ready the houses for an extended vacancy.

So that was the project for the next week or so. We walked everywhere to save what fuel I had left for the pickup.

We did find at least a little food in every house. A few times it was just spices which Betty said was the best find anyway because it was something we could not make or grow ourselves. Sometimes we found coffee or tea and often we found additional baking supplies like salt, sugar, and flour. Every food item we brought back home.

Betty always searched for the food while I disconnected the electric and tried to drain the water lines. I did the same for every outbuilding or barn. I always left a note on how to hook the electric back up. Sometimes it was as easy as flipping on the main breaker.

Betty needed more clothes and she also looked in each house for clothes that would fit her. She did find some along with an extra pair of shoes.

After more than a week we had hit every place within walking distance. We had gone farther than when I

was looking for fruit trees and when we found those trees at new locations we both made sure to remember for next year's crop. In the end, we did end up with a fair amount of additional food stocks. And Betty was correct about not letting that food all just go to waste. It was no different than us harvesting the fruit from the trees at other ranches.

I should mention now that Betty had changed. She no longer looked like she did when I first found her. Her face had filled back in along with the rest of her body. She had no fat on her but she sure looked different. She was a beautiful woman. So much so that she often caught me staring at her. When she did catch me staring the result was always the same when she just smiled.

## Chapter 7

We were sitting at the kitchen table one day when Betty spoke up.

“You’re staring at me again.”

“Not my fault at all because you are truly a very beautiful woman and no man could possibly resist starring at you.”

“Seems like I remember when you brought me here that you said I was an ugly woman.”

“I don’t remember that at all.”

“So you just going to stare at me every day from now on?”

“Yup. I believe I will.”

“Is starring the only thing you plan on doing?”

She was smiling at me. Not an uncommon event but this time it seemed slightly different. I did not say anything but kept looking at her.

“So just the staring uh?”

I surprised myself with what words came out of my mouth next.

“Nope not just looking but probably touching and kissing too.”

“So when do you think that stuff would start?”

“Right now is as good a time as any.”

“Big talker but I don’t see you moving.”

Then I did move and she found out I always did what I said I would do.

Thing is she did not seem to mind a bit.

## The End

