

Stupid Computer! - Chapter 1

“Stupid Computer!” Frank Cooper muttered as he stared at the white lettering on the bright blue screen of his laptop computer. It was the third time in a week he had a blue screen crash. “Time to take this puppy in for some serious evaluation,” he said aloud as he turned the laptop off.

A week later Frank handed over a hundred dollar bill and got back a few ones in change. “It won’t crash now?” he asked the tech.

“Can’t guarantee that. Depends on what you wind up downloading. You had half a dozen viruses on your system. If you hadn’t had that backup you would have lost everything since I had to wipe the drive and start over. There’s nothing on it now that should cause a blue screen crash.”

The tech frowned. “A couple of those viruses I just started running into. Usually my virus software will recover everything while it gets rid of the virus. Not those two, though.”

Frank nodded. If that was the best the guy could do, that was just the way it was. “Stupid computers!” he muttered as he put the computer in the truck, behind the driver’s seat in the crew cab of the truck so it wouldn’t slide around on his way to work.

He muttered the same phrase when he got to work. The LAN was down and he couldn’t log in. He really needed to connect to the WAN at corporate, but that wasn’t doable either since it took access to the LAN to get to the WAN. At least he could get some work done on his own machine.

For a while, it turned out. He was in the middle of setting up a spreadsheet when the computer froze up. Muttering a couple of foul words, including his trademark “Stupid Computer!” Frank called IT asked for some help.

“Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I hear you. Well, we got a dozen other problems right now. You’ll just have to wait.”

Frustrated, Frank took an early lunch. Perhaps things would be better when he returned.

They weren’t. His computer was still locked up, and from the looks of things, almost everyone else’s in the department was, too.

After an extended after lunch coffee break with some of the others, Smythers, the department head, came out of his office and said, “Okay people! Listen up. Paid day off the rest of the day. IT should have this thing cleared up by morning. Report in at your regular times.”

Smythers turned around and went back into his office as most of the department made a dash for the door. Frank waited for the others to leave before leaving himself. He was lost in thought for a moment.

The situation was beginning to sound like one of the PAW stories he read on the internet. Frank was a prepper, to a degree. Suddenly feeling very inadequate, prep wise, when he left the office building he didn't head for home. Instead he headed for the closest thing in town to a prep store. It was a locally owned hardware store with a sideline of preparedness items.

The hardware store did a good business, but Winston had told Frank recently that despite everything going on in the world, the line of prep goods wasn't selling well. The cheap stuff was moving, but not the quality items. Frank was counting on that fact to perhaps make a good deal of a large bulk purchase of items he'd been wanting but had put off getting.

"Hi ya, Winston!" Frank said, seeing Winston at the checkout counter. He was talking to someone else behind the counter.

"Hey, Frank! How goes it?"

"Lousy. Computer is down, LAN is down, WAN is down."

"Internet is down, too," Winston said. "So is my super duper deluxe very fancy very expensive cash register system. Some kind of virus. Victor here is trying to get the system back up and running."

"And not having much luck," Victor said. "Hi, Frank. You say your systems are down, too?"

Frank nodded.

"Strange. I've got calls from all over about systems going down."

"That is strange," Frank said. "Uh... Winston, can I talk to you for a minute?"

"Sure, Frank. What's up?" Winston came around the end of the counter and joined Frank as he walked toward the display of prep items.

"You still having trouble moving the higher end preps, Winston?"

"Yeah. I made a bad choice bringing in everything the way I did. But I got a great deal at the time..."

"Speaking of a great deal..." Frank said. He lowered his voice a bit and leaned closer. "I'd kind'a like to get a great deal on some of those items. A lot of them, as a matter of fact."

"What do you mean? You know my prices are good. I'm a little hurt that..."

"Aw, Winston! I'd didn't mean to hurt your feelings. But a deal is a deal. I'm talking about taking pretty much all the food, freeze-dried, dehydrated, MREs, and LTS packaged food. All of your water barrels. That grain grinder you've been after me to take off your hands..."

Frank was slowly going down the three aisles that made up the Prep Goods section of the store. “The good fuel cans. Oh, a whole bunch more of the things you have. Plus four or five more guns, reloading set ups, and all the ammunition you have in my calibers.”

Winston was staring at Frank, rather in awe. Frank was a frugal shopper. Always wanting a discount, but never taking umbrage when Winston held to his listed prices. But this time, if he was serious, Frank was talking about several thousand dollars worth of goods. Goods that he was having trouble selling. So... “A discount might be arranged. If the order is large enough.”

“Uh-huh. I thought you might be willing.” Frank was looking around at things, adding prices in his head. “Tell you what. I don’t need everything, but I’ll buy you out of all your prep stuff, say... for seven thousand. That doesn’t include the guns, but does the ammunition and reloading gear.”

“You’re out of your mind! I’d have to have at least...” Winston was doing some figuring in his head, too. “Fifteen thousand.”

“Don’t think so, Winston. Eight.”

“Twelve thousand!”

“Ten. That’s my best offer, Winston. Remember, I’m buying some guns, too.”

“Oh. Yeah. Okay, old son, you have a deal!” Winston held out his hand and Frank grinned and shook it. That’s going to have to be cash. I can’t run a credit card through because of the internet, and I’m afraid it could be days before a check would clear.” Winston was a bit hesitant. He wanted the sale, but asking for ten thousand in cash was pushing it.

“Not a problem,” Frank said. “I’ll have it for you tomorrow. Just don’t sell any of this stuff until I can arrange to pick it up. Now, let’s look at the guns you have.” The two walked over to the sporting goods section of the store and Winston went behind the counter, telling the regular clerk to take a break.

“Okay, what do you have in mind?” Winston didn’t rub his hands together in anticipation, but it was close as Frank named off six rifles, three shotguns, and five handguns. “I expect a deal on these, too,” Frank said firmly.

“Sure! Sure! Not a problem. Actually, it comes out the same as the other stuff. Ten grand.”

“Six.”

“Aw, come on, Frank! I have to make some money off them!”

Frank didn’t say anything. “Okay,” Winston said after a long silence. “Eight. That’s as low as I can go.”

“Done. Do the paperwork and I’ll pick up the guns when I get the other stuff. One last thing. Your precious metals. You still have some or did you sell them all?”

“Man, I thought I’d make a killing on them. Nobody is buying after the price topped eight hundred for gold and twelve for silver. And I wasn’t selling much before then. I got lucky when I bought the stuff several years ago. I...” Winston shut up quickly realizing his mistake when he saw the glint in Frank’s eyes.

“Not that I meant...”

“I’ll take all you’ve got at six hundred an ounce for gold and eight dollars an ounce for silver.” Frank was prepared to go a little higher, but he didn’t offer up.

Winston knew he’d stepped in it when he said he’d bought them cheap. It was a nice piece of change, and he had gotten them for much less than Frank was offering. And he could sure use the cash. He would be making a bundle, and getting rid of non-moving merchandise. He considered that two birds with one stone. “Okay,” he said, trying to sound dejected.

If Frank heard the dejection he paid no attention to it. He was going to be giving Winston a wad of cash that would choke a horse. But in his mind, converting the cash he’d been saving into tangibles was more than worth it. The internet and computer issues were really bothering him.

“How much gold and silver do you have?” Frank asked Winston.

Frank whistled when Winston told him. “That’s more than I was counting on...”

Afraid to lose what was the best sale of his ownership of the store, Winston offered, of his own free will, to cut the prices of the gold and silver to five-hundred-fifty and seven-fifty for the silver.

Frank hadn’t expected that. He’d just been commenting on the fact that it was more than he expected. But he could have paid the stated price. But he wasn’t going to tell Winston that. Instead, he said, “Thanks Winston. It’s a deal.” He held out his hand and they shook again.

Frank went home and before he made it into the house he got the shakes. “What have I done?” he asked himself silently. “All that money... What if nothing happens?” But he shook his head, straightened his shoulders and said aloud. “But a deal is a deal. And I’m afraid I’m right, anyway.”

It took Frank an hour to gather up the cash he’d been saving for years, hidden in and around the house in various places. There were still a few hiding places left untouched when Frank had not only the money for Winston, but another wad for another project he had been thinking about for a long time but had not pursued.

With eighty-five percent of his life savings in his hands, Frank hoped the other fifteen percent would be enough to get by on if things didn't work out the way he was suddenly feeling they would.

Despite the decisions he'd made, Frank was able to eat a light supper, go to bed, and sleep through the night without waking up sweating the way he did sometimes when he made what he found to be difficult decisions.

He was even whistling when he went into work. It didn't even bother him when he was able to get back to work. The computer, LAN, WAN, and internet were all operating just fine. The preps he was buying would last for years for the most part. If the balloon didn't go up now, that was fine with him.

Still in a good mood, Frank took the time on his afternoon break to make arrangements to get a rental truck for after work and during the weekend. Those arrangements made, Frank rented a climate controlled storage room at a facility not too far from where he lived. Now he was ready to go pay Winston and start moving his new preps. He only had one stop to make after work before picking up the rental truck, and it was on the way.

Having caught up on the work he'd been unable to do the day before, Frank was happy with his progress, thankful that his immediate fears were groundless about the internet. He was looking forward to getting his new preps squared away and was whistling again when he left the office building and headed toward the rental place.

The stop he made was at the garage that he knew some preppers swore by as a great place to have a vehicle converted to a BOV. Frank thought he was in pretty good shape, BOV wise, but a few improvements wouldn't hurt. He'd already switched out the old gasoline engine for a non-electronic diesel and added a heavy duty transmission.

When Robert Wise heard what Frank wanted done to the pickup he smiled. "Good choices. Gonna cost, though."

"Cash price?" Frank asked.

Frank followed Robert into the office of the garage and sat patiently while Robert worked on the computer for several minutes. When Robert looked over at Frank he told him the price.

Frank didn't even blink. "Half now, half when it's finished and approved?"

It caught Robert by surprise. Most people wanted to finance the work done. It was seldom anyone paid outright with cash. "Absolutely!"

As always, Frank had his cash stashed in several pockets. He took out only what he needed to pay the half down on the truck work and left the rest where it was. "Can I get a ride to the rental place? I'm picking up a truck to move some things."

“You betcha!” Robert replied. “Be a pleasure.” Robert took Frank to the rental place, using Frank’s truck to get a feel for it. “Two weeks, tops,” Robert told Frank just before Frank got out of the truck at the rental place.

“Sounds good.” Frank hitched his pants up a bit and went into the truck rental office to get the keys to the truck he’d be using that weekend. It took just a few minutes for the paperwork and then Frank was on his way to the hardware store in a one-ton box bed truck.

When he arrived at Winston’s hardware store Frank found the prep aisles cordoned off with signs that said the section was closed. In the back office of the store Winston’s eager eyes watched as Frank took out the wad of one-hundred-dollar bills from first one pocket and then another and counted them out.

“How’d you get so much cash so quick? I didn’t get my computer system up until this afternoon. I took some receipts to the bank at noon and their system was down too. It’s beginning to sound like aluminum foil hat time.”

“I know what you mean,” Frank said, not elaborating on his thoughts on the matter. Finally Frank quit pulling money out and counting it. He waited patiently while Winston recounted it and then bundled it up with rubber bands.

“Stuff is all yours, Frank! Oh. Here’s the papers for the guns. You can fill in your parts while I get the PMs out of the safe.”

Carefully shielding the knob from Frank, Winston turned around and opened up the large safe in the office. He began to set out tubes of coins from the safe onto the desk. It was hard for Frank to concentrate. He had some PMs, but this purchase was far more than he already had.

Winston began to add white tubes of gold coins to the clear tubes of silver coins. After everything was on the desk and the safe was closed and locked again, Winston said, “I’ll go get a couple of boxes for these.”

Frank nodded and went back to filling out the firearms purchase forms. He was finished when Winston returned with four small, heavy duty boxes. Between them they had the boxes loaded up in just a couple of minutes. Winston helped Frank carry the boxes out to the rental truck and put them in the cab.

Frank carefully locked up the cab of the truck and then began to load up the back with the things from the prep aisles of the store. Winston had to wait on a customer apparently, as he disappeared while Frank was stacking things on the hand cart.

Frank made two trips that evening before the store closed, and it took the rest of the weekend to get everything moved either to his house or the storage room. The new guns went into the existing gun safe, along with the precious metals, in the shelter connected to the basement of Frank’s house.

He was more than a little sore when he got to work the following Monday, but got right down to work. For a while. The computer locked up and Frank called IT. He finally hung up after waiting fifteen minutes of listening to bad hold music. If IT was this busy, his problem was probably only one of many. He checked with his co-workers. Sure enough, all their computers were locked up, too.

“Hey, boss,” Frank said, knocking on Smythers’ office door. “What do we do?”

Smythers frowned and sighed. “Jenkins said to send everyone home again. But this time without pay.”

“People aren’t going to like that,” Frank said calmly.

“Yeah. Well, they don’t like it enough, they can look for another job. Jenkins said no paid time off for computer problems anymore. You can’t do your work, you don’t get paid.”

“Okay dokey,” Frank said. He shut things down in his office and headed out to the parking lot. He’d rented a compact car to get around in while his truck was at the garage. He decided to stop there before going home to see how the work was going.

It was going well. Robert showed him the various pieces the truck was now disassembled into, and what was being done to each one. “You can get it all back together, without any parts left over, can’t you?” Frank asked, a bit awed at the process of modifying the truck.

Robert laughed. “Sure, Frank. We know what we’re doing. That’s why you hired us. But don’t feel bad, we get that question a lot when someone sees their prized vehicle torn down to its basic parts.

“Yeah. I understand why. Okay. I’ll get out of the way. I was just curious.” Just before he left the garage he stopped and asked Robert, “You been having any trouble with your computer or internet access?”

“I hope to tell you! Why do you ask?”

“Just curious. I’ve had some, too. And it’s why I’m not at work. System is down.”

“I’m not surprised. The infrastructure of the United States is in a fragile state, including the internet,” Robert said. Before he could elaborate Frank made his exit. He read the prep forums. The infrastructure was one of the main topics of conversation.

When he got home, Frank got to work sorting out some of the things he’d bought. He’d tried to get things organized and separated when he brought them in, but had not been that successful. Part of the reason was there was actually more than he’d thought there was. Winston had been assuming Frank wanted the things still in the back of the store, and Frank hadn’t even considered that there might be more than what was on display.

So he had an eclectic mixture of items he wanted to keep and things he planned on selling the first chance he had. He kept busy until it was time to go to bed, falling asleep counting in his mind how many different kinds of LTS foods he now owned.

Frank was able to work again the next day, and the rest of the week, without any more computer problems. He did, however, note that things were running more slowly than he could remember. And apparently it was fairly widespread, as it made the national news. There seemed to be problems not just in Frank's area of the country, but nationwide and even internationally. The major anti-virus programmers were working day and night to try to isolate the problem or problems. So far no success.

There was no more trouble the next week at Frank's work, but he heard from others that people were having trouble elsewhere. It seemed to be random. Frank was still thinking about it when he pulled into the garage parking lot to pick up the truck. A rental car driver was waiting for him, to take the rental back to the agency.

"Better be ready," Frank muttered as he watched the rental disappear down the street. He went into the garage office. Robert was there. Grinning.

"I take it the truck is ready?" Frank asked, having to smile in return.

"Sure is. Come take a look. I think you'll be pleased."

Frank followed Robert into the garage. There was his one-ton crew cab truck, riding a bit higher than previously, with a four inch lift and thirty-five inch tires. Frank went to one knee and looked underneath. Everything was reinforced and there were skid plates protecting everything that needed protecting, including the large replacement fuel tank and the second large fuel tank that had been added.

"Check out these bumpers!" Robert said proudly, leading Frank to first the front of the truck and then the rear. Both bumpers were stout and boasted a winch, receiver hitch, spare tire, and some pioneer tools, plus high intensity lights. The front bumper also carried a tow bar, and the rear bumper had a couple of tall radio antennas, one on each corner.

A custom cargo rack projected halfway over the cab and carried two more spares, more tools and lights, and two aerodynamic cargo pods, with plenty of room left for additional cargo. Several antennas were also mounted on the cargo rack. A CBRNE air filtration unit sat on the front of the cab roof. A windshield visor carried more lights and had the air intakes for the engine snorkels incorporated.

The twin engine exhaust stacks were mounted to the front posts of the cargo rack and projected well above the equipment on the rack.

Robert unlocked and slid the bed cover forward, exposing the open area between the tool boxes that lined both sides of the truck bed, full height, front to back, the width of the wheel wells.

Frank looked outside at the bed and had to look closely to see the doors to the tool boxes. They were in the contour of the original bed, and the hardware was painted the same as the bed, making them blend in perfectly.

With the tan paint scheme, there was nothing particularly outstanding about the truck. Yes, it didn't look quite stock, but it didn't stand out the way many customized trucks did, especially if you only saw it from one angle and didn't get the full effect of the multiple spare tires and front and rear bumper setups.

Robert opened the driver's side door of the cab and let Frank take a look. "Looks like you got all the radios and navigation gear melded into the new dash okay."

"Yeah. That was tough. Not so much the faraday cage itself, but making it look good, as well as be effective."

"And the light cutout relays and switches?" Frank asked.

"Yep. Just like you wanted. Just lift this edge of the dash to seatback console and they are right here." Robert illustrated. "All the lights are on switch controlled relays for on, automatic, and off. You can kill any set of lights that you want, or activate them if you want. You can show brake lights without hitting the brake pedal, or turn them off so they don't come on with the pedal. Interior lights the same way. Headlights, auxiliary lights, everything."

Frank nodded. He ran his hand over the soft leather of the split bucket seats for a moment and then used the side step to get up and into the driver's seat. "Any trouble with the GPS mapping system and digital dash?"

"None. If either fails, you just remove the display panels and there is a full mechanical dash behind them. With compass and tilt indicators. First time I put a system like this together. I like it. Might as well have all the modern conveniences while they are available. The computer is in a faraday cage, too, but I don't know if it will survive an HEMP event. I'd never depend on them fully. If... Well, you know, or you wouldn't have asked for it."

Frank smiled. "Exactly." He slid out of the driver's seat and opened the passenger side rear door. "Everything fit okay back here?"

"Tight, but yeah. Chemical toilet under the console between the bucket seats. Lock boxes under the seats, and the one on the floor that runs behind the seats and chemical toilet. Can be accessed from either side."

"Okay. Let's see under the hood," Frank said, walking back to the front of the truck.

Both stepped up on the steps built into the bumper. Robert worked a latch in the grill and lifted the hood and began pointing out things. "Just tweaked the engine a bit. Got the dual snorkels for the engine intake and risers on all underneath vents. Hydraulic pump for the winches and twin twelve volt generators rather than alternators. One for the truck batteries, the other for an onboard welder and AC inverter with its own set of batteries. Air compressor."

“Good job,” Frank said and Robert closed the hood. “Let’s go to the office and I’ll give you the second payment.”

Robert was grinning when Frank counted out the crisp one-hundred-dollar bills. “Thank you, Sir!” he said. “Any other work and you know where to find me.”

“That I do,” Frank said and shook Robert’s hand. Robert went to open the garage door and Frank climbed back into the truck and started it up. There was a little bit of diesel rattle, but not much.

Putting the truck in gear, Frank headed for home, getting a feel for how the truck rode with the various changes that had been done. He stopped at the truck stop and filled both tanks with fuel. The station computer system was up and he put the fuel on his debit card, the first time he’d been able to use it for some time. Frank was grinning when he went to sleep that evening.

He wasn’t grinning the next day after he got to work. The computer was still down. More than a few of his co-workers were extremely unhappy with being sent home again, without pay. Frank was getting that hinky feeling again about the computers and the internet. He went home and fired up his laptop. He hadn’t used it much since he’d had it de-virused so it booted up quickly. Everything was in order.

With some trepidation, Frank tried to open his web browser. It locked up halfway through the process and Frank Control Alt Deleted to shut down the computer. He re-booted and the computer came up fine and was working, but he didn’t try the internet again. Instead he deactivated the wireless connection so nothing could come in and he couldn’t inadvertently try to open the internet from a link in one of his Excel files where he kept his lists of equipment and supplies and their sources, many of which were internet based stores.

Frank leaned back in his chair and began to wonder just what was happening. He called a couple of friends and asked them about their internet connection. Neither had one at the moment. Just out of curiosity, Frank turned on the television and switched to the Weather Channel. No problems there.

He switched to Fox News and watched for a few minutes. The story that came up after the one he entered in the middle of, was about the troubles with the internet. “So there is a widespread problem!” Frank muttered.

By the end of the report Frank was convinced he had made the right decision to spend the money he had for the preps. The news was downplaying it, but Frank had a feeling the problem was going to get worse and even more widespread.

The report had not indicated that any nationally sponsored hacking was going on, but Frank had his own opinion about that. “The Chinese, unless I really miss my guess,” he muttered. “Or the Russians...”

On a whim, Frank decided to go do his regular grocery shopping for the week a day early. He drove the truck out of the garage and headed to the Wal-Mart Super Center where he usually got his regular groceries. The parking lot was packed. He had to park well away from the main doors of the building.

He had to wait for someone to drop a cart off. Pushing it in front of him, Frank found himself not going to the grocery aisles, but headed toward the far point of the store. Just to check out how much of what the store had. The displays at the entry were almost empty.

There was still much merchandize on the shelves and hangers, but the stock was as low as he'd ever seen it. Finally getting to groceries, he had to make several substitutions for items he normally bought that were out of stock. Again, the shelves weren't empty, but they were very low.

Frank stopped a stocker rearranging items in a freezer case. "Any idea when you'll be getting in more goods. I can't find half of what I usually get."

"Sorry mister. Don't know. Didn't get yesterday's or today's trucks. You'll have to ask a manager for more information."

"Okay. Thanks." Frank headed for the checkout counter and paid for the few purchases he'd made. He tried the debit card again. The system was down. Another whim struck him and he headed for his bank.

"Need to see if my direct deposit came in yesterday," Frank told the teller after a long wait in the line. Many of those leaving the counter before him had not been happy. He could see why when he got his answer.

"I'm sorry, sir. We are unable to process any wire transactions at the moment. I can not determine if the deposit was made before the systems went down."

"I see. Can I make a withdrawal?"

"For up to one hundred dollars. We're limiting the cash withdrawals until our systems are back up."

"Yeah. Let me have that much," Frank said. It took a couple of minutes for the teller to write out the paper withdrawal slip and get it initialed by a manager. Frank got his money in mostly tens and fives, since the teller only had two twenties in her drawer.

Frank left, his mind in a whirl. Whatever it was causing the problems, the problems were spreading. Going home, Frank put away the few groceries he'd purchased and went back to watching the news.

There was another report on the internet troubles and how they were affecting many aspects of modern living. Suddenly the talking head put a hand to his ear and had a look of intensity on his face as he listened to his director through his earpiece.

“Breaking news!” he said after a few tense moments of silence. “We have reports that several nuclear power plants have gone off-line due to computer viruses in their operating systems. But how? I know those systems are independent! What? Gas fired and coal plants, too?” The man’s eyes were wide as he listened again.

“My apologies, ladies and gentlemen. We have just received word that several non-nuclear power plants are also experiencing problems with computerized controls. However, the nuclear plants have not been compromised. Only the distribution network is down. The nuclear plants themselves are okay.”

Frank saw the lights go out in the studio and the TV go to white screen. But in only a couple of seconds the picture was back. It was obviously darker in the background of the studio, but the picture was still all right.

“We’ve suffered a power failure here at the studios. Our backup generator has kicked in. The transmitter also lost power, but it, too, has a backup generator. We will remain on the air for as long as we can.”

The guy looked scared, but kept repeating what he was being told through his earpiece. It was an awkward delivery and Frank realized that the guy’s computer monitor built into the desk was not working.

Frank sat entranced as the reports continued to come in of systems failures and shut downs all over the country, and then reports from overseas of similar situations. It seemed the entire computerized world was crashing in one way or another. Anything connected to the internet was being affected.

He gave it up at ten-thirty that night. More and more systems were going down and there was only speculation as to how and why. Even some independent computer systems seemed to be infected, which could only happen if someone used a physical media to upload to the system a virus, intentionally or by accident.

When Frank got up the next morning he turned on the TV to watch the news for the latest reports while he prepared and ate breakfast, but there was only static on each channel he tried. The TV came on so the power wasn’t out where he was, but the cable system apparently was down.

Frank tried the radio and was able to get several stations. He picked one at random and began to listen as he worked. Things were much worse now than the evening before. The station was without power, but the crew was at the transmitter site, running on a backup generator.

The station went dead and Frank switched to another. He shook his head. It was the same everywhere he went. The stations that had backup generators had power. Not as many did as Frank thought would.

After trying the landline telephone and the cell phone to check if he should go in to work and discovering both systems were out, Frank again went into work. And again he was sent home. Two people gave notice on the spot and said they weren't coming back and would look for another job that was a real job where you went to work, did your work, and got paid.

Frank had to sympathize with Smythers. It wasn't Smythers' fault, but he was the one getting the heat for his boss' orders. At a loss as to what to do, Frank drove down to the hardware store to see what Winston was doing during the crisis. He was stopped at a traffic control light when thing went black. He looked around. The power in the area was down now, too.

When he got to hardware store Frank noted that the service station across the street had a line at it and people were out of their cars, milling around. He could hear the shouting. The little bell dinged when Frank entered the store, loud in the silence within the dark store.

"Hey, Winston! It's me, Frank! You in here somewhere?"

"Yeah!" came a yell from the back of the store. "Be right there."

A few moments later Winston walked up, a flashlight bobbing in his hand. "Dang generator blew when I hooked it up to the building wiring after the power went out."

"You... uh... didn't try to power the whole store, did you?"

"Well, yeah. I know it's not a big jenny, but all I wanted was a few lights, but it was easier to connect it to the main feed."

Frank managed not to lecture Winston on how to hook up a generator. Of all people, Frank thought Winston should know. But apparently not.

"Sold my last one just before the power went out. I'm stuck now," Winston said, shaking his head. He turned off the flashlight since there was enough light coming in through the front windows to see. "I'm telling you, if they don't get things straightened out, I don't know what I'm going to do.

"I've got checks and cash I need to deposit in the bank, but they are shut down because of the computer problems. And now, with the power out, I bet they can't be doing anything. I need to get that money in the bank so I can write some checks of my own to my suppliers. Though I don't know why. Can't order anything anyway. I usually put in my orders over the internet, but with that down I tried to phone in an order and the cotton pickin' phones are out, including cell service."

"I know," Frank said. "This whole thing is getting bad. Anything I can do to help?"

Winston shook his head. "Naw. I'll just keep a flashlight handy and take only cash if I, by some miracle, get any customers."

“Okay. I’m heading home then,” Frank said. When he got home he debated on whether or not to fire up his own generator. Deciding against it for the moment, since the PV roof panels were supplying enough power for everything he needed powered up at the moment, Frank made sure all the blackout curtains and shutters were closed so no one could tell he had any power at all.

With nothing better to do, Frank went into the shelter, picked a book from the bookcase of preparedness and self-sufficiency books it contained and began to read up on small space gardening.

He read late into the night, but finally went to bed, wondering what the next day would bring.

It brought more of the same. No TV and very little radio. He listened to the only radio station he could hear very well. There was more bad news. Additional infrastructure systems that depended on the internet were going down at an alarming rate. Over half of the US was now without electrical power.

Frank decided to go take a look around town after he had his breakfast. It was eerie. People were out and about, and there was some traffic, but it was still extremely quiet, with little activity. Many businesses had closed signs on their doors or in a window. The service stations were empty, except for one.

When he got closer Frank could hear a generator running. The station had power and there was a long line of people waiting to get fuel. With nothing better to do, and one of his tanks down to three-quarters, Frank got into the line and waited patiently for his chance at the pumps.

It never came. A man came out of the C-store and began to tell people the station was out of fuel. Some of those that got the news didn’t like it. Having left plenty of space between the truck and the vehicle in front of him, Frank pulled out of line before the man got to him and headed for home again. Before he rolled up the window he heard shouting and screaming behind him. “This is not good,” Frank muttered.

Arriving home, Frank secured the truck in the garage and then went out to the mini-barn in the back yard. It was big for a mini, but that’s what the brochure called it. It certainly wasn’t a full size barn, but it was big enough to hold everything Frank needed to store inside, and even included both metal shop and wood shop tools.

After servicing the rototiller, Frank began tilling up a large section of his back yard. He would be planting a garden again to complement his greenhouse and small fruit and nut tree orchards. There was a small orchard of dwarf trees in the front yard and a larger one in the back with larger trees. The larger orchard hosted four beehives.

He hadn’t gardened in a couple of years. It was time to start again. The large root cellar under the greenhouse was currently empty. It had an outdoor access as well as access from the basement.

Needless to say, his nosey neighbor, Tommy Steel, was soon at the fence between their properties, wanting to know why Frank was making all the noise. Frank didn't think the rototiller was all that loud. It was just that Tommy liked to complain.

Frank throttled back the tiller and walked over to the fence to talk to Tommy. He stopped short of the waist high blackberry brambles that grew just inside of the chain link fence that encircled the yard, except for the front, which had decorative iron security fencing. "Just thought I'd put in a garden again. Been meaning to again for a couple of years, but just never got around to it. Can't work cause of the computer problems so I thought now would be a good time. Still early enough in the year to get some seeds in the ground."

"Oh. What do you think about all that? Seems bogus to me."

Frank could barely conceal his incredulity. "Well, I can say for sure our computers at work are out of commission for the moment."

"I think the government is just trying to scare us into doing what they want. Just more taxes to fix things up again. All they'll do is party in some tropical paradise with the money."

"Uh-huh. Need to get back to it if I'm going to get finished by dark."

"Okay neighbor," Tommy said. "Good luck with that. Save me a tomato or two, huh?"

"Sure, Tommy. Sure." Frank figured he got off easy. Tommy was often hard to break away from without being rude to him.

Frank worked until dark, but the entire garden plot was tilled. Feeling tired, but pleased, he put away the equipment and went into the house to take a shower. He checked to make sure he still had city water pressure and was glad he checked before getting into the shower. The water was off. And if it was, so would be the sewer pumps.

It took only a few moments in the basement to close some valves and open others to connect the water pump in the basement to the well at the side of the house, and divert the sewer to the septic system on the other side of the house.

Both systems violated city ordinances, but Frank had managed to get them installed quickly and quietly when the house was built. Same thing with the underground shelter connected to the basement and the escape tunnel. His house was one of the first to be built in the development. He'd rented the equipment needed over a long holiday weekend and the guys he'd hired to do the work were all day laborers from the next town over.

The water table was pretty high and the well driller had been able to jet in a two inch well to forty-two feet, with a ten-foot slotted screen in just three hours. The water turned out to be sweet and plentiful and could be drawn with a shallow well pump since the water level was only fourteen feet down. A larger pump was also plumbed to fill two underground fifteen-hundred-gallon fiberglass cisterns connected to the roof guttering system when there wasn't enough rain

to keep them full. Another pump could draw the water from the tanks to water the lawn and garden when he had one. The pressure pump for the house could also draw from the cisterns.

He'd had fuel tanks buried at the same time. Two one-thousand gallon tanks for diesel, two five-hundred gallon tanks for gasoline, and two eleven-hundred gallon propane tanks. The propane tanks were from two separate propane companies. Neither knew about the competitor's tanks.

Frank had all the parts and the tools to install them to convert his natural gas appliances to propane, but he wasn't going to do that yet. Instead, he turned a couple more valves and brought hot water from the propane fired hot water heater in the mini-barn to the house.

And he still had one back up to both the natural gas and propane systems. A dual fuel, wood and coal, outside furnace with its own PV electrical system to power the pumps and fans for heat and hot water. He didn't want to fire it up, either, despite the large covered racks of firewood and bin of coal next to the furnace.

So, with plenty of both cold and hot water, and a working septic system for it to drain to, Frank got his hot shower, nuked some dinner, and went to bed, satisfied with the way the day had gone.

The rest of the week went about the same. Frank was able to buy several truck loads of seasoned manure from a local farm. Enough to till a thick layer into the garden, with plenty left over to enrich the soil two more years running. He'd already done the same thing before when he first moved in, but more natural fertilizer never hurt.

Frank was also able to top off the truck's fuel tanks at another service station that had acquired a generator to run the pumps. He didn't want to use any of the stabilized fuel at home until he absolutely had to. Frank was one of the last ones to fill up before this station, like the one he'd tried before, announced that they were out of fuel.

Deciding to save his long term storage non-hybrid seeds, Frank bought hybrids from Winston and got the garden planted, with the intention of saving some of the seed from the hybrid plants to use until the plants were no longer viable.

Tommy was at the fence on Monday, watching Frank for a while before he called over. Frank was aware of Tommy from the first but had hoped that he would leave without saying anything. But when Frank finished what he was doing, Tommy called over to him.

Though he'd seen him out of the corners of his eyes, he didn't realize how bad Tommy looked until he got close and had a good, direct, look at him. Tommy was unshaven, in badly wrinkled clothing.

"Hey, Tommy. What's up?"

"Hey, man! I was wondering... Do you have any water I could borrow? The water's been off and me and the family have used up all the bottled water we could get. The stores are all out."

Frank had no intention of letting Tommy know of his preps. “Let me check my camping gear stored in the barn. I might have left my water containers full. Hang on a couple of minutes.”

“Thanks, Man. I owe you.”

Frank quickly went to the mini-barn, retrieved two of the seven-gallon water containers, and carried them back to the fence. Tommy opened the gate that allowed access between the two back yards. Frank handed Tommy one of the containers and then the other.

“Aw, man! Thanks. I’ll get these back to you as soon as I can. This is a life saver.”

Frank nodded. “How are you flushing your toilet?”

“Oh. Got one of those bucket toilets from the hardware store back the last time the power was out. It’s a pain, and the kids hate using it, but it’s working. Guess I’ll just bury the stuff in the back yard when it gets full. Should have got more of the water containers, too. But he only had two of the cheap ones. I wasn’t going to pay the price for ones like these. They are nice.”

Frank nodded. Tommy picked up both containers and staggered toward the house. He was on the small size physically and fourteen gallons of water is heavy. When Frank turned around he saw old Mrs. Watson watching from her breakfast room window. He waved and she waved back.

When she hurried outside, Frank had an idea what she wanted. The same thing Tommy had. Water. He wasn’t mistaken.

“I saw you giving Tommy some water, I take it. Would you have any more for an old lady?”

“Sure, Mrs. Watson. Let me go get a container and I’ll bring it over. I don’t want you trying to carry it.”

“Thank you, Frank. You’re a good boy. Even if you aren’t married yet.”

Frank didn’t respond. Mrs. Watson had been trying to marry him off since she and her late husband had moved in next door after the previous owners had sold. With the water container on her kitchen counter, Frank switched the faucet from inside the cap to the outside so she could draw the water easily.

“Do you need anything else, Mrs. Watson?”

“Would you be so kind as to take out the trash for me?” She lowered her voice and wouldn’t look at Frank when she continued. “I’ve had to put my waste in there. The toilet doesn’t work, either.”

“Sure thing, Mrs. Watson. But it isn’t a good thing to put in regular garbage. You keep it separate and I’ll take it out in your back yard and bury it. Okay?”

“Oh, that would be such a help! You are a dear! Thank you. As soon as this mess is all over I’ll bake you the best cookies you’ve ever had.”

“That’s not necessary, Mrs. Watson, but I will look forward to them.”

Frank took the triple bagged waste out to the trash can and moved the can to the street. The next day was trash day. If, for some reason they didn’t do a pickup, he’d bury the whole bag in Mrs. Watson’s back yard.

Surprised that the trash truck did make its regular run the next morning, Frank had some hope that things might just be getting back to normal. He went to the office, just in case, but found the building locked up and no one around. Frank went on an exploratory run, to see what he could see. There were very few vehicles on the streets, and even more businesses than before were closed down.

He drove by City Hall and discovered where quite a few of the people that weren’t at work were. They were protesting at City Hall. The police were keeping them off the steps and out of the building, but it looked like it was a near thing. Frank headed home. He wanted no part of a mob scene. When he went by the largest of the city’s parks, the one with a small lake, he saw dozens of people with all sorts of containers getting water. “Sure hope they are treating it,” he muttered.

When he got home he hooked up his shortwave receiver to the long wire antenna strung from the two fifty-five foot tall telescoping fold-over towers located at each end of the house. He also hooked up his scanner to the discone antenna on a side arm mount on one of the towers.

The scanner was busy with law enforcement calls. The shortwave was pretty quiet. There were a few of the big stations broadcasting, but none of the broadcasts were in English. He’d try that night and see what he could hear.

For something to do, Frank went to the greenhouse and did a little clean up and harvested a few things. One of the miniature bananas was ripe and he enjoyed it and one of the oranges that was also ready for picking. He didn’t get all that much fruit from the sub-tropical and tropical miniature plants he was growing so they were a real treat when one matured.

He snipped a couple of bay leaves to season the soup he was going to make for supper and then went to the kitchen get things ready. When they were, he took the stainless steel stock pot out to the outdoor kitchen on the patio at the back of the house and fired up the propane grill. Though the propane was piped to the grill from the buried tanks, Frank had capped the line and used forty-pound tanks with the outdoor kitchen so no one would suspect he had the buried tanks.

He kept half a dozen of the forty pound tanks filled and ready to use. He filled them at the propane station one of the local service stations had to fill propane powered vehicles and to fill portable tanks. Both his buried propane tanks had wet legs so he could refill the tanks in the future if he needed to, but for now filling them at the service station was the better idea.

He looked over at Tommy's house. It looked like Milly was cooking something on their outdoor grill. Frank waved. Milly gave a half wave back. It was only a few minutes later when Tommy was at the fence. "Hey Frank!"

"Yeah, Tommy?" Frank asked, going over to the fence.

"About the water... Would you have any more?"

Frank did, and he could always fill the other containers from the well, but he didn't want Tommy depending on him. "Sorry. But I've got a spare filter in my camping gear I can loan you. I saw some people getting water at the park when I was out. You can refill the containers there."

"Gee, man. I can't get there. I'm out of gasoline for the car. Just enough for one emergency trip in case one of us gets hurt or sick or something."

Frank held back his sigh. "Get all the containers you have that will hold water. I'll take you down there and help you fill up." Frank walked back to the outdoor kitchen and turned off the propane burner. It wouldn't hurt the soup to let it set for awhile and then resume cooking.

It took two hours to get the job done. Tommy had four of his own five-gallon containers, in addition to the two seven-gallon Frank was loaning him. Frank had added an empty six-gallon bucket to dip the water with. The filter would draw from the bucket and the filtered water would go into the water containers.

Frank and Tommy switched off pumping the filter. Frank almost wished he'd brought the Sawyer bucket filter, but it was expensive and he wasn't sure Tommy might not somehow screw it up. Let him work a little for the water was Frank's decision.

Frank helped Tommy carry the water into the house when they got back home. Frank closed the tailgate and bed cover and put the truck back into his garage before going back to the outdoor kitchen to put the soup on again. The sun was going down when he dished up a bowl of the soup and Frank sat and watched the sun disappear as he ate.

While there was still a little light left, Frank took the pot of soup inside and put it in the refrigerator without turning on a light. He still didn't want anyone, especially Tommy, knowing he had power. It should be obvious, with the solar roofing, but Tommy wasn't too observant. It was just a different looking roof to him.

With the door and shutter closed, Frank flipped on a light. He did the few dishes he had by hand and then had a relaxing shower before going to bed.

The next several weeks, essentially without any sort of communications from beyond the nearby towns, were hard ones for most people in the area, Frank knew. The city council had managed to get large generators brought in and hooked up to provide water and sewer service for the city, and electrical service to a few key buildings, including the hospital and two nursing homes.

The rest of the city had power for two hours at a time on a rotating blackout schedule, with calls to minimize the usage as much as possible while still doing everything needed within that two hour period. The rotating power schedule was for seven AM to seven PM. The other twelve hours only the chosen buildings had power, along with the water and sewer systems.

The residents counted themselves lucky. The city had it better than most. Many areas were out of power completely, with no hope in sight to change the situation.

There were some that demanded full services, no matter what the reason they were out and there were protests for more power in more places for longer times. All sorts of reasons were given for the demands, some of them bordering on the ludicrous.

Frank continued to keep a low profile. After the stores had run out of food, and the trucks were still not running much, the federal and state governments had arranged for some food to be brought in using National Guard assets. But that didn't last long. The refineries had suffered the same types of computer hacking that everyone else had and fuel was short. So food was scarce.

Frank saw Tommy eyeing the bit of green that was showing in Frank's garden. He finally asked Tommy how they were doing on food.

"Not very good. Milly and I are cut back to just one small meal a day so we can give the kids three. But our pantry is about empty. I don't suppose..."

Before Tommy could continue, Frank said, "I saw lines at a couple of churches. People with food are turning it over to churches and the emergency agencies like the Red Cross and Salvation Army. You might check with some of them before you run out."

"That's a good idea. Thanks. Don't know how I'll pay for it, but that's not your concern, Frank. Haven't had work for weeks. Funds are getting a little low."

Frank understood it as Tommy meant it. It was a sly request for a loan. It wasn't going to happen. Frank would see that the family got fed, and Mrs. Watson, too, but it would be on his terms.

Though Frank didn't attend any church, he was familiar with several in the area. He loaded up the bed of the truck with food and sanitation items from the things he'd bought at the hardware store and made a round of the churches that night, after nine PM. There were some initially angry and upset people when he knocked on doors that late, but that turned to joy and thanks when Frank unloaded the food and other things.

He made six stops and then the truck was empty. He went back home, tired, but satisfied that he'd done the right thing. The next day, when Frank was cooking breakfast in the outdoor kitchen, Tommy called over the fence.

"Hey, Frank! You were right! I went down to our church early this morning. They were handing out food. For free. That was good advice from you. Thanks."

“No problem, Tommy,” Frank said and waved the spatula in his hand at Tommy. Franks saw the lights come on through one of the windows of Tommy’s house and he ran inside to take advantage of the two hours of power they would have.

Frank concentrated on his breakfast for a bit, and then stretched out on the recliner in the living room, his hands behind his head. He began to go through things in his head. He had supplies for years, but, if nothing more than for appearances sake, he needed to find some work. Temporary or permanent. The company he worked for could very well fold if the situation continued very much longer.

He ran through the things that he could do and decided he had enough skills to find some kind of job. Of course, he found out, lots of people felt the same way that were also out of work. When he went to the employment center down town there was a line snaking out the door. He parked and was walking over to join the line when he almost got trampled by a group in the line that saw a truck with a construction company logo on it pull up and ran over, hoping to be one of those selected to work for the day.

Frank shook his head and went to the new end of the line. He got a few looks from those that got back in line, jockeying for their original spot, but he held his ground. That is, until he saw Winston pull into the parking lot and get out of his car.

Frank couldn’t believe that Winston was going to get into the employment seeker’s line. And Winston didn’t. He talked to one of the center’s employees outside trying to keep things orderly. Suddenly Winston’s eyes met Franks. Winston said something else to the guy and then headed for Frank.

“You looking for work, Frank?”

“I sure am, Winston. I can’t believe you are, too.”

“I’m not. I’m looking for someone to lend a hand at the store,” Winston said.

Half a dozen people within earshot eagerly crowded around Winston, detailing how suitable they were for whatever work that Winston had available. He shook them off and took Frank’s arm. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

The two headed for the parking lot, followed by several curses. “Just what is it you have planned, Winston?” Frank asked when they reached Frank’s truck.

“I need someone at the store to help me. All my other help took off when this stuff started and I kept sending them home and couldn’t pay them. But I’m getting some business again and can’t handle it all myself. I can’t get hold of any of my former employees.”

“I know how they feel,” Frank said, but quickly added, “I’m game. Not too experienced in retail, but I can do it, I’m sure. How are you doing transactions?”

“Cash only. All hand written receipts. I got the last three receipt books the office store had.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you there.”

“Thanks, Frank. I owe you.”

“About that Winston... How are you going to pay me?”

“Cash on the barrelhead at the end of every day.” Winston looked at Frank expectantly.

“That sounds doable,” Frank replied and Winston smiled. He looked relieved.

Frank made it to the store before Winston did. He waited at the door, standing with a couple more people that were customers. The time shown on the “Will Return” sign was approaching and the two people seemed to be in a hurry. Frank told them that Winston would be there in just a few minutes.

And he was. He walked up the sidewalk, to Frank’s surprise. Winston opened the doors and let the customers go inside. He handed them each a crank-up flashlight to light their way in the semi-darkness in the rearmost sections of the store.

“What happened?” Frank asked as Winston moved behind the counter.

“Ran out of gas and had to walk the last two blocks.” Winston looked more than a little disgruntled. “And to top it off, I sold my last fuel can just this morning.”

“Don’t worry,” Frank said. “I’ve got a couple of gallons in the truck for situations such as this. I’ll go get it.”

“Wow. Thanks man! I wasn’t sure how I was going to get the car to the station this evening when they have power. I just hope they have gas left.”

“There have been some trucks moving. But I bet you won’t get much.”

“Yeah. Any is better than none.”

Frank went out the back of the store to where he had parked the truck, opened one of the built-in tool box doors and took out a two-gallon container of gasoline. He’d helped more than one stranded motorist with enough gasoline to get to a station in the past and always carried some even though his truck was diesel.

When he gave the fuel to Winston, Winston headed for the door. “I’ve marked everything with prices. Just collect the money and write a receipt. I’ll be back in a bit.” Winston was gone and Frank’s first customer was at the counter with a handful of items.

Frank dealt with numbers every day, so adding up a sales ticket receipt was no problem. Fortunately the first customer had the correct change and Winston got back in time to unlock the cash drawer before the second customer came up with a whole cartful of items. Frank made the change while Winston looked on.

“You’re pretty good at this. I’m so used to the electronic cash register calculating change that I’ve almost lost the ability to do it in my head.”

“I’m old enough to have learned it in school. Guess it just stayed with me,” Frank replied. “When do you get power here?”

“I’m lucky,” Winston replied. “Two to four here, and six to eight at the house.”

Frank nodded as the door bell tinkled when another customer came in. “Frank, I’m going back to the office to rest up a bit. I’ve been missing sleep due to worry. If something comes up that you can’t handle, come get me. And thanks, Buddy. You’re really helping me out.”

“Sure thing, Winston.”

It was close to the store’s new closing time of five PM when Winston came back up front. “Sorry, man! I fell asleep in the chair and just woke up. How’d things go?”

“Good. Only half a dozen more customers after you went back. Simple stuff. No problems.”

“That’s great,” Winston said. “At least I’m making expenses. Don’t know how long it will last if I don’t get another delivery. I sent an order in with the last delivery truck that dropped off the last order I made before all this stuff started.”

Winston fell silent as he checked over the receipts and counted the contents of the cash draw. “Right on the money,” he said. He counted out a couple of bills, hesitated, and added another. “Here you go, Frank. I hope this is okay. It’s about all I can afford and still have money to eat on and restock the store.”

“It’s okay, Winston. Every little bit helps. Nine in the morning?”

“Yep. There’s enough light to see by then. That’s why the new hours. It’s dark in here without power before then and after about five, as you can see.”

Indeed, Frank could see. The sun was going down and it was getting very dark inside the store. Winston didn’t bother cranking up a flashlight as he locked up the front doors and led Frank through the back room and locked up the back doors as Frank got into his truck. He waved at Winston and headed for the service station that would have power until six to top off his truck tanks. Winston was right behind him.

Both were able to get fuel. It took all Winston had given Frank to top off the truck's tanks. Winston was cursing under his breath as he put some gasoline in his car. The prices were triple what they'd been before the crisis.

At least it was peaceful. Primarily due to the two armed guards that were keeping an eye on everything. Frank had noted several instances of the same thing. Private security seemed to be the only business that was booming.

Frank hadn't been to a grocery store for days. He was still living out of his regular food pantry. He hadn't even touched his preps, except for the humanitarian goods. The Wal-Mart where he shopped was lighted up so, on impulse, he turned into the parking lot. It looked like a normal before crisis evening. Lots of cars, but no full parking lot.

There were armed guards outside the store, one standing near the greeter, and he saw two more wandering the aisles. Frank suspected there were several more undercover, watching for shoplifting. With people running out of things and many essentially unemployed now, shoplifting had been on the rise. Especially food items.

Pushing a cart, Frank ran the aisles in the non-food areas of the store. The shelves were pretty bare. Same thing in the grocery aisles. There was food, but a tiny portion compared to normal. And the prices were astronomical, in Frank's opinion.

Frank put the empty cart back in the rack and headed for the doors. He just couldn't bring himself to take food out of starving peoples' mouths when he had plenty at home. Before he got to the door, however, the guard with the greeter called to him. "Sir! Sir. Stop please."

Frank did and turned around. The guy looked a bit apologetic when he said, "I'm going to need to search you. We've had troubles with shoplifting. Anyone doing anything suspicious is subject to search. There are notices posted all over the store.

Frank had seen the notices, but didn't consider what he'd done suspicious. "The prices were just too high," he said.

"Please sir. Don't make a scene. It will only take a minute. Just your basic pat down search."

Frank didn't like it, but he wasn't going to create a scene. The guard wouldn't find anything.

"Thank you, sir. You can leave now," the guard said after the quick pat down. Frank said nothing, but he left the store with a frown on his face. Suddenly he was almost run over by two young men. Three security guards were after them. Frank left before the two were caught, wondering about what they might have taken. Food for their families, or something more precious to them. Like the latest sneakers or even just a candy bar.

Frank was thoughtful all evening as he ate supper and then ran the shortwave bands. There still wasn't any TV or local radio. From the shortwave reports, things were tough around

the world. The downing of the internet and infection of all types of computer devices wasn't limited to the US.

Just before going to bed, Frank switched the radio to the Amateur radio bands. There was quite a bit of activity on the HF frequencies. Seemed that many were running QRP power levels to conserve energy, but with the much more quiet atmosphere, they were coming through loud and clear.

Everyone he listened to said essentially the same thing. They were hunkered down, protecting their holdings, and looking for information over the airwaves as there was no local, regional, or national news available. Many of them didn't even have the rotating power available they way some areas were.

Subdued, Frank went to bed early. He'd arranged to get to the hardware store early so he could go over the shelves and familiarize himself with what was in stock and where it was in the store.

Frank carried on for a month at the store, until Winston had to lock the doors. There were only odds and ends of stock left, and Winston couldn't afford to keep the store open any longer. Like so many others, Winston joined the lines at the government handout locations and the local food banks.

Another nocturnal trip and Frank distributed more of his humanitarian supplies to food banks in the area. He simply boxed up some items and took them over to Mrs. Watson. "I picked up some things for you, Mrs. Watson. I know you haven't been able to go out and shop."

"You are such a sweet boy! Let me get my purse."

Frank wanted to decline the money, but knew it would hurt Mrs. Watson to feel like she was getting charity from him.

Tommy, on the other hand, was a different case. Without enough of the expensive fuel to travel much, Tommy had been hitting every site possible that was furnishing food. And every day he asked Frank how the garden was going.

Actually, the garden was going quite well. But there would be no harvest of anything for several more weeks. Frank thought about offering to help Tommy put in a garden, but it was too late to really start one and get anything from it. And Tommy kept talking like he believed the government would have things straightened out any time and all he wanted to do was get by until then. So Frank didn't offer to help get Tommy's yard ready for a garden the next year.

Somehow the gas company managed to keep the natural gas flowing, and propane available, so, as summer turned to fall and the temperatures began to fall, people with natural gas or propane furnaces had heat. The ones that started to suffer were those with all electric homes. Two hours a day of electricity simply wasn't enough to warm a house enough for the heat to last through until the next day.

At least no one had yet to find out how well off Frank was. Especially now with the garden producing. He'd planned to can much of what he grew, but again he made the choice to distribute what the garden, orchards, and greenhouse were producing. Much of it went to Tommy and his family, with some going to Mrs. Watson, and the rest that he didn't eat went to the food banks.

He cautioned Tommy that when the garden was picked clean, that would be all there was until the following late summer. Again Tommy insisted the government would have things straightened out long before then. Frank tried to talk Tommy into getting some rabbits to supplement their diet, but Tommy declined, with his face scrunched up in disgust.

It didn't deter Frank. He checked the one local paper that was publishing a four sheet paper twice a week. He found that every ad to sell rabbits had already been pounced on and none were available. Frank chanced going into the feed store on the edge of town and made inquiries there. And got lucky. Someone in the store heard him asking about rabbits and stepped over.

"You looking to by just the meat or some live rabbits for breeding?" asked the man. A woman and two children stood nearby.

"Breeders. For meat production," Frank replied. "Also need all the paraphernalia. I'm Frank Cooper." Frank held out his hand and the man shook it.

"Brad Salizar. I've been thinking of selling some of our stock. The kids are sick of rabbit meat and want something else. I'm trying to get chickens, but..."

"Things are tight all over," Frank said in understanding. "I'll pay premium for a complete set up, especially if you have rabbits ready for harvesting."

Eagerly Brad said, "I've got a complete set up. Two actually. One has worm beds and fish tanks as part of a system. I wouldn't want to split that up. But the rabbit only one..."

"I'm interested in the package system. You have fish and active worms, too?"

Brad nodded. Frank looked over at the rest of his family. They were talking to each other excitedly.

"When can I come take a look at it?" Frank asked then.

"Right now okay?" Brad asked.

Frank grinned and nodded. He went to his truck and Brad and his family went to their old, rather beat up Suburban. They had a small trailer attached. It was a pretty good drive out to the Salizar place, but Frank decided it was more than worth it when he saw what Brad had for sale.

It was obviously all homemade, but it was well constructed, of quality materials. Frank made an offer, but when Brad looked hesitantly, Frank added, "For the equipment. How much for the rabbits, worms, and fish?"

Brad quickly stated a figure and Frank pulled out his wallet. He counted out the money, hesitated and then add two more twenties. "I'll need help getting everything there and set up. That enough extra?"

"Absolutely!" Brad turned around and there was the family watching again. "Junior! Cassie! Get the tools." Turning back to Frank he said, "Won't be no time. The missus will get you some lemonade or water, if you prefer."

"That's okay. I'm fine. I want to watch the work so I'll know how to do it in the future if I have to."

"Smart." Brad tapped his temple. "Always gotta keep learning."

Four hours later Frank was in the rabbit, worm, and fish farming business. He waved good-bye to the Salizars, on their way to pick up some chicks at the feed store.

Frank saw Tommy watching over the fence. "You did it. You got the rabbits. You really going to kill and eat them?"

"I certainly am."

"What's all the other stuff for?"

"Worm beds to feed the fish in that tank," Frank said, walking over to the fence. He pointed out the various parts of the system. "I'll put a small greenhouse over it with a small heater to keep it warm enough in the winter."

"What do you feed the worms?" Tommy asked.

"The rabbit droppings feed the worms."

"And the worms feed the fish, like you said. Pretty cool. What do you feed the rabbits?"

"Scraps from the garden when they are available and feed store rabbit feed when they aren't." Frank didn't mention how much rabbit feed he'd bought at the feed store on the way from the Salizars back to the house. As long as he took good care of the rabbits, they and their offspring would provide years of meat. The same with the fish. And what he couldn't eat, he could sell. He looked over at Mrs. Watson's. Or give away.

"I don't think we could eat rabbit... But the kids love fish sticks..." Tommy was musing, his eyes on the rabbit house.

Frank didn't respond. He just turned and smiled at his new small stock farm. "Got to go clean up," Frank said after a few moments of silence. He really did. He'd helped with the breakdown, moving, and reassembly of the structure and was tired. And he still had to pick up and install a small greenhouse over the structure the next day.

He went by Winston's home the next day and knocked on his front door. He stepped back slightly when Winston, in a bathrobe, unshaven, opened the door and barked, "What is it?"

But upon seeing Frank, he lowered his voice. "Oh. Sorry. Been having a few bad days. What do you want, Frank?"

"Do you still have that small greenhouse at the store?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"I'd like to buy it."

Winston's eyes lit up. "Really?"

Frank nodded.

"Let me get cleaned up and dressed." He looked over his shoulder. "Look. I'd ask you in, but my wife..."

"It's okay. I'll wait out in the truck," Frank said. He had no wish to enter the house, considering the aroma coming from it.

Frank didn't have long to wait. Fifteen minutes and Winston was taking long strides down his driveway to where Frank had parked on the street. He climbed up into the truck and Frank head for the hardware store.

"Geez, man! This is some truck. I've never seen a dashboard like that."

"Custom. Got it back when I was working."

"Yeah. I understand that. When I was working, I applied for aid. Don't know if we'll get it."

Frank didn't encourage Winston to continue his tale of woe. He turned on the radio and found the station that had been able to fire up again on a limited schedule. The two men listened in silence as Frank drove.

"It's bad all over, isn't it?" Winston asked a few minutes later.

"Yes, it is. I don't know how some people are making it."

"You've got all that stuff from the store. Don't suppose you'd want to sell it back? Cheap?"

Giving a little of the truth, but certainly not the bulk of it, Frank said, "Actually, I've been contributing to a food bank. And making sure the elderly widow next door has enough to eat."

“Yeah. You always were too generous.” Winston sounded a bit jealous. But he opened up the store and helped Frank load the greenhouse components into the bed of the truck and on top of the bed cover when the bed was full.

Frank secured everything. “Tell you what,” he said when they got back into the truck. “I can pay you in cash or with food. Be a bonus if you help me put this thing up.”

“You will? You know, I always gave you the best prices I could when you bought stuff in my store.”

“Yeah. I know.” Frank didn’t elaborate. When they got to Frank’s house, Frank backed parked the truck into the back yard from the alley so they could unload the greenhouse components closer to where it was going up.

Frank saw Tommy watching, and much to Frank’s surprise, Tommy called over and asked, “You need some help?”

“Could sure use some,” Winston immediately said.

Frank didn’t object. Between the three the greenhouse was unloaded and then, after Frank moved the truck back into the garage, assembled around the rabbit, worm, and fish house. When it was finished, Frank took Tommy aside for a moment while Winston used the bathroom in the mini-barn.

“I appreciate your help. Let me pay you with some food?”

“Sure, Frank. You won’t hurt my feelings.”

“Okay. Let me get Winston home and when I get back I’ll go through my pantry and put a box together for you. That okay?”

Eagerly Tommy nodded. “And you know... I talked to Milly... She said if you showed her how to cook a rabbit, she’d like to try it. See how the kids will eat it.”

“Okay. You can count on that, too.” Frank kept his voice light, but Tommy’s attitude that he was doing Frank a favor eating his rabbits was a bit grating.

Tommy went back around the fence to his place and Winston followed Frank into his kitchen. “Man, that was a lot of work! Got something cold to drink?” Winston asked.

Again Frank’s nerves grated a bit. This time at Winston’s comment about how much work it had been installing the greenhouse. Most of the time Winston had simply handed pieces and parts and tools to Frank or Tommy while they did the hard work.

But Frank was smiling when he came out of the walk in pantry carrying a box filled to overflowing with canned and packaged foods. “Here you go, Winston. Let’s go. I’ll get you home

so you can take a rest.” Frank took two bottles of water from the refrigerator and set one in the box Winston now held.

Again there was mostly silence on the way to Winston’s, as both men sipped the cold water. It had turned into a very warm day. Unseasonable, actually, for as late in the fall as it was. With a last “Thanks, Winston,” Frank dropped Winston off at the driveway entrance of his house and waved good-bye.

When Frank got home, he filled another of his dwindling supply of boxes with food and took it over to the fence. Tommy was there waiting for him. “Thanks, man. You didn’t really have to do this. But I sure am glad you did. Sing out when you need some more help.”

“Okay, Tommy. Thanks for your help.” Frank checked on the rabbits and fish, feeding both sets of animals before he went in to shower, eat supper, and go to bed.

A couple of days later Frank butchered two of the rabbits in the outdoor kitchen. He took them inside to soak in some cold water for a bit. When they’d soaked for a while, he took the pieces out of the water and put two of the pieces in his refrigerator. The other, in a plastic container, he took over to Tommy’s house. Milly opened the door and ushered Frank inside.

Frank saw her wrinkle her nose slightly at the sight of the skinned and cut up rabbits, but she resolutely led Frank into the kitchen. Tommy was there, helping one of the kids with her homework.

“You’d better take Jenna to the living room,” Milly said pointedly to Tommy.

“Oh. Yeah. Sure. Come on, Jenna. Let’s finish this in the living room.”

“Can I watch a movie then, Daddy?”

“Yes. For as long as the power is on.”

Frank launched into his lesson on how to cook rabbits. Boiling, stewing, grilled, floured and fried. Milly chose to fry the rabbit. Frank let Milly do the work, but he coached her through the process. She was an accomplished cook and only needed a bit of guidance in recognizing when the rabbit was the correct doneness.

“Thank you, Frank,” Milly said as she led him to the front door again. He had his container in his hand.

“No problem, Milly. I hope the kids like it. It really is good.”

“I think they will. We probably won’t tell them what it is right away.”

Frank thought that was a mistake, but held his peace. Tommy and Milly could raise their kids the way they wanted. He went home, grilled his two pieces of rabbit on the outdoor grill and enjoyed them with a salad from the last of his garden vegetables.

Frank continued to look for work as fall progressed. Though it was about as far from his old job as it could get, Frank hooked up with a newly formed co-op group selling outside furnaces much like the one Frank had himself.

He wasn't involved in the sale or installation of the furnaces. Instead, he was on one of three crews processing firewood. The co-op had obtained permission to harvest deadwood from the National Forest nearby. Frank was even able to get Tommy onto the same crew. Winston had declined the opportunity when Frank told him he thought he could get him on.

Though Frank had a couple of chainsaws and knew how to use them, the felling of the trees was left to more experienced people. Frank wound up as a skid steer driver, handling the logs brought into the firewood processing area by the skid teams. Tommy ran the portable firewood processor that Frank kept fed with fresh logs.

The co-op had fingers in several pies, so was able to off pay as food, cash, or firewood, or any combination of the three. Frank took the first few weeks of production in firewood. When he ran out of room at the house, he switched to taking food to replenish his pantry. When that was done, before Christmas, Frank had decided to start getting the cash after they started up again after the first of the year.

Tommy's house had a working fireplace so he took one third of his pay from each of the three options. Frank tried to talk him into installing one of the outside furnaces, since it could heat the entire home, but Tommy didn't want to spend the money, even with the large discount co-op members received.

When the First rolled around, Frank and Tommy showed up in Frank's truck, ready to go to work. But there were State Police cars all over the place. When Frank stopped an officer came up to the truck. Frank rolled the front door windows down.

"Who are you and what do you want?" asked the officer, including both men in the request for information.

Frank and Tommy both gave their names and addresses and explained that they were part of the co-op. That they were part of one of the firewood crews.

"The co-op is defunct. The organizers in jail. They've been installing these new furnaces and selling the owners firewood without paying for them. Getting food from some farms that haven't been paid in six months. Have you been paid?"

Both Tommy and Frank nodded.

"You're lucky then. Most of the other workers got stiffed on their last payment. Go home, forget about this, and find something else to do."

"Will we get our membership dues back?" Tommy asked. The Officer just laughed.

“What’s going to happen to the equipment?” Frank quickly asked as the officer turned to leave.

“Auction. Three weeks. Look for the announcements.” The officer gave Frank a hard look.

“Thank you, Officer,” Frank quickly said and put the truck in gear to head back down the fire road in the forest, headed for the county road, and then home.

“Man! What am I going to do? I don’t have enough firewood for the winter! And no other kind of work I’ve been able to find.”

“Don’t worry,” Frank found himself saying. “I’ve got enough wood to get you through. You can pay me back when you can get more.”

“Thanks, man!”

“Yeah. I’ve got an idea. Let me think on it some.”

There was a foot of snow on the ground and more was coming down when the co-op’s equipment went on sale. Frank was only one of five people that showed up for the auction and got bidding numbers.

Frank was quite familiar with the equipment his team had been using, but the other two teams had operated differently. Rather than a portable firewood processor set up in a stationary position fed by a skid steer with tree forks, the other two teams used a set of skid steers to do all the work. One had a tree shear that cut down the trees. The trees were trimmed of limbs by a team with chainsaws and then another skid steer cut the downed trees to manageable lengths. A third took the cut logs to a clearing where a fourth skid steer, with a mounted firewood processor, cut them to firewood length and split them.

The portable firewood process went first and it was way out of range of what Frank was willing to pay. But then the skid steers went on the auction block one at a time. Frank began to bid on them. He had to drop out on the first three, but the other buyers seemed to have what they wanted and began to leave. Frank and one other man were left. Frank dropped out of the bidding on the fourth skid steer and the other man got it cheap.

Just about convinced that the other guy was going to out bid Frank on the rest of the units, since they were going so cheap, that he almost left as the wind picked up and more snow swirled around.

But just as he made the decision the other guy said, “Enough of this. I’m out of here.” That left Frank alone to bid on the rest of the equipment. It was a no reserve auction. A bit ashamed to bid only a dollar on the next machine, Frank bid twenty. And, with no other bidders, he got the machine.

It was one of the Bobcat brand skid steers he'd really wanted. He passed on a couple more of the other skid steers and then bought the last five for twenty dollars apiece. He'd brought ten-thousand with him and went home with nine-thousand-eight hundred-eighty dollars.

It would cost him a bit more to get the equipment moved and stored where it could be worked on and brought back to tip top shape. The co-op had not been big on servicing the equipment.

At the end of February, Frank was the owner of six very good Bobcat Skid steer loaders, equipped to harvest firewood. He fully intended to start up his own firewood business, but, like the deal he'd got purchasing the equipment, he got an offer he couldn't refuse for the equipment after it was all refurbished.

The storage yard where he'd had the equipment moved to, to be worked on, was owned by a real wheeler-dealer. He'd been watching the process of bringing the equipment up to par. Two days after the work was finished he made Frank what he considered a very low ball offer. He had no idea what Frank had paid for the machines. But he knew what new and like new equipment went for, and that Frank didn't have much experience in the field.

Frank's jaw dropped when Hiram Oslo offered him a quick hundred thousand dollars for the equipment where it sat. "Are you kidding?" Frank asked, thinking the offer was a joke.

"Okay. You're more astute than I thought. One-hundred fifty thousand."

"Got yourself a deal, if it's cash," Frank said. He held out his hand and Hiram shook it and then lit up a cigar.

"You know, Frank isn't it? You know, I would have gone up another fifty K."

"I would have taken the hundred. I thought you were just pulling my leg when you made the offer. I only have about twenty-five hundred in them."

"Each?" Hiram asked, looking a little sour.

"All together." Frank grinned. He had no doubt Hiram would honor the deal. And that he'd probably make good money when he sold them. But Hiram looked ready to choke Frank at the moment, so he made himself scarce for a while.

When Hiram drove up in his Cadillac and parked in Frank's driveway, Frank had the garage door open, getting ready to leave in his truck. "You have any idea how hard it is to get a hundred fifty large out of a bank under the current conditions?"

"Can't say as I have," Frank said, waiting patiently for Hiram to fire up a cigar. "Well, here it is," Hiram said, handing over the leather messenger bag he'd brought from the car.

“Thank you, sir! Here’s the bill of sale.” Frank reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the hand written bill of sale with the serial numbers and descriptions of the equipment listed, with the total price.

For a moment Frank didn’t think Hiram was going to release the strap of the messenger bag, but he did and Frank swung it over his shoulder. “Aren’t you going to count it?” Hiram asked.

“Later. You aren’t going to cheat me.” Frank was reaching into his hip pocket for his wallet. “What do I owe you for the bag. I’d like to keep it.”

“Bah!” Hiram growled and tossed his half smoked cigar to the snow covered lawn. He turned on his heel and went back to the idling Cadillac. He backed onto the street and squalled the tires when he put the car into drive.

“Who was that?” Tommy asked, walking over from his front entry, in shirt sleeves, his hands in his pockets.

“Just a delivery guy,” Frank said evenly. “How do you like the new bag.”

“Not catch me carrying one of those. Looks too much like a purse. Wow, though. A delivery guy in a Caddy. That’s something.”

“Yep. He’s something, all right. Talk to you later, Tommy. I was just leaving.”

“Sure. Cold out here, anyway. Any signs of another job?”

Frank shook his head.

“You have anything at all I can do? I need to get a couple more rabbits and a couple fish from you and I’m pretty much busted.”

“You lend a hand in the garden this spring?” Frank asked.

Tommy hesitated a moment, but hung his head. “Yes. I’ll help.” He lifted his head and looked at Frank again.

“Okay. I’ll bring some things over when I get back. You’d better get inside. You can’t afford to take a cold.”

“You’re right about that. Thanks, Frank.”

Frank nodded and went to get in the truck. He pulled out of the garage and pressed the button on the door opener to close it. He patted the messenger bag in the other front bucket seat. When he returned to the house the bag was fifty-thousand dollars lighter. He’d deposited that much between his bank checking and savings accounts, making the bank manager very happy.

The other one-hundred-thousand went into the hiding places he'd pulled cash from when the computer and internet problems had started. He was back to that point financially and had increased his fresh food production capability tremendously with the garden, rabbit hutches and fish tanks. Not to mention all the firewood he had stacked and covered from his time working with the co-op.

The only thing he hadn't accomplished was the filling of the root cellar with fresh and canned produce and meat. All the excess food he hadn't eaten had been given away. But he was happy and slept like a baby that night.

It wasn't until well into spring when power and communications began to return to even a semblance of normal. A streamlined and tightly controlled internet was back up. Some of those businesses that had depended on it in the past had new systems in place so they no longer needed it. Others, with updated software to try to prevent future similar events, were again using it.

With the return of communications it became evident of the great loss of life during the winter. Starvation, hypothermia, dehydration for the lack of enough food, warm shelter, and clean water took millions of lives in the more northern areas of the Northern Hemisphere, The Southern Hemisphere nations, much less dependent on internet communications and computer controls suffered proportionately less than did the Northern Hemisphere.

Two of those that had died were Winston and his wife. To Frank's surprise, he got a notification to attend the reading of Winston's will. Winston, having no children, left all he had to Frank. Other than the hardware store, there wasn't much. The house went back to the mortgage company.

Even the hardware store wasn't much. There was significant back rent owed on the property, accounts payable were high since the last few deliveries Winston had received had not been paid for. And there was very little stock left.

But Frank had a new career, and enough money to bring the store back to tip top shape. Frank reluctantly replaced the store's relatively integrated computer system with a different one, guaranteed to be crash-proof, and connected to the new internet.

Frank had his fingers crossed that he would never again have to say "Stupid computer!" But he kept his preps up, anyway. Never knew what nature or humans might throw at one.

End *****

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