

Joe Labriola

Golden Delicious

There were no jobs.

None for me, at least.

I had held out with the hope, like many, that I would eventually find something. But after nearly thirteen months of collecting unemployment benefits, this overqualified former northeast regional assistant quality-assurance manager at Hostess Snack Cakes was as close to working now as when my search began the day after learning that I would no longer be doing what I had been doing for the past twenty years.

It wasn't anything personal.

It was just business.

Smart business.

Good business.

Streamlining, outsourcing, globalized markets – it all had something to do with my layoff, although I was unsure if my boss, and longtime friend who had broken the news to me that fateful fall afternoon lunch, had fully understood what he himself was really talking about.

“I’m sorry, Joe,” Bill had told me. “I really tried everything I could. I even spoke with Sean, but he said his hands were tied.” Sean was the northeast regional vice-president of operations. Well, the former northeast regional vice-president of operations, as I learned when Bill called me three months later. His shaking voice explained how Sean had shot himself after finding out that he had been laid off. He had gone to bed the night before and waited until the next morning for his wife to drop off the kids at school. “But you’ll be getting full severance,” Bill assured me. “Still working out the length, but you know I’ll do everything I can... You alright Joe?”

“Huh?” I had grunted.

“You alright?”

“Yeah,” I had answered. “I’m alright. I mean, I’ll be fine. I’m just thinking about Shelly.”

Bill sighed into his chair.

I didn’t vote in the previous presidential election. In fact, I couldn’t remember the last election that I did vote in. Was it 2000? Or 1996? I couldn’t remember, but I was happy with our current commander-in-chief. I had slept through most of my Intro to Political-Science course back in college, passing with a C+ grade, but the hour or so of CNN that I watched every night had recently explained to me via shouting commentators how the “opposition’s” regime would have cut my unemployment benefits months ago. This president had extended them. I was glad for that.

But politics didn’t really interest me. Jobs did. And there were none left. None that I could find, at least. And I had looked. Craigslist, search engines, newspapers, job fairs, friends, family connections, old acquaintances, new acquaintances, strangers at bars. I had exhausted every network to try to find some work. Any work.

But there just wasn’t anything available right now for a former northeast regional associate quality-assurance manager.

I had even applied for menial management positions at several supermarkets and restaurants, but no applicants could compete with my credentials – which was just the problem. Some of those jobs would pay me almost as little as I was receiving on unemployment right now – others offered even less, but I honestly would have rather been working than sitting at home dawdling the days away. I hated wasting around; interviewing and waiting, interviewing and waiting, interviewing and waiting. And searching all in-between.

Despite exploring everywhere I knew to look, I hadn’t found anything, yet.

But still, I kept looking.

“Low-lying areas are under mandatory evacuation as of noon tomorrow,” the newscaster announced into his field mic from the sun-bathed parking lot. “The first rains are expected to begin late tomorrow afternoon and strengthen as we head on into the night. Wind gusts are expected to exceed sixty miles per hour by six p.m.”

I hit the power button off and tossed the remote on the couch cushion next to me. The storm was coming. I knew that. I had known for almost a week since the cute, blonde-haired Channel 12 newswoman had frantically explained how half of Puerto Rico was being swept away. The hurricane had been classified as a category four storm then. It was a lesser terror now – category two, and although weakening with every mile blown farther up the milder northeast coastline, the experts still warned that the damage here could be as devastating as everywhere else so far along its fateful trek.

I was born and raised in my little coastal town and remembered past storms bluster up from the south. Hurricane Gloria, and later, Bob, had both wreaked destruction that took emergency crews weeks of scrambling to cleanup. We rarely lost power, but I recalled those long, wasting days of 19th century living. This cataclysm was foretold to bust the damage records set by both storms. So the experts warned us.

We might return to the 19th century for a while, several fine-suited weather forecasters had prophesied. Just what we needed in these strained economic times.

But all we could do now was wait for what we all knew was coming.

I lived only a few hundred yards from the local harbor. Fortunately, my house stood on a wooded hill above the coastal roads and homes that would surely be steeped in surge waters. Flooding or not though, I was confident that some despair would blow my way. Maybe falling debris would total my car? Or a whole tree would crush my house? The fifty-foot evergreen rising from the brush along the driveway might not survive the hundred-plus mile per hour gusts. Maybe I wouldn't either if Mary's old Christmas tree came crashing down through my bedroom ceiling at three a.m.

My wife had always loved that tree. How cynically ironic would that be?

But it might be better this way. My sarcastic sense honestly wondered that at the time. Not me dying, but the house being smashed. I imagined that I could use the insurance money to pay off the month's mortgage. I almost chuckled at the idea that either Mother Nature or Salle Mae would likely take my home of nearly fifteen years.

I thought about it for another moment. It seemed logical that I *should* hope for the falling tree. Only time would tell what havoc struck where though. But maybe I would be one of the lucky ones for a change.

I was never religious. Instead, I poured another coffee cup full of Disaronno liqueur. My now nearly iceless drink was the only task left on my Friday night agenda. I had bought all of the standard emergency survival supplies:

bottled water, non-perishables, a few bundles of wood from 711, batteries, first aid kit, fire extinguisher, flashlights, etc. The cache of preparations stacked in the corner of my den looked like I was readying to weather World War III.

It could last for a week, they were predicting – the 19th century, that is. At least until the power came back and the roads were cleared of fallen hazards.

The blurry clock hands above the T.V. in front of me had slowly swept their way over to eleven-thirty p.m.

I should probably call Shelly, I thought as I took another swig of almond-flavored ease. My daughter lived in Connecticut and was unlikely to get much more than a long day and night of windy rain. But she still worried. Just like her mother had. She was always worried.

I finished my drink just as I realized that I had been sitting there, staring into the deep dimness for several minutes. I was tired. It had been another mundane afternoon of awkward phone calls to prospective employers and online job browsing. And zero progress made. People seemed paranoid beneath the impending storm's black-clouded prelude. The tropical breeze was still swirling in the south, but we all knew what was coming. It had been predicted with precise accuracy. I had tuned into over a dozen news, radio and internet forecasts today, and almost all of them lectured that landfall would be within a sixty mile span of my home. For once, I might finally be seen by the eye of something divine, only this time, this look was that of nature's ire.

At least I had prepared though. All that was left now was to wait for the inevitable event.

I leaned over to the wooden nightstand, grabbed the cordless landline phone and dialed Shelly.

“Hello?”

“Hi Shelly, it's dad.”

“Oh hey dad. How is everything?”

“It's going fine,” I said, tilting the Disaronno bottle to add a splash to my empty glass. “Just finished getting ready.”

“You have all the supplies you need then?”

“Everything on the list.”

“You have enough water, right?”

“Oh yeah, of course. I got two cases – and the old well out back,” I added with a half-chuckle. “I'll be fine.”

“Good. And you have flashlights and candles too, right? And batteries?”

“Yup,” I chuckled. “Geez, you sound just like your mother.”

Shelly paused.

“I know,” she finally spoke. “I’m just worried... You know they say this is going to be bigger than Gloria *or* Bob.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. But don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure you don’t wanna just come stay with me? If you drive up now you’ll still beat the traffic. You’ll be here before one, probably.”

“Nah, I’ll be fine. Someone needs to watch the house anyways.”

I took another swig.

“Okay,” she conceded. “Well, Andy’s still coming over, right?”

“Yup,” I said. “Andy’s gonna come by tomorrow during the day and stay the night.”

“Good,” she sounded relieved. “Is he bringing his survival gear?”

“I certainly hope so.” We always got a kick out of Andy’s backpack that appeared with him whenever summer storms and February blizzards spread across our area or through neighboring states. We had never needed to use his flint tools, camping gear, or bow and arrows, but some of these rudimentary items were probably good to have around just in case.

“Well, that’ll be good then. It’s better to have a friend with you just in case something happens.”

“In case what happens?” my alcohol soaked skull asked.

“Well, you just never know.”

“Yeah, well, we’ll see if Mom’s old Christmas tree finally snaps. That could split the whole damn house right in two.”

“Dad, don’t say that.”

“Hey, you never know. I’m sure at least a few of the older trees will be down in the backyard.”

“Well, at least Andy will be there. It’ll be good. You two can spend the weekend chopping firewood then.”

I managed to burp a laugh. Everyday was the weekend for me.

“Are you gonna be okay up there?” I shifted the subject.

“Oh, we’ll be fine,” she said, referring to herself and her kitten, Saucy. “We’re just expecting a lot of rain, but that should be about it.”

“Eh, I really wouldn’t worry about it. There’s been worst storms to hit before.”

“Yeah, that’s true, but I heard on the news how the last one this strong was in like 1820 or something. It did a lot of damage then, there just weren’t that many people around for it to hurt.”

“Yeah, I read about that online somewhere too,” I corroborated. “But we have a lot more infrastructure now too. A lot more people and resources if things get bad.”

“You’re right. I’m sure you’ll be fine – just promise me that you’ll be careful.”

I chuckled again as I swallowed my splash. “Okay Shelly. I promise I’ll be careful.”

“Well, just remember to call if you have power. Is the cell service still lousy there?”

“Yeah, but I should be able to send out texts. Don’t worry though, I’ll call you tomorrow during work before the winds start up.”

“You promise?”

“Of course, pumpkin. I’ll call you at noon. You have lunch then, right?”

“Yup, same time as always.”

“Okay, good. Well, I don’t wanna keep you up. I’m gonna get some rest. I’ll talk to you then, alright?”

“Okay, get a good night’s sleep, alright?”

“Promise.”

“Okay. Oh, before you go, any luck?”

“Negative,” I said, somehow without sighing. “The search continues.”

“Oh...alright. Well, don’t even think about it for this weekend. You’ll just start fresh again on Monday.”

“I always do...” Now I really struggled to hold back my sigh.

“Alright, I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Love you, dad.”

“Love you too, Shelly.”

“Night.”

“Night night, pumpkin.”

I clicked the fluorescent blue “talk” button off and sat there for a few more absent moments before rising. There was nothing left to do tonight. No need to worry now. I had done everything I needed to prepare.

All I could do now was to sleep, wait, and dream.

I would bank my hopes for Monday’s job search.

The morning was gloomier than the overcast evening. A slight wind swayed the tall pines and oaks, but the real threatening gusts remained far from our bay, for now. I spent most the day watching T.V., switching between stormcasts and sitcoms. I called Shelly back to reassure her that myself, and everything else, would be fine. Nothing bad would happen. Andy was on his way over, I had told her. I loved her and would call her back as soon as the storm ended.

Andy wasn't really coming over though.

My old high-school buddy was actually out east for the weekend with his self-proclaimed "storm training squad" that he regularly camped with. His group had access to a real shelter but their mission was to prevail beneath the deadly torrent. It seemed insane.

But I had always seen Andy as a bit of an unusual character.

Shelly had no idea he wasn't coming, of course. If she had known, she certainly wouldn't have left me here by myself. The issue wasn't that I couldn't handle myself, but as nearly every broadcaster had picked up the cliché, this was supposed to be, "the storm of the century."

But I would be fine. I think my only child was more worried about me being alone regardless of any hurricane. Again, just like her mother had, Shelly possessed the incredible ability to sniff out my depression whenever it seized me, and I had been gripped by a feeling of hopeless futility for a while now – a long while. It was nice that she cared – especially with her mother gone.

Shelly gave even a cynic like myself a small glint of hope to stare at.

That seemed to be all that was left now.

At least I held some light, as the skies grew darker around me.

Andy actually called me around three p.m. when the drizzle began. He invited me out one last time, and I politely declined, one last time.

"You sure?" he had given his final pitch. "This is a great opportunity, man. Once in a lifetime."

"An opportunity?"

"Yeah, man. A-class survival training."

"I think I'll survive just fine with my Netflix, but thanks anyways."

"Heh, not without power you won't."

Andy had previously listed about a dozen reasons why his psychotic camping adventure was actually, “the responsible thing to do,” but the time was too late to argue anymore. Through the window I watched the creeping beast’s heavier breaths scare the weaker leaves from their quivering branches. We both knew that it was too late to join him. Too late for me, at least.

“Just promise me that you’ll be careful, alright?” Andy said.

I laughed. “You want *me* to be careful? You just watch out for them falling trees, alright? I won’t be there to help you hobble around like the Catskills weekend.”

Andy chuckled, remembering our college summer camping expedition in which the young adventurer had fallen ten feet from an evergreen in an attempt to hide our food from skulking bears hungry for dinner. But Andy always survived. “You know I will,” he reassured me.

It wasn’t until three a.m. that the power finally flickered out. But I had known this would happen. All of the forecasts had told us. The wooden electric poles were already tilted from years of bending gusts. How many decades had passed since they were reinforced? Maybe not since the last major hurricane? I remember waking up from what had sounded like a giant, zip-lock bag “POP!” The now faceless digital clock on the dresser next to my bed might as well not have existed in this total blackness.

We were back to the 19th century.

I figured I should just try to get some more sleep despite the world’s moaning. The wind gusted with an airy howl.

I wrapped a pillow around my head. Maybe I would be lucky and awake back in the 21st century.

That was my hope as I drifted off back into dreamless rest.

I woke around seven a.m., according to one of the only functioning electronic devices that separated me from my great grandparents’ generation: my cell phone. Solid sleep had been difficult to maintain with the swirling winds trying to penetrate my half-century old sanctuary. The nonstop rain had hammered on the shaking shingles. It might have even hailed at some point over the long night. But by nine a.m., the lashing winds had slackened and the deluge dissolved back into carefree drizzle. As noon arrived, so did the inevitable end of the much-hyped inevitable end.

The all-consuming darkness had yielded to typical late summer overcast. It seemed safe to step out into the shaken world.

The damage was clear, but I was more focused on the fact that Mary's fifty-foot evergreen right outside of my window stood as sturdy as it had yesterday. My gaze shifted down onto my 1999 Nissan Altima, which had also survived almost unscathed. The silver vehicle was coated in a collage of green leaves and brown twigs, but no big branches had crushed the roof – no windows were smashed, crushed or even scratched.

I shrugged and smirked at my luck for once.

Everyone got lucky sometime.

I made my way through the limb-littered muck, weeds, and grass onto the pebbled street. My property had begun tangling into a knee-high mess of wavy blades shortly after I stopped paying the landscapers. I hadn't used my old mower in weeks and had no real intention of cleaning out the bag and greasing the engine anytime soon. It was menial work that took too long to complete. Why bother if I might be evicted before the month was over anyways? Why bother if the fallow winter could do the same work without complaint?

Several electric lines across the road, in front of my neighbor's house, had been ripped from their plastic casings by an uprooted tree. That explained last evening's booming pop and power-outage.

"What a nightmare," I mumbled. It would definitely take days before the power company got here to clean this mess up. The main roads were always cleared first. I lived on the shore though. The back streets were last on their list. The highways and two-laners were what kept things moving.

We weren't the priority.

I sighed as I continued examining the scattered scene. A few of my neighbors were visible as well; at first peeking from their windows, then creeping out from their doors, and finally braving the first soggy steps to assess the damages and begin rebuilding what had been broken. It wasn't too bad though. There were some busted fences, fallen trees, and one crushed car down the block that I later heard about, but nothing irreparable had happened. Our puzzled worlds could be pieced back together with care and time. There were no tragic deaths here. No gruesome injuries nearby. It would just be a while before everything was back to normal again.

I could wait.

I returned inside for a few minutes to follow my Sunday routine before realizing that there was little to do with my now obsolete appliances. Without Internet access, my Dell laptop was nothing more than a glorified DVD and CD player. It hardly seemed worth wasting the battery, so I didn't.

It wouldn't last long anyway.

I had spent most of the morning reading magazines, and occasionally checking the basement, which had taken on about an inch of water since the pair of garden hose-connected pumps had sputtered silent in the middle of the trembling night. My concern was more out of boredom than worry though, now that the rain had stopped. It would be dry by dawn.

But what to do now?

I thought about reading some more, but figured that I might as well go exploring farther than my own lawn. Initially, I was too timid to venture out past my property line, but I could see others down the street from out of my elevated window. A few brave adventurers were drifting toward the harbor. I wondered if the local landing were flooded. That might be some sight to see.

And I had all the time in the world to read, after all. At least until the power came back.

I laced up my winter boots and entered the outside world again. The landing was about half a mile down the road from my house. I began the post-apocalypse journey alone, at first, still uneasy about the few power lines lying so deathly silent across the roadsides. I made sure to avoid these, even though the electrical supply had probably been shut off, lest some fools wander the wet pavement too close to the high-voltage wires. My safe stepping took me past the first few houses from mine before I joined the trickle of others headed the same way. I knew some of the neighbors, but didn't recognize more of them. Even the sunniest summer afternoons normally lacked as many out running, bicycling, and walking with dancing dog leashes in one hand and directing baby strollers with the other. This sight seemed unusual even though such an outdoors renaissance made so much sense right now. What else was there to do on a Sunday afternoon in the 19th century?

We soon reached the flooded landing. Most of the pier was still soaking beneath the uneasy tidal surge, but the benches and recently mowed grass were drying.

"Guess we got lucky," my neighbor, Kendra said as her children splashed on the water's gradually retreating edge.

"Yeah," I agreed. "I'm sure they got it much worse to the south."

“Yeah, they always do with these kind of storms.”

Just then, I heard a gentle strumming that made me turn. The acoustic guitar chords floated from the fingers of a pale-faced teenage boy sitting on a heavy branch across the soft pavement.

“Looks like we have ourselves a little music festival,” I joked.

“Yeah, it looks like it,” Kendra said. “Sammy!” she suddenly scolded her eldest daughter who was splashing her younger brother. “Sorry,” she lowered her voice for me before rushing away. “Sammy, stop!”

I took a moment to take in the choppy harbor waves below the lazy overcast above.

“Should be out by nightfall.”

I turned, startled by the speaker who had crept over behind me.

“Huh?” I gargled my confusion.

“The water,” clarified the middle-aged man with a yamaka sized bald spot marking his otherwise buzzed head.

“The tide should be out by six or seven, I’d say.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s not that bad now though. We definitely got spared, that’s for sure.”

“Heh, not so much with the power though.”

“Hah, yeah, that’s true. No power for you either, huh?”

“Nope, it went out at three in the morning. I knew it was coming though.”

“Mine too. Hm. Must’ve been the same wires.”

“Yeah, probably. Where do you live?”

“Oh, right up the block like half a mile.”

“Really? I haven’t seen you around here before.”

“Oh,” I began. “Well, I don’t get down here much nowadays. Just so much always going on, you know?”

“Ah, yeah, I hear you. Name’s Dave by the way.”

“Joe,” I reciprocated. We shook.

“There’s gonna be hell to pay if I can’t get to the office tomorrow,” Dave continued. “I’m hoping the roads will be clear by then, but you never know.”

“Yeah, I guess it depends on where you’re headed though.”

“Well, it’s only about a fifteen minute drive, but who knows what the main roads look like. I just rather not have to take a personal day, you know?”

“Oof, yeah. I guess that’s why we really have them though, right?”

“Yeah. True. You work nearby?”

“Oh, well, I’m, uh, in between work right now actually…”

“Oh yeah? What’d you do before?”

“I was the northeast regional assistant quality-assurance manager at Hostess Snack Cakes,” I answered as prideful as possible. I was sick of that once-title. It meant nothing now, here in this half-flooded park.

“Really? Wow, that sounds like the real deal.”

“Hah, yeah, well, it was for twenty years.”

“What happened? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Oh, no,” I sighed. “Not at all. Just cuts. You know, the economy and everything. Company restructuring. They merged my position with some other managers in the area. It’s a long story, but it happened how it happened. I’m just ready to move on now, honestly.”

“Well, that’s definitely the right attitude.”

“Yeah,” I chuckled, less enthusiastically than I wished I could. “I mean, that’s all you can do, right?”

“I hear you. I’ve been accounting at the same firm for almost twenty-five years and they’re chopping guys who’ve been around longer than I have!” It was Dave’s turn to sigh. “It’s just so tough in this economy. Things are still all screwed up.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Hey, if it’s any help, um… I have a buddy in construction, and they’re looking for someone in middle management at their corporate headquarters. I don’t know how similar it is to what you did, but I’d be happy to introduce you to him. Maybe have him talk to you about the work over some drinks or something. I mean, you never know, right?”

“Oh…” I tried to seem interested. By this point I was taking any leads no matter how dim the path seemed. “I mean, yeah, that’d be great. I’d really appreciate it.”

“Here,” Dave said, reaching into his black leather wallet to retrieve a business card. “Give me a ring or text when we get back to civilization and I’ll see what I can do.”

“Yeah, definitely. I really do appreciate it.”

“Nah, don’t mention it. It’s nothing, really. I should be headed back though. I told my wife I was just going out to see if the neighbors have power. They’ll be thinking I was electrocuted or something if I don’t get back soon.”

“Oh, hah, well definitely don’t keep them worrying then.”

“Nope, definitely not a good idea. Nice to meet you though. I’ll see you later.”

“Same here,” I said as Dave started away. “See you around.”

The landing was a beautiful spot with the green coastal hills and beige cliffs framed by the blue bay and gray sky. It was a composed scene even only an hour or so after the hurricane’s final flusters had sauntered off north. That storm had moved on – a category one now according to the radio before I had left the house, and was weakening further as it continued across the eastern seaboard. But areas farther north were said to be even less prepared for such a cataclysm than we were. The damage was sure to be comparable, if not worse, in some places where naysayers hadn’t been willing to admit and accept their unalterable doom.

But we were here. We were safe now.

I hadn’t been down to the landing in months, and now that I was, I couldn’t answer the question that bloomed in the forefront of my thoughts: *Why haven’t I been here in so long?* It was late August and I had spent most of the summer either indoors or in my car to reach elsewhere to be indoors. I wasn’t an athletic type unless my activity involved a knife and fork, or chopsticks. I had run track in grade school, but those seeming-marathons were about as relevant as the world that had been before the now vanished storm. My present workout routine involved a rarely used exercise bike from the 1980s that I had bought at a garage sale years ago, and some dusty dumbbells. It seemed vain to try too hard. Who the hell was I trying to impress anyways?

But this spot was beautiful. Despite the deep overcast blanketing the azure heavens high above, there was a calming peace about this wedge of grass, bushes, pines, pebbles, and pavement. The harbor beach ranged off somewhere over the tide-swelled marshes waving on the breezy horizon. Even the bobbing sails that had braved the long storm looked right at home.

It was a beautiful home.

It was my home.

The boy playing his guitar had attracted a small crowd of children and their parents, who moseyed nearby and clapped whenever he finished fingering a tune. A father and son played catch on the grass. An elderly couple held hands as they stepped slowly up to the waning water to view the surreal serenity of the healing harbor. I had never seen *this* landing before.

I didn't know the time, but after a few more reflective moments, it seemed time to return home. I could always come back later, after all. Maybe I would bring some magazines and read under one of the coastal spruces when the ground dried some more. That seemed like a good way to spend the afternoon.

But I needed to call Shelly too.

Normally I would use the landline, but without power, my cell was my only outbound connection to society. Unfortunately, there was little service within these shoreline hills. Sometimes I got lucky, and by freezing in the right position, at the right angle, and at the right moment, I could capture enough black bars on my fluorescent screen to squeeze out texts. I should be able to at least send out a text. This wasn't *really* the 19th century, after all.

I walked back onto the road leading away from the landing. The usually car-traveled lanes were scattered with pedestrians; some wandering to the waterfront park, others leaving, and even more floating in other directions to other places of other interests. I was about halfway home when I came to the fork in the road. I paused in the small depression where the paths met. The one way bent left, taking me farther up the winding incline and around the bend to my silver-shaded mailbox and long gravel driveway; the other choice bore right, rising steeply, but leveling out soon after that first difficult heap of paved Earth. I hadn't been that way in a while. It wasn't in the direction of work or worry, but I remembered the journey from some time past. Today seemed like the perfect day to enjoy such a scenic route.

The hill tested my resolve, but I had conquered such a mount before, and I knew that I could again. After about a minute of wearisome huffing, I straightened and stretched my back at the summit before continuing along the oak-lined curb. There were houses on this way as well; all of them old, snuck in on small cleared patches among the acres of woods encroaching them. I saw an old man lugging a cracked branch around a tall, planked fence from out of his backyard.

"Hey there," I called as I jogged over. "You need a hand?"

“Nah, I got this one...thanks,” the elderly man answered through heavy breaths as he dropped his haul on the edge of the leaf-littered road. “Wish you’d been by about an hour ago – I got most of the debris cleared now though.”

“I’ll say.” I noticed the pile of snapped tree limbs by the old man’s wooden trashcans. “Wooden trashcans?” I asked, hardly realizing the thought had snuck out through my lips.

“Oh, those, yeah. Biodegradable.”

“Biodegradable?”

“Yeah, they break down when you throw them out.”

“Throw them out?” I asked. “Who throws out garbage pails?”

The old man snickered an honest chuckle. “You still got the same pails you did from the 80s?”

“No...”

“Well they didn’t just up and disappear, that’s for sure.”

“Hah, yeah, I guess so.”

“Heh, the name’s Chris, by the way.”

“Joe.” I reciprocated.

We shook.

“You live nearby?”

“Yeah, right down the road, actually. I haven’t seen you around.”

“Hm,” Chris thought aloud as he scratched his white scruff beneath his faded green fisherman’s cap. “Well I’ve been here for...oh...thirty-three years this winter.”

“Wow. That’s a long time.”

“Hah, yeah, I guess you could say so. It’s been home for a while now. Might as well have always been home. Sure as heck’s gonna be.”

I noticed the rows of stringy green bushes through the open gate in the lacquered fence. “Are those plants?” I asked with casually curtailed interest.

“Well they sure ain’t lawn fixtures,” Chris answered with a smile. “Care to take a gander?”

“Yeah,” I said. Normally, I would have politely declined such an invitation into a stranger’s yard, but Chris *was* my neighbor, and I did have all the time in the world today, and perhaps for days ahead. “Sure. I’ll take a look.”

“It’s right on through here,” he said, trudging up the grassy rise and on through the fence.

I followed, stepping into a yard that might have once been a short-trimmed field for kids to play summer games and dogs to frolic on. Chris’s house was across the acre-sized plot, lined with what appeared to be chest-high beans stalks, reinforced on thick poles.

“What are they?” I asked as we stepped among the plentiful plants.

“Sugar peas. Or at least they will be in another few weeks or so.”

“They seem to have weathered the storm just fine.”

“Heh, yeah, lucky, I guess.”

I was no horticulturalist but I noted the barely sprouted pods.

“Jesus,” I murmured. There must have been a hundred of these stalks. “What the heck are you gonna do with all of them?”

“Eat some of them. And sell the rest at local markets.”

“Do you make any money off of them?”

“Enough to feed me. The house is paid off and I have quite the pension plan from the state for the time being. What money do I really need?”

“I guess so.”

“There’s more too. We still got some tomatoes, basil, oregano, garlic, thyme, mint, cucumber, further back by the house. Got plenty more to plant and harvest before the year’s over. Squash and pumpkin season’s right around the corner.”

“Geez, this must take all day to manage.”

“Not really,” he assured me. “I have my routine. I’m a retired high school biology teacher, so it’s pretty much my thing now. It’s good training anyways.”

“Training?”

“Yeah for when we all start farming again.”

My lips made to move but fell fallow. “What?” was all I could think to finally mumble.

“Hah,” Chris chuckled. “Not now. Not yet, but some day.”

“Some day?”

“Yeah, I suppose in another twenty, maybe thirty years. Probably after I’m long gone. Back into the soil myself. One can only hope though, right?”

“But why would people start farming again in another twenty or thirty years?” That seemed backwards. If grade school history had taught me anything, it was that fewer and fewer families were farming every year. It was just the way and trend of things.

“Nothing lasts forever.” Chris smiled. “Here, I wanna show you something.” The old man waved me over as he continued past the hedges closer to his house. “You ever done any gardening?”

“Not really…” I frowned, following behind. “Never really had the time.”

“Hm,” he sniffed. “Have you?”

Chris pulled ahead until I caught up with him near the peeling white steps of his small, perhaps two bedroom, one story home. We stopped at what I presumed was his herb garden out front. The budding leaves peeked out above the dark, tilled soil; perfuming the air with a scent reminiscent of my Italian grandmother’s kitchen on Sunday afternoons.

“It smells amazing,” I commented, drawing thicker than normal breaths.

“It is,” Chris said, his satisfied hands placed on his leather belt above his baggy blue jeans. “Enough herbs here to last you through the winter if you store them right.”

“Really?”

“Oh yeah. Hold on a sec, I got something else for you…”

Chris hobbled up the creaking wooden steps and disappeared into his house for a moment, and for that moment I pondered about stealthily departing. Normally I would have snuck off to get back in time to catch the beginning of the game (football, baseball or whatever exciting event the current season sported), but what else was there to do? Might as well indulge in 19th century living for just a little longer.

It wouldn’t be like this forever after all.

“Here you go,” Chris said, halfway back out through porch-ceilinged door. He came over and raised forth his age-shriveled palm.

“What’s this?” I asked, taking the brown crumple of lunch-bag paper. I unfolded the small wrapping to find myself holding over a dozen spouting beads.

“Seeds,” the old man answered. “Apple seeds.”

“Apple seeds?”

“Yup. Golden Delicious. One of the tastiest breeds in my opinion.”

“Oh...those are nice,” I said, assuming that he meant the yellow apples from the supermarket as per the name, Golden Delicious.

“Yup. Well, those are yours to keep.”

“Mine?”

“Yup. Yours to plant and grow as you wish. As you see fit.”

I paused. *Me* growing apple trees? The notion was a seemingly ridiculous one at the time.

“Thanks...” was all I could think to say right then.

“No problem. You can plant them right now as long as you keep them inside for the winter. Wait till the spring to move them to your yard.”

“Won’t an apple tree take years to grow though?”

“It’ll take some time, some work, but definitely not twenty or thirty years at least.” Chris grinned. “What do you do by the way?”

“Oh, well, I mean I used to...” I paused, “...um...well, nothing really right now.”

“Heh, well I guess you got all the time in the world then, don’t you?”

“Hm,” I smiled. “Yeah, I guess you could say that I do.”

“Well then I’d say you should get right to it then. The sooner you start the sooner you can start enjoying.”

“Damn... I don’t think that I have any plant pots though...” A long-dormant piece of my spirit was enthused by this idea, but I hated the thought of spending any amount of money that I literally didn’t have. In such situations I had always half-jokingly assured myself that was why God invented credit cards, but such an option was long-since maxed out. “Well, I mean I guess I could hit up the dollar store and find some soil at the landscaping place up in town.”

“You got an old bowl?” Chris asked.

“Um, yeah, probably.”

“Got dirt in your backyard?”

“Well yeah...”

“Water from your faucet?”

“Yeah, well, there’s actually an old well up by the woods on my property from whoever built the house.”

“Well it sounds to me like you’re ready to go.”

“Heh, yeah, I guess so...”

“Try it out,” Chris said, patting my shoulder. “It’ll take some time, but I think you’ll get the hang of it over the next few decades.”

“Well, thanks, I’m definitely gonna try.”

“That’s the only way to *do* – gotta try first. Care for some cider? I just finished a batch last week.”

“Oh, thanks, but I think I’m gonna try and get these seeds going. What, do I just put them in dirt and watch them grow?”

“Yeah, you can plant them right now. Just make sure to water, but don’t flood, and leave them somewhere with plenty of sunlight – the more the better. Might have to upgrade to some larger pots over the winter but as soon as spring rolls around you can move them outside.”

“Huh...alright. Well I’m sure I’ll be back with more questions.”

“And I’ll be sure to be right here.”

“Yeah, really, thanks a lot.”

“Don’t mentioned it,” Chris said with another smile. He extended his hand to shake. “Neighbor to neighbor.”

I remembered the last time that I had rushed home with such excitement pulsing through my legs. Of course these legs were much stiffer now. I was much slower, but my rushing anticipation mirrored my past passions. I had gotten an A on my forth-grade science invention project that me and my dad had created together (the Spongeulator 9000). I couldn’t wait to let him know what a hit our genius had been with my teacher, my class – the whole world, at the time. I remember that run home from school – my desperation to share my adrenaline fed adulation. Life had possessed a bright meaning back then. Back when the world was golden. Back when the world was right.

My childhood was far behind, but I now felt that enlightenment once more.

It took some time searching in the already dry basement before I found an old ceramic bowl. I hurried outside to scoop up some dirt from the muddy border between the uncut lawn and gravel driveway. The gray sky was growing brighter. The clouds were whitening. Back inside, I kneaded the seeds into the cool muck. The pebbly mixture didn't seem like it needed water, but I figured I would wet it just a little. I was sure that the thirsty seeds would quickly soak up what moisture the dark dirt held.

The windowsill in the kitchen facing the backyard seemed like the best home for my future tree. The sun now peaked over the dissipating clouds, spreading late summer warmth and light down onto the damp Earth.

As I stood in the glaring afternoon brightness, I realized that I forgot that I had originally left the landing for home to try to text Shelly.

She would be happy to hear about this new project.

But I was hard at work now, tilting the pregnant clump's bowl with paper towels stuffed beneath so that the angle would yield the most plentiful life.

I nearly forgot that I was still in the 21st century.