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I'll Have A Beer, Thanks For Asking

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I'll Have A Beer, Thanks For Asking - Chapter 1

Barney slid the empty beer bottle across the width of the bar. “Another one, Trudy,” he said as he slipped another twenty dollar bill into the video poker machine in the bar surface. It was some moments before he looked up. A cold beer wasn't within reach of his right hand. Barney frowned and looked first left, and then to the right. There was Trudy, standing there near the end of the bar, staring up at the television.

Several people were crowding around, also watching the TV. Barney hesitated to prompt Trudy about his beer. It didn't pay to tick Trudy off. He could wait another minute. Or so. His eyes lifted from Trudy's rear to the TV.

“Holy Mackerel!” Barney exclaimed at the sight of a nuclear mushroom cloud rising. Then he hunched down, hoping no one had heard him. “Just that new show, Jericho,” he thought to himself. “It's about a nuclear war.”

He was about to ask Trudy again for that beer, but he noticed one of the women had turned to the man with her face buried in his shoulder. She was crying. Great big sobbing gasps crying.

It finally dawned on Barney that something was wrong. “What's wrong? What's going on?” He asked. No one answered. “Hey,” he said then, touching on a shoulder one of the men watching the TV with so much interest. “What's going on?”

This time he got a response. “Nuclear war has started. That's New York on the screen, you big dummy.” Normally a comment like that would have resulted in Barney taking a swing at the one that voiced it, but the news was so astonishing that Barney didn't think to hit the man. He just stared at the screen with the rest of the bar patrons.

It finally came to him that he might ought to do something. It was

nuclear war. Just the one so far, but... The screen went white, and then black, and then another shot of a rising mushroom cloud, seen from a distance. Even Barney could tell it was a different one.

Now several people were crying and there was some soft cursing, that Barney couldn't quite make out. Oh. Maybe that was a prayer. Suddenly galvanized into action, being this was the real thing, Barney hit the cash out button on the video poker machine.

"Come on, Trudy! Cash me out. I need to get out of here and do... something! Oh. Get me a six-pack to go out of that." He grabbed the six-pack and his change, choosing a bill at random to shove across the bar. Trudy stared at it in awe. It was a five dollar bill. Barney had never tipped more than the coin change from his beers. She looked up to thank him, but the door was closing as Barney strode out of the bar, on a mission.

Problem was, Barney didn't know what the mission was. He climbed into his junker of a truck, an old Ford F-250 two-wheel-drive he'd got from his uncle for doing some plumbing work for him one time. Barney put the six-pack in the twelve volt cooler. The six-pack was now a five-pack, since he'd pulled one bottle free and opened it with the opener on his keychain.

Putting the beer between his legs, Barney started the truck and then put it in gear. Where to go? Where to go? Nuclear war meant fallout. That was for sure. And that was dangerous. Where to go? Where to go? Barney suddenly hit the steering wheel with the heel of his right hand. "That culvert under the interstate for the X Bar X cattle cross-over!" he exclaimed, pressing the accelerator of the truck to pull out onto the street from the bar gravel parking lot.

"Gonna need food. Gonna need food. And water." Barney looked at the cooler. "More beer. Lot's more beer." He headed for the grocery store on the other end of town. The nearest one was closed. He was past his

bank before he thought about it. He came to a screeching halt in the middle of the street, checked the rearview mirror and backed up until he could turn in to the ATM lane of the bank. “Work! Work! Work! Work!” he mumbled as he screeched to another halt, approximately across from the ATM panel. Barney fished the tattered leather wallet from his left hip pocket, took out the card, and slid it into the machine. “Yes!” he almost yelled when the screen came up with his options.

He knew how much he had in the bank, to the penny. He kept close track of his money. He had to. After punching in the total amount on deposit to withdraw, he got the error screen reminding him to withdraw in multiples of twenty dollars. “Nuts!” He punched in the new amount, which left \$9.88 in the account. That irked him, but he let it go.

This was all he had. The rent money for this month coming up and the next, and enough for utilities and food for the two months. But that was it. Since he’d been laid off at the mine the handyman jobs he’d been getting were barely paying his way.

“Next stop, Cleppers Grocery!” The tires of the truck chirped as he dropped it into gear and hit the accelerator. The truck might not look like much, but Barney kept the engine tuned to a T.

He tried to calm himself down and not give away what he was doing so no one would beat him to what he wanted. It didn’t look like anyone in the store knew what was going on. Grabbing a cart Barney headed for the liquor isle. Four twenty-four packs went into it. He rolled it up to the ice machine and got several sacks of ice for the beer.

Barney left the beer cart near the checkout lanes and grabbed another cart. He went straight to the canned meat isle. He raked can after can of roast beef, chili, and tuna fish into the cart.

Barney was almost running when he moved on to the canned vegetable and fruit aisle. Ignoring the vegetables for the most part, except for

whole peeled tomatoes and pork and beans, he added quite a few cans of peaches.

He slid to a halt when he passed the display of jerky. He took all they had. Ditto the dried fruit. Except prunes. He hated prunes. Barney threw in half a dozen loaves of bread, and a couple big boxes of crackers.

Barney used paper towels for napkins so he decided to get a couple of rolls. Then he saw the toilet paper. Last time he'd been camping he'd run out of toilet paper. Not again. He grabbed the cheapest big package on the shelf. The second cart was overflowing.

He grabbed a shelf stocker and asked him to get him ten cases of the cheapest cases of water they had. "Liters or bigger."

When he got to the checkout stand with the two carts he'd filled, the high-school girl at the cash register looked amazed as she began to ring up Barney's purchases. "You never buy this much. You come into some money?"

Barney had a sickly look on his face. "Yeah. Something like that." He noticed the candy as he tried to look nonchalant. He went to each checkout lane and gathered up all the boxes of plain Hershey bars they had. He added them to the pile of stuff already on the sliding belt.

"I've got water coming," Barney said, as the clerk rang up the last of the candy. He looked around and pointed. "There he is."

The girl leaned over slightly to see what was coming and began to ring it up. "Ten cases," Barney told her. She nodded and ran up the final bill. Barney blanched.

The boy left the water on the trolley and followed Barney out to the truck. It was full dark now. The stars were bright, with the moon not up yet. Barney piled the groceries on the front passenger seat and

floorboard and the water in the bed of the truck. The beer and ice went into the two coolers also in the bed of the truck. Barney suddenly looked up and noticed the stars. And a couple of streaks of bright white light heading west.

And then the lights in the store went out. Barney started the truck and headed home to get his camping gear. It didn't amount to much. A good tarp, some tent pegs, and a couple of poles with lots of 550 cord. An old GI sleeping bag he'd picked up. A fire grate. A coffee can stove and a couple more coffee cans for cook ware. A Coleman lamp and a couple of cans of fuel. A couple of ammo cans with the small stuff. He threw everything in the back of the truck, on top of his tools. It took a couple of minutes to get the little fresh food he had in the fridge out and put into the chiller box on the front seat.

With a last look around the efficiency apartment, Barney grabbed one kitchen chair and decided there wasn't anything else he really needed. He went out to the truck, got in and headed to the interstate. He couldn't figure out why he was passing so many cars on the road. From what he could see, he was the only thing moving. A couple of people tried to wave him down, but he just drove around them and ignored the cursing and rude gestures.

Barney took the next exit, and got on the service road. It ran out and he was on a dirt ranch road. Two miles further and he was at the cattle crossing underpass. There had been a lot of rain early that spring and both ends of the tunnel had piles of earth washed up from the drainage of the interstate. That worked to his advantage.

He didn't know much about radiation, but Barney did know mass was good. Taking a shovel from the bed of the truck, he worked on the two piles to make them as high as possible and as close to the tunnel as he could get them with moving the whole pile.

Using the reflected light from the truck headlights, Barney moved the

food, water and beer from the truck into the tunnel, and then his camp gear and the chair. He started to set up the tarp as a lean-to but realized that the sand that had washed into the tunnel wasn't deep enough to hold the pegs.

So, he stacked the food and water to hold the poles in place and as anchors for tying off the lean-to. He put down the sleeping back on the floor flap of the lean-to, and then lit the Coleman lantern. Barney went back outside, got an axe from the bed of the truck and began to cut sagebrush. Every so often he would stop cutting and carry the smelly stuff into the tunnel. When he had a pile of firewood large enough to suit him, he put the axe back in the truck, turned off the headlights, and went back into the tunnel.

Five more beers on top of the ones he'd had at the bar and the one in the truck and Barney was ready for bed. He'd done all he knew to do. Time would tell if it was enough. Hopefully it would be a little war.

I'll Have A Beer, Thanks For Asking - Chapter 2

When Barney came groggily awake the next morning it took a few seconds for him to remember where he was. When he did, he scrambled up and started for the south end of the tunnel. He stopped before he got close. The sky wasn't very bright. He checked his watch. The sun was up. Then he noticed the dust falling. It was almost like a rain of very tiny dry raindrops. He backed up.

He stopped and thought for a few moments and then decided to do his business inside the tunnel. He picked a spot, scraped the sand away and did what he needed to do, and then covered things back up.

Rubbing the stubble on his chin, Barney realized he hadn't brought any shaving gear. With the thought in his mind about what else he might

have forgotten to bring, he started to fix breakfast. He came to an abrupt stop, can of corned beef hash in his hand. He hadn't brought a can opener. The corned beef hash had a self opener, but not everything did. He hated the thought of using his good sheath knife to open tin cans, but that was about his only option.

Then again, maybe not. The sheath knife was nowhere to be found in the ammo box that held the small items of camping gear. For the life of him he couldn't remember what he'd done with it. That meant it was the pocket knife. "Nuts!"

After a breakfast of the two eggs he'd brought from home, and the can of corned beef hash, Barney looked at the fallout coming down and wondered if he was going to live or die. Something else he realized he hadn't thought of was something to do. There were several books at home he'd never got around to reading.

Barney dropped his head on his chest for a moment. "Guess I can sleep all I want to." Which was what he did mostly, during the two weeks he waited, after the fallout stopped. He seemed to remember that two weeks was somehow important. But the morning of the second day he couldn't keep anything on his stomach. He threw up, off and on, all day and decided he was going to die. But he'd go out fighting.

He felt much better the next day and was able to keep some food down. Maybe he wouldn't die, after all. Realizing that he didn't have any first-aid kit beyond a couple of band-aids and a twelve count tin of Excedrin, Barney became very cautious opening the tins of food with his pocket knife. It was sharp to start with, but dulled rapidly. He worked it on the concrete to keep it as shape as he could. It was something to do, and a sharp knife is safer than a dull one.

As the two week point rolled around, Barney noticed he was taking much more hair from his comb whenever he combed it, than usual. Didn't that mean he had radiation sickness? He was pretty sure it did.

But he sure didn't feel like he was about to die. For the most part, other than feeling kind of tired, despite all the sleep, he didn't feel all that bad. But the beer was long gone, though he still had plenty of food. Water was running low, but he still had enough. He was just ready to leave the tunnel.

He waffled back and forth for an hour about whether or not to pack up everything he had left and take it with him, or leave it in the tunnel. He hadn't seen or heard a soul since he'd been there, but he figured with his luck, someone would wander in and steal everything if he left it. But then again, the same thing might happen if he took it with him. Someone might try to take what he had.

Barney compromised. After digging into the mound of earth at each end of the tunnel, he split his supplies and buried two-thirds of what was left, a third in each hole. The other third he would take with him.

So Barney headed back to town. When he left the interstate and got back on the local road into town he still hadn't seen anyone. Just all those cars stopped on the highway. Actually he couldn't quite say that. He'd seen two dead bodies in one of them. He didn't realize it until he happily pulled over and got out of the truck to talk to them. He felt like throwing up again.

He did see a couple of people running away from Cleppers. The windows were all busted out and carts and parts of shelving units lay scattered around the parking lot. Barney pulled into the parking lot and went into the store. It was stripped of everything edible or immediately useable. Just hardware and non-edible things were left. Barney shook his head. "Looters," he said, going back to the truck. It surprised him when he saw the two that had run away edging back toward the store. "Wait a minute! They're not going back to the store! They're headed for my truck!"

He ran the last few steps to the truck. "Hey! You guys! What do you

want? Do you know what happened? Where is everyone?”

Neither of the two men, looking to be in their mid- to late-twenties, replied. One brought up a baseball bat from where he had been holding it against his right leg. The other unsheathed a wicked looking knife.

Fire in his eye, Barney reached into the bed of the truck and brought out the axe. If they wanted a fight, they'd get it. When the two saw the axe they exchanged a quick look, then turned and ran off again. One didn't get very far. He came to a sliding halt and began to throw up.

Barney got into the truck and drove off, wishing he hadn't sold his old Winchester .30-30 for beer money three years before. It looked like every window on main street was busted and the buildings looted. Deciding that the most probable place to find someone would be at city hall, or the county offices. He tried the city hall, but no one was around. It looked intact.

His next stop, at the county office complex, was more interesting. Barney saw activity through a couple of windows, so parked the truck and headed for the front door. He looked all around before he started to go inside. He didn't get a chance to open the door. It seemed to open on its own and he was staring into the business end of an AR-15.

Barney's hands went up and he took a step back. “Hold it right there!” came a firm voice.

“What's going on? I haven't done anything!”

“Are you one of them?”

“Them who?”

“The raiders. They came through two days ago. Some of us holed up here. We haven't been out since.”

“No. I’ve been hiding out outside of town. I just came in to see what was going on,” Barney started to lower his hands but the muzzle of the AR-15 made two upward jerks and his hands went back up.

“Well, who all is in there? Maybe someone knows me. I’m Barney Richardson.”

From well back in the building came a whiney voice. “It’s Barney Fife. Yeah. I know him. We’re drinking buddies.”

Barney didn’t challenge the statement since the AR-15 was lowering. Him and Jim Perkins were not drinking buddies. The little slug was always calling him Barney Fife. Barney hated that.

“Look,” Barney lowered his hands. “I haven’t seen any raiders, or signs of them. Well, except for all the businesses look like they’ve been looted.”

“You have any food?” came a call from those behind. Barney wasn’t surprised it was the same voice as before. “We haven’t had anything to eat since day before yesterday.”

“Well...” Barney hesitated. Not saying yes didn’t do any good. Three people pushed past the guy holding the AR-15 and headed for Barney’s truck, including Jim. “Hey!” Barney called out as they started going through it. He started to step down toward them to stop the scavenging, but the AR-15 was pointing at him again. Barney just frowned and let it go.

“Is there anyone in charge here?” Barney asked the gun holder, finally looking past the muzzle at the wielder. His eyes widened. It was a woman.

“I guess I am,” she said. The AR-15 was finally hanging by her side, not

pointing at him.

“I should know you. You look familiar.” Barney was looking at her quizzically.

I’m Genevieve Prescott. Tom’s daughter. The pharmacist. I used to handle the cash register some at his shop.”

“Yeah. That’s it. Where’s Tom?”

A forlorn look crossed Genevieve’s face. “They killed him. The raiders. For the drugs.” She shook her head. “And the drugs won’t even help them. They’d been out in the radiation too much. Most of them were already in bad shape, but they were able to kill people and take what little food was left after the food riot.”

“Food riot?”

“Yes. I’m ashamed to admit it, but the local residents mobbed both grocery stores and both mini-marts when it became obvious what was happening. I guess people don’t keep much food at home anymore. It seemed like everyone was there.”

Barney didn’t mention his early visit to the store on that day. “So the raiders didn’t do that, huh?”

She shook her head. “Most of the rest. Liquor stores and the pharmacy. A lot of the stores they just trashed for the pleasure, I guess.”

Barney was keeping an eye on the truck. Food for hungry people... Okay. But Jim was starting to take out the 12 volt chiller from the cab. “Hey! Just the food!” Jim looked reluctant, but he put the chiller back down on the seat and got back out of the truck.

“How many people are here?” Barney asked.

“Twenty-three,” Genevieve replied. “A couple of people left right after the raiders quit attacking us here, but we heard some shooting right after that. I don’t know if it was them or someone else.”

It was only then that Barney noticed the pockmarks on the stone building, mostly around windows. “How many were there?”

“Fifteen... Twenty... I’m not sure. But every one of them had at least two or three guns. It was all I could do to hold them off. And I’m about out of ammunition.”

“You held them off by yourself?” Barney asked, incredulous. When she nodded he believed her.

“They took their dead and wounded, which surprised me, and left after shooting the place up. They only stayed across the street. Never tried to flank me, or attack the rear of the building. I’d never have been able to stop them if they had.”

Barney still thought she had done a pretty good job, though he didn’t say so. “You have any idea if the radiation is gone? Where did you shelter?”

“Over at City Hall. That building has a better basement than this one. Some of us just came out three days ago to check on things. The raiders caught us out. Never did get over to the hospital to check there. Some people were planning to shelter at it. Don’t know about the radiation. I’m hoping they have some instruments over there. Fallout was physically light, but it might still have been pretty hot.”

“Hot? Oh. Nuke hot.”

Genevieve nodded. “We only saw a couple of vehicles running that day we were out and about. Yours seems to be doing okay. I guess it’s old enough the EMP didn’t damage it.”

“EMP?” Barney asked.

“Yeah. Electro Magnetic Pulse. Don’t you know what that is?”

Barney shook his head.

“Well, I don’t have time to explain it to you. Uh... Is there any chance you can run me over to the hospital? I’m still leery about going out on my own. No one here has wanted to go. I guess they might, now.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll take you. Come on, let’s go.”

Genevieve reached down and picked up a large gym bag. At Barney’s questioning look, she said, “Rest of my loaded magazines, plus the empties. Don’t want to lose any.” Barney nodded.

She turned around and gave some instructions to two people that had been hovering just out of earshot. “Find something to hold them and then go pick up all the empty brass you can find across the street. I’ll be back for it. I’ll try to find more food.”

“Some of these people are like animals,” Genevieve said softly as more people came out and started fighting with the first three over the food.

“Yeah. A couple of guys tried to steal my truck when I stopped at Cleppers to see what I could find.”

“You’ve got a valuable property here, in a running vehicle, especially a truck.” She looked over at him after she buckled her seatbelt. “You don’t have to tell me and I’ll understand, but do you have much gasoline?”

Barney almost didn’t tell her, but he was beginning to trust her. “I’m something of a fanatic about fuel. Ran out once up in the mountains. I’d

just filled the tanks the day before this happened. A twenty gallon and a forty gallon tank under the truck and two 5-gallon cans in the back.”

“Sweet. I’d hide as much of it as I could. They may start commandeering stuff like that. Maybe even the truck.”

“They, who? Haven’t seen any National Guard or anything. Have you?”

“No. But one of the guys that got caught out with us is a ham. He was picking up some traffic on one of the military bands before his batteries went dead. He said they had to be getting close. That was the day we came out of the basement. We were supposed to just try to get some more food and water since we were running short, but the raiders were there and chased us to the county offices.”

“I stopped at the City Hall. I didn’t see any signs of anyone.”

“I told the ones that stayed behind to lay low unless I came back and gave a password to let them know everything was okay. I want to get to the hospital and see how it’s going there before I go back to City Hall. I hate to go back without taking some food and water.”

Barney turned down one street and had to back out. There were two cars dead on the street going opposite ways, side by side. He took the streets around them and finally got to the hospital without any additional trouble.

The stink was unmistakable when they opened the main door into the hospital. Genevieve and Barney both backed out of the lobby and began to retch, one on each side of the walkway. After a few minutes they made their way around the building, trying different doors. The smell was overwhelming at every one, until they got to the kitchen delivery door. It, too, was unlocked and Genevieve opened it a crack and took a cautious sniff. Discernable, but tolerable.

They went inside and tried the door from the kitchen to the dining area of the hospital. The smell was not quite as bad, but still sickening. Genevieve closed the door and turned back to the kitchen. "Let's see what we can find."

When they began opening cabinets they did find some #10 cans of food. It would be enough to feed everyone they knew about at least one meal. Maybe two for the children. Barney brought the truck around and they loaded everything edible into the bed of the truck, and then headed for City Hall. Barney made sure there was a can opener included.

When they got there, Genevieve ran to one of the basement access doors and banged on it. She gave the password and the door opened. When Barney got close he got a whiff of the air in the basement. It was nowhere near as sickening as the hospital, but it was rank enough. Too many people in too small a place with inadequate facilities.

Barney stayed outside, going back to the truck, while Genevieve went inside to come up with a plan with the others to feed everyone. When Genevieve came back out she told Barney they had decided to take everything to one of the restaurants near the edge of town that used propane for cooking. It should have what they needed, even if the place had been vandalized.

Everyone was to walk to it, while Barney took Genevieve and four other people to get things set up. The main window was broken and there were a few overturned chairs, but the place was intact. Barney went to check the propane tank. It was about half full. He checked the valve. It had been turned off. Someone had been thinking. He hoped it was one of the survivors.

Barney turned the valve on and then went back inside to light the pilot lights of the cook stoves. After that, with the others preparing the food, Barney felt a little redundant and went outside to his truck. Genevieve saw him leaving and followed him out. "You aren't leaving, are you?"

she asked.

“I’ve done all I can, as far as I can see. I want to check on my apartment and make sure everything is okay.” He rubbed his rather scraggly beard. “And I want to shave.”

Genevieve smiled at him. “I can understand that.” The smile faded. “But... We need more water.”

“Gee. I don’t know,” Barney replied. He looked thoughtful. “We can check places here in town, but I bet there isn’t a lot. I guess I could go check the city’s tank. See if it still has water in it.” The more he thought, the more ideas he had. “I’ll stop at the hardware store and get some plastic buckets. They sell them I think.”

“Thanks, Barney,” Genevieve said. “I’d go help, but I don’t want to leave this group unprotected.”

“Sure. No problem.” Barney climbed into the truck and headed for the hardware store. It looked like the hardware store had been hit, too, but not badly. There weren’t any firearms or ammunition left. Barney checked that first. But he found an even dozen 6-gallon plastic buckets with lids and loaded them into the truck. He also found a sheath knife that had been overlooked. He took that, too.

When he got to the water tank he felt elated when he saw the automatic generator sitting beside the pump house. But then he was disappointed when he checked it. Apparently it had worked like a charm when the power went out. It had run the fuel tank dry. The water tank was also dry. Barney cursed for a little while, and then got back into the truck

He drove down to the river and filled the buckets and his two coolers with river water. Barney had to stop often. He didn’t think he’d ever been this tired, and he really hadn’t done all that much. “Just the two weeks of doing nothing, I guess,” he told the world after he loaded the

tenth bucket of water into the bed of the truck. He left the other two empty. Barney stopped behind the hardware store after he left the river.

The hardware store rented tow-behind concrete mixers and had the cement and aggregates to make concrete. He half filled one of the empty buckets with fine sand after removing the top layer that he figured had fallout on it. He got back into the truck and headed for Cleppers. There he found several packages of coffee filters.

Taking all they had, he put them on the front seat and went back to the diner. Genevieve came out when she saw the truck pull up. "Any luck?" she asked. She had the AR-15 slung over one shoulder and held a plate of food in one hand. She set the food on one of the outdoor tables and went over to the truck. "I'll help you."

"Well," said Barney, "It's good news, bad news deal. The city tank was empty and so was the fuel tank for the generator. We might get that going if we can get fuel from the depot outside of town. For now, I got river water and the stuff to make a simple filter."

Genevieve watched as Barney poked several holes in the bottom of one of the buckets, near the center, and then placed several coffee filters on the inside bottom of the bucket. After transferring the sand from its bucket to the filter bucket, he set the empty bucket on the ground near the entrance of the diner. Barney cut a large circle out of the middle of the lid for the empty bucket, snapped it into place, and set the filter bucket on top of the empty bucket.

"Can you get me something to dip the water with?" he asked Genevieve.

She took her food with her back inside and came out a few moments later with a large pot. Barney had just finished putting a layer of coffee filters on top of the sand in the filter bucket. Bringing one of the water buckets over, he took off the lid and began to ladle water into the filter bucket.

“Going to take a while, but just keep adding water to the top bucket and taking it out of the bottom one. This will filter stuff out, but it won’t help if there is some kind of bug or something in the water. It’s all I know to do.”

“We’ll just have to take a chance. Some of these people are desperate for water. Thanks, Barney.”

Barney felt himself blush at her words. He hadn’t blushed in years.

“Sure,” he replied, shrugging his shoulders. “No big deal. But I’m tired now. I’m going over to my apartment and get shaved and take a nap.”

“Okay. Oh. Don’t you want some food?”

Barney shook his head. “Too tired to eat. I’d probably just throw it up, anyway.”

“Radiation sickness,” Genevieve said, looking somber. “What kind of shelter were you in?”

After his explanation, Genevieve said, “Clever. But you probably got an unhealthy dose. I hope you’ll be okay.”

“Yeah. Me, too.” With that, Barney got into the truck and went to his apartment. He started to go inside, but turned back and opened the hood of the Ford. Getting a screwdriver from the toolbox in the bed of the truck, Barney unsnapped the catches for the distributor cap and took out the rotor. No one was going to steal his truck without a lot of trouble.

Even with those precautions, after he carried one of the coolers of water inside and shaved, he came back outside and lay down across the seat in the truck to nap. Just in case.

It was well into the afternoon when Barney awakened. He rubbed his

face with both hands and sat up. And found himself staring into the barrel of another firearm. A pump shotgun this time. “That truck wasn’t here before. That means it runs. Get out. I’m taking it.”

Barney lifted his eyes from the muzzle of the shotgun to the face of the man holding it. When his eyes uncrossed he noted that the man’s hair had fallen out in patches. He was nearly bald. There were huge dark half moons under his eyes. He did not look well at all. But he was holding the gun steady.

Easing out of the truck, Barney waited for his chance. He knew it would come. He’d been in a few fights in his time and knew how to take advantage of the other guy’s mistakes. With the door half open, the muzzle of the shotgun still partly through the open window, Barney shoved the door the rest of the way open.

The door post hit the shotgun and swung it away from Barney. The man fired in reflex, the shot charge going over the hood of the truck. Barney tackled the man, taking both of them to the ground. Landing on the man cushioned Barney’s fall and knocked the wind out of the man. Barney slugged him a couple of times, knocking the man out with the second punch.

Barney climbed to his feet, the shotgun in his hands. He frisked the man and recovered half a dozen 12 gauge shells. All 7½ shot. He checked the magazine. It still held three rounds. He reloaded the shotgun and set it in the truck.

Then he bent down to try to bring the guy around with a slap or two, if need be. But when Barney knelt down and shook the man, his head rolled back and forth rather uncannily. Alarmed, Barney checked the man’s pulse in his throat. He couldn’t find one. Barney watched the man’s chest for a couple of minutes. It neither rose nor fell. The man was dead.

Barney blanched, rose, and stepped back. He'd never killed anyone before. It was a feeling he didn't like. Even if it was more or less accidental. Barney finally shrugged. "Probably would have died, anyway, the way he looks."

Barney wondered what to do with the body for a few minutes. When he came to a decision he loaded the body in the back of the truck. It was a struggle that left him gasping for breath. He rested for a few moments and then installed the rotor in the distributor. He got in the truck, started it and headed for one of the cemeteries outside of town. That's where dead bodies belonged, he had decided.

After pulling the body out of the truck, Barney dragged it over to an empty plot and left it there. Feeling more than a little sick, Barney went back to his tunnel shelter to spend the rest of the afternoon taking a nap. Nothing had been disturbed in his absence. He woke up as it was getting dark. Barney opened a can of roast beef for supper. It was easier now. It was easier with the can opener he'd filched at the hospital kitchen when he got the one to take to the diner. After his supper he went back to bed and was asleep again in moments. It had been a stressful and tiring day.

I'll Have A Beer, Thanks For Asking - Chapter 3

The next morning, during his breakfast, Barney debated on whether or not to go back into town or wait a few more days. The cooler and a half of water would let him save the rest of his bottled water. He had a couple of bottles of Potable Aqua in his camp gear.

His conscience finally got the best of him, after he'd decided to stay where he was for another week or so and let the townspeople work things out on their own. His was the only working vehicle so far. They might need him to help with something.

This time Barney loaded up his gear, leaving the one cache where it was, but taking everything out of the first one. He wasn't in any big hurry, so he stopped at several of the cars abandoned on the highway and siphoned what gas he could get. He kept a siphon hose in the truck to transfer fuel from the 5-gallon cans. He always spilled too much when he tried to pour it in. Barney managed to top up both truck tanks and refill both the cans.

He slammed on his brakes just after he'd passed a semi that had managed to get onto the shoulder before it quit rolling after it died. It was a grocery delivery truck. "Be full. Be full. Be full. Be full," he chanted as he walked to the rear of the trailer. No lock. Not a good sign. Barney opened the rear doors anyway. And found a treasure trove. It wasn't full, but it was three-quarters full.

Barney climbed inside and began to check the pallets. It was mostly food, but there were some dry goods as well. He loaded up the back of the Ford with a general selection and then closed the doors to the trailer. He took a lock out of his toolbox and locked the trailer doors.

When he got to town, he drove by the diner. No one was there. He went to City hall. There were people lounging around and he saw Genevieve keeping watch from the tall steps up to the main entrance. He waved her over. He began to untie and roll back the tarp with which he'd covered the contents of the bed of the truck.

"Holy cow, Barney! Where'd you get all this?"

"Found it. Okay? Don't ask too many questions."

Genevieve grinned at him. "Whatever you say." She called several of the people over to help unload. Most of the food could be eaten from the can or package.

"We've got people out scavenging for food, but they aren't having much

luck. People don't keep a lot of food at home any more, I guess," she said as the food was unloaded. Barney had noticed the wheel-barrows and garden carts sitting on the lawn.

"You're all still sleeping in the basement of the City Hall?" Barney asked as more people streamed out to help.

Genevieve nodded. "We still don't know what the radiation level is. We've kept an AM/FM radio watch going, but there hasn't been any local news. We occasionally get a station from way off, so we know there are more survivors, but haven't heard anything even remotely local.

"Some of the people have pretty bad radiation sickness," she continued, "From what I know about it, several of them are going to die. And we're keeping the kids inside, except for just a few minutes a day. They have the highest risk."

"I think I've got it," Barney admitted. "I was sick for a couple of days and my hair is coming out. And I'm so weak all the time. It was all I could do yesterday. And today, loading up the food wore me completely out."

"Those are all signs, for sure. But it sounds like a moderate dose. Maybe it won't be too bad."

"I hope not." Suddenly Barney straightened up, from his leaning position against the truck. "Something just occurred to me. I gotta go."

"What?" Genevieve asked, but Barney just waved and drove off.

Barney drove all the way across town and out into the country. He'd remembered talking to a drunk at a street fair several years ago. The guy had been bragging how prepared he was for the end of the world. It was only later that Barney found out the guy's name. He'd driven by his

place not long after that. It looked ordinary and Barney forgot all about it, until now.

When Barney got to the place his smile faded. Apparently the guy had bragged a little too much a little too often. Or the man had just been unlucky. The house was half burned down. When Barney got out and cautiously approached he saw the remains of a human form lying in the carnage, a rifle still in one hand. The garage was still intact. Barney checked it. If there had been anything in it, it was gone.

Barney tried to remember more about the conversation. He'd been a bit drunk himself and the memory was sketchy. But something was nagging at Barney. Something in the conversation about split supplies so if the government started confiscating things, they'd find some and quit looking. Barney was sure the man hadn't mentioned the actual location, but there had been two or three clues the guy let slip. One was that it was on his property But what where the rest?

Walking around the place, Barney hoped he would see something that would jog his memory. He saw a small out building in the back yard and went to investigate it. It was the pump house. There had been something about the pump house. He couldn't see anything inside, except the water line coming out of the well into a tank, and the power line going into the well.

And the electrical box. Barney remembered something the guy had said. "They'd never think to look in a breaker." Barney hadn't any idea at the time, but now it might make sense. He opened the electrical panel and used his knife to undo the screws holding the internal cover in place. One of the breakers was marked 'Spare' on the listing on the door. There were no wires leading from it. He pulled it free of the electrical bus and shook it. Sure enough, it rattled.

Using the tip of his pocket knife this time, Barney undid the screws holding the breaker together and found a key. Okay. Now he had a key.

Where was the lock that it fit? Something about birdbrains never finding it. The word birdbrains seemed hysterically funny to the guy.

Barney had walked past an overturned bird bath on the way to the pump house. Hurrying now, Barney went to the truck and got a shovel. It was the work of only a few minutes to dig down where the bird bath had stood. Something thudded and Barney made the hole a bit bigger, exposing a square panel made of treated boards. And there was a lock, wrapped in duct tape.

After removing the tape from the lock, Barney tried the key. Sure enough, it worked. He opened the hatch and looked down into darkness. Back to the truck to get a flashlight. There was a ladder down into the hole and Barney took it. He had to crouch down, the concrete compartment had a low ceiling.

Barney decided it was a two-thousand gallon septic tank. And it was nearly filled with boxes and other containers, all neatly labeled. They were stacked along the two sides of the tank, floor to ceiling, two deep, with a very narrow center aisle between.

A wooden cabinet was at the far end of the aisle. It had a lock on it as well. Barney tried the key. It worked. Swinging the door open, Barney decided he didn't have to worry about only having the pump shotgun and a few shells for it. The cabinet was a small armory. The long guns were racked, the handguns were on a shelf. Barney saw the ammunition cans stacked two deep by two wide by four high on both sides of the cabinet.

The man must have built the cabinet in place, because it was too big to have come through the hatch, Barney decided. Some of the boxes, it looked like to him, would barely fit through the hatch. Checking the labels of the boxes next to the aisle, and then pulling three to check the labels on the boxes against the wall, Barney determined that the box behind held the same or similar items as the box on the aisle. Might not

be true for all, but for Barney's mental inventory, he assumed so. He whistled. This was a lot of stuff.

Leaning over was hurting his back, so he turned back to the entrance. That's when he saw the clipboard laying on top of the left hand row of boxes. It was a detailed inventory. And it answered a question that had popped into his mind. The man had stored all of this. Wouldn't he have stored fuel, too?

He had. It was in 55-gallon drums, which were, in turn, placed in over-pack barrels buried around the perimeter of the tank.

Barney didn't get greedy. He took a Springfield Armory 1911 .45 ACP, six spare magazines, which were in one of the boxes stacked next to the cabinet, and a Ruger Ranch Rifle, also with six spare magazines.

Opening one of the ammo cans marked .223/5.56, Barney took out three bandoleers. One would fill the magazines and the other two were spare reloads. Out of one of the .45 ACP can came two boxes of ball ammunition. Barney also took two boxes of 12 gauge shotgun shells. 00-Buck. One of the weapons related boxes contain a couple of cleaning kits. He took one of those, too.

He almost forgot what had sent him on this chase in the first place. He found the container that held electrical equipment. He took out a CD V-715 radiation survey meter and a couple of batteries.

After setting the weapons and accessories outside, Barney climbed out, closed and locked the door hatch and carefully refilled the hole, placing the sod he'd cut out back on top. He stood the bird bath back up on top of the hole.

He put a battery in the meter and tried it. Best he could figure out the reading was 0.30 r-something.

He was hungry and his back hurt when he got back to his apartment. He took the same precaution he had before, pulling the rotor out of the distributor before he went upstairs to his apartment. It took him three trips to get the things he wanted from the truck.

Barney ate a little and then set about field stripping the weapons and cleaning them. He loaded up the magazines and wished he had something to carry them in besides his pockets. There was load bearing gear in the tank, but it was in one of the back, bottom boxes and he hadn't wanted to dig that deep yet. Besides, he wanted something a little less obvious and military looking.

After he rested for a while, Barney went back down to City Hall. Again Genevieve was on watch. He waved her over. "Has anyone run across a generator?" he asked.

"No. We're looking, but haven't run across one."

"I'm going to go out and check Fernando's place. He had a portable generator for running tools and stuff. I worked for him some. It'll make it a lot easier to get water we don't have to filter."

"Thank you, Barney. That's sweet of you. And by the way, Jasper said he thought he could get a couple of vehicles going if he gets the parts from the auto supply store. He doesn't want to go on his own and people are getting sick right and left now. Everyone else is out scavenging. We're getting a few things, but what you brought sure kept us going."

"I'll take him with me. And don't worry. I'll bring another load of food in tomorrow. Oh. And I found this." He handed her the CD V-715.

She didn't ask him where he got it. "Thanks again, Barney. I'll go send Jasper out." She hadn't mentioned anything about the weapons now on the seat of the truck, either.

It wasn't far to the auto parts store. Jasper said it would take a while to find everything he needed. Barney nodded. "I'll hang around out here."

As he was waited, thinking about trying to find some beer, he noticed the women's clothing store across the street. On a hunch, he went over and stepped through the broken window. He found the purse section and found what he thought he might. It was a large shoulder bag, of leather. He whistled when he saw the price. It just about cleaned him out, but he left money at the cash register. He didn't feel right about taking something like this without paying for it. Food and water were one thing. And if the owner of something was obviously not coming back, he figured it was okay.

Back at the truck, he put the magazines for the pistol and rifle in different compartments of the bag and put the strap over his head, onto his shoulder. He took it back off to adjust the shoulder strap length. It worked well when he put it back on. He had his LBE.

Barney was a pretty good shade tree mechanic, but he didn't have much experience with newer models. He acted as a second pair of hands for Jasper as he worked on three different vehicles. Two started and ran all right. The third would start, but only run for a few seconds before dying.

"I don't know," Jasper said, "There must be another computer or something that I don't know about." He pulled the parts he'd put in, and then they shuttled the other two vehicles back to City Hall. One was a Jeep Cherokee, and the other a Ford pickup, both mid-eighties models.

Again Barney was exhausted well before nightfall. Afraid of something happening to the truck, even if he pulled the rotor, he went back to his tunnel. He just laid the tarp out, put his sleeping bag down, climbed in, and pulled the tarp over him.

He was still feeling poorly the next morning when he had his breakfast. But he'd told Genevieve he would deliver another load of food. And he

hadn't made it out to Fernando's the day before. With a sigh, Barney got into the truck and went to work.

By the time he had to quit early that afternoon, he had a small generator hooked up to a private well with a pump there in town. The city residents could get safe water fairly easily now. They just had to bring their own container.

When he went back to City Hall to tell Genevieve, she scolded him for doing too much. Apparently he didn't look too well.

"The radiation is still way over 0.10. Almost 0.30. Everyone is still getting pretty bad doses of radiation when they are out doing stuff. I didn't know. I wouldn't have let anyone leave the shelter if I'd known how high it was."

"We all going to die?" Barney asked Genevieve.

"Oh, no. Some will, but even at these doses, most people will only show some of the symptoms. What worries me is the flu or something getting started. Everyone's immune system is very weak. The flu could kill a bunch. I suggest you stay here in the shelter for a few days. It has to be better than your tunnel."

"Well, thanks." Barney wasn't inclined to stay in town. Apparently his tunnel had protected him well enough to get through the worst of it. It would do for the rest of it. "When do we not have to worry about the radiation? Do you know?"

"When it's down below 0.10. It will still be affecting people, but at that level it's mostly long term effects, if you don't already have a big accumulated dose. I'm not sure how long that will be. I know the seven ten rule, but I don't have enough numbers to figure out the rates previous to when you gave me the meter. We just have to keep measuring it every day until the meter says 0.10."

“Okay,” Barney replied. “I’m going back out to my tunnel. I probably won’t come in for two or three days. The food good for that long?”

“I think so. Thanks again for all that. The curiosity is killing me about where you’re getting it, but I said I wouldn’t ask too many questions.”

Barney managed a smile. “Thanks.” With a wave of his hand out the open window of the truck, Barney drove off. He was feeling much better three days later when he headed back into town. He became concerned when he thought he heard weapons fire. He stopped the truck and listened. Yes. There was definitely a fire fight going on in town.

Keeping a sharp eye out, Barney drove as close to the noise as he dared. He pulled the rotor again, and slipped the .45 behind his belt in the small of his back. Slinging the musette bag with the magazines over his head and onto his right shoulder, Barney picked up the Ranch Rifle. Taking his time, he approached the area of the fire fight. It was at the City Hall.

He spotted one of the attackers. It was a man in uniform. Barney was hesitant to fire on the military. Maybe it was just a misunderstanding he could clear up. He changed his mind when another man, also in uniform, bellowed out what he was going to do to the women when he got to them.

Barney used all his deer hunting scouting skills to locate most of the attack force. They were all in uniform. He found a National Guard Humvee parked out of harm’s way. A soldier with a lieutenant’s bar lay dead nearby.

Barney made his way back to the fight, a plan in mind. He’d use the Sgt. York turkey hunting tactic of taking out the rearmost soldier and advancing to the next. That would give him the best chance of taking out a few of them before they discovered him.

Sighting carefully, Barney squeezed the trigger of his rifle. He had fired a couple of sighting shots out at the tunnel, so he knew the sights were on. The man fell silently. Barney advanced. He took out three more of the soldiers before he drew the attention of the rest.

He started taking fire, but the attack from the rear had spooked the rest. With Genevieve and someone else firing from City Hall, and the attack from their rear, the last four began to withdraw, headed, Barney was sure, for the Humvee. He broke into a run to cut them off.

Barney almost ran right into one of the men. He fired from the hip and the man fell. Barney slowed then and eased closer to the Humvee. The shot he'd taken nearby slowed the others' advance.

After seeing one man ease his head around the corner of a building to check the Humvee, Barney waited until he moved again. The shot took him clean. The other two men made a mad dash for the vehicle. Barney poured fire at them, but had to reload. His next shot took one of the men down, but the other got into the Humvee. Barney ran forward and shot him at close range before he could get the vehicle started.

Everything fell silent. Barney checked each of his targets in turn. All but the one he'd almost run into was dead. He left that one where he lay. He wasn't going anywhere. Not one-hundred-percent sure that was everyone, Barney headed toward the City Hall. He also didn't want to get shot by someone there, either.

He didn't find anyone else, just a few more dead bodies. He called out to the City Hall from cover, just in case. It was Genevieve that returned his call. He spun around suddenly when he heard the Humvee start and take off with a squeal of tires. There had been someone else.

People began to come out of the building, making Barney uneasy. There could be more around. But nothing happened and people spread out and began collecting weapons and such from the dead soldiers. Other's lay

lamenting over the fallen bodies of their own killed.

“They took us by surprise,” Genevieve told Barney when she joined him. “From some of the coherent yelling I take it they had sneaked into town and scouted out likely targets. Most of us were outside when the first volley came from over here. That’s what got most of our people dead. I did what I could. So did Jimmy. He’d found a bolt action and some ammunition in one of the houses he searched. I know we got two or three of them, but you turned the battle. How did you know we were in trouble?”

“I didn’t. I just happened to be coming into town and heard the firing.” Barney and Genevieve both spun around, their weapons rising, as a shot rang out.”

“Be careful,” Barney yelled. “There’s a live injured one out there.”

“Not anymore,” came the cheerful, yelled reply.

“I believe the spoils go to the victor,” Genevieve said, as several people came up showing them what they were finding. You get your pick. What you don’t want goes into the communal supplies.

Barney started to decline, considering what he had in his new stash, but decided more is usually better. He took a couple of the M-4’s, three dozen magazines, and a couple of nice non-issue knives. There was only one pistol among the salvaged items and it was an M-9 9mm. He left it for the community. Apparently any extra ammunition was in the Humvee. None of the soldiers had been carrying bandoleers, just their loaded magazines. Barney was amazed they had been firing full-auto with only the few magazines each soldier had.

He went to his truck and put the weapons away, and then drove back to the City Hall, joining Genevieve again in front of the building, still carrying the Ranch Rifle.

“Hey!” a youth yelled, running up to them. “Look what I found! It’s an Army walky-talky!”

He handed it to Genevieve. She keyed the radio and said, “This is Genevieve Prescott. Can anyone hear me?”

Almost immediately a voice came out of the speaker. “I hear you. Why are you on a military radio?” By the time Genevieve had explained a Blackhawk helicopter was hovering over them. It banked away and began landing in a nearby vacant lot.

A group of soldiers came running over, rifles at port arms, led by a Captain and a Lieutenant. “We’ll take charge of those,” the Lieutenant said, going with his men to collect the ‘spoils’. There was a medic in the squad and he began checking the fallen soldiers. When he returned, he went over to the Lieutenant and whispered in his ear.

The Captain had watched the gathering of the weaponry, silently, but then turned toward Genevieve and Barney. Everyone else had shied away, grouping together at the top of the stairs to the entrance of City Hall.

“Looks like you did the world a service and saved the National Guard some time and trouble. We’ve been after these guys for almost a week.”

“At least one of them got away,” Barney said. “In a Humvee.”

“We saw it on the way here. It was stopped on the interstate, the driver lying on the road beside it. No sign of anyone else.”

“One of us must have hit him,” Genevieve said.

The Lieutenant came up to the Captain and asked, “Should we disarm the civilians, Sir?”

Both Genevieve and Barney stepped back and gripped their weapons tightly.

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Lieutenant,” said the Captain. “Carry on with gathering the bodies and all their belongings.”

“Yes, sir,” the Lieutenant replied, saluting, and then walking away. Barney didn’t mention the stuff in the truck and if they didn’t look... that was just their loss.

“By the way,” Genevieve said, “Where have you guys been all this time? We were expecting help to be here days ago.”

The Captain shook his head. “The world is a mess, Miss. We’re doing all we can do. The cities were a priority. We were instructed to concentrate our efforts there.”

“Lousy orders,” Genevieve mumbled.

“Makes sense, I guess,” Barney said with a shrug. “The rural areas should be able to take care of themselves better than those in the city. We have been doing some scavenging,” Barney continued. “Are we going to get into trouble about that?”

“No. Not as long as you’re taking truly abandoned goods for survival. Since we are in the area, do you need anything?”

When Genevieve opened her mouth to answer, the Captain smiled and raised his right hand. “Anything we might actually be able to help with.”

“Oh. Can you get a doctor or someone to check on our ill? There is a lot of radiation sickness. We’re losing people right and left.”

The Captain called the medic over and sent him with Genevieve into the

building. Genevieve came out a few minutes later, a grim look on her face. “It’s as bad as I feared. We’re going to lose most of those that are bad off already. Be more as time passes. According to the medic. He said there wasn’t much to do except treat the symptoms and make them as comfortable as possible.”

“I’m sorry,” the Captain said. “It’s the same all over. Too many people didn’t understand the dangers and came out of shelter too soon, or just didn’t have shelter to start with. Good shelter, anyway.”

“Is there any chance we can get some diesel for the city water pump generator? At least we would have running water. It would be easier than trying to get fuel at the depot outside of town.”

“Fuel is in short supply, just like everything else. You’d better take what you can get. We did fly over a tanker about ten miles out,” the Captain said. “You might check it out and see if you can get it started. Assuming it isn’t empty.”

Genevieve turned her eyes to Barney. He was nodding. “So that’s where the food is coming from!” she thought to herself. “Abandoned grocery delivery truck or trucks.”

The helicopter was taking off and they fell silent due to the noise. “It will be back for us,” the Captain said when it quieted down. “It’s taking the bodies back to base. We’ll take up residence until tomorrow in one of the abandoned buildings. We brought what we need, so don’t worry about your own supplies. We’ll leave anything we don’t need behind for you to distribute.”

The Captain turned then, and walked away without a further word. He joined the other National Guardsmen and they went looking for a suitable building in which to spend the night. One of the men handed the Captain a back pack and he shrugged into it, taking the lead as the grouped moved off.

Genevieve looked over at Barney and asked, “What’s our next project after we get that truck of food and the one of fuel back here?”

Barney wasn’t surprised she’d figured it out, after the Captain mentioning the tanker. “Big... Giant garden plots. There were plenty of seed packets left in the hardware store, I noticed. We need to contact some of the ranchers and farmers around here, too. See where we can help them and they can help us. I’m surprised some of them haven’t already been in. Surely an old tractor or something would have started after the attack, even with that EMP stuff you were talking about.

“And the bodies. We need to move the bodies from the shallow graves you’ve dug to the cemetery. They’re a health hazard. I’m surprised the coyotes haven’t started digging them up. I bet plenty of coyotes survived in their dens. I don’t know. Look for more supply trucks before someone else gets to them. There’re hundreds of things to get done.”

“We’ll manage,” Genevieve said. She put her free arm through Barney’s, much to his surprise. “We’ll manage.”

“You think we could maybe look for a beer truck, too?” Barney asked as they walked toward the City Hall building.

End *****

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