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Tommy,

Greetings from the Hotel Fort Des Moines.

I was thinking of you the other day. I really appreciated your support when I was working through my hotel management program & thought I could return the favor with an idea. I can honestly say, though, that the program never really prepared me -- or probably you, for that matter -- for what happened the other year.

The year after the lights went off, we had a couple riots here in town: the big one at the capitol and a way smaller one a month or so prior. It wasn't even remotely a surprise. No electricity, no gasoline. It was a wonder to me that thousands more didn't die that winter.

Well, of course, once the weather got hot in June, people started getting really pissed off and it wasn't too long before they stormed the steps. I don't know what they expected to accomplish. Frustration's understandable. Nobody could plant corn or soybeans -- en masse, anyway. Couldn't water them even if you did plant them. You couldn't get around without having to walk or ride a bike or, if you were really lucky, ride a horse. Couldn't take a shit inside because the plumbing didn't work. Couldn't eat enough to make you have to shit, anyway. Not like the state folks hadn't tried everything they could. What little news we got from DC, Minneapolis and elsewhere indicated that it wasn't just a Des Moines, or an Iowa problem, but that it was everywhere. Now how is the state government going to fix things that the eggheads the feds have at their disposal can't even figure out?

Sorry, I just get irked about it. Frustrated at the frustration, even though I never was a real patient person. I guess I was more than a little peeved about life in general that summer, too. Since none of the guests could effectively leave town once everything stopped working, we turned into a kind of halfway house for them. I guess some did leave, and I hope they got where they were going. But most stayed at the hotel. Yeah, non-paying guests staying in your hotel while you can't really pay your workers. It was stressful, although quite a few of the guests are pretty much working tenants. Also, I am glad I can say the previous management never removed the fireplace out of the lobby. It's saved dozens of lives these last few years.

Well, so a couple hundred people stormed the capitol mid-day. It was the third week of June. June 18th, a Tuesday. And there was no one there to stop them.

A couple of weeks prior a smaller mob had taken over a Wal-Mart, carted off basically everything they could get away with and beaten the lone security guard there to within an inch of his life. So, there was a feeling that worse things were on the way. But the guard, the Highway patrol, sherriffs and police had no way to communicate with each other, no way to get around other than the options everyone else had. They didn't even have any bullets to fire had they known to be there AND been there when things gotten really out of hand at the capitol. And they did. A couple dozen congresspeople got pretty much hucked to pieces, ten raped before hand, and then the idiots gutted the capitol building with fire. Twenty more died in the blaze.

Meanwhile, the mob just dissipated. Nobody tried to stop them. Nobody ever got called on it or brought to justice.

The Des Moines Disgrace.

The only fortunate thing about the whole mess was that the capitol building is pretty well isolated from other buildings nearby and so ~~no~~ the fire didn't spread. The entire city could have gone up, what with no functional fire department. What was left of the government scrambled to get a hold of themselves, and reconvened outside City Hall a week later. By that time most everybody else had gotten completely fed up and there were almost three thousand people there. State, city, and county law enforcement finally got somewhat organized and showed up, too, even though of them were out of uniform. I was there, and the whole scene was hair-raising to me. The Congress took roll call, and called out each missing member twice. Once the roll had been taken, they got down to business. They met for all of thirty minutes, then dissolved. Nobody really knew what was going on until the congress people started filtering into the crowd.

Groups formed around them, just pretty naturally. Everyone listened to what each member had to say. I wasn't there, but it all filtered down to me quick enough. The gist was that folks were told that the lights weren't coming back on, the sugar water wouldn't turn itself back into gasoline or diesel, the Wal-Marts weren't going to fill up again with cheap food and clothing, and that this sucked but, regardless, the outcome of the situation was ultimately up to them. Some folks thought they were being patronized and so they left, but the majority stuck around and started talking about how to improve things.

Shit, I've already rambled on too long about this. Here's the upshot. Folks got organized and started working instead of bitching. All our park space downtown and along the river, for that matter, is now a community farm and orchard.

The first year it was corn and soybeans because that's all anyone really had seed for. But vegetable seeds made it around the next year, so the locals actually started raising something halfway tasty to eat.

We've gotten in on the act. There's a huge pool here at the hotel, but after the power went out we drained it as best we could to keep the whole thing from stagnating. Well I'd like to say that this was my idea, but Embassy Suites thought of it first and we copped it from them. Any way the fire department set us up with a couple manual pumps. We seined what seemed like a few thousand hatchlings out of the river, purged some fresh water into the pool and dumped them in, and started feeding them surplus corn. So we raise cat fish. Channel cat.

They seem to do best given the size limitations of the pool. I'd ask if you've ever eaten it but you grew up in Missouri, so you had to have, right? I was never really a big fan of it -- muddy tasting -- but now it's on my dinner table at least twice a week. So, I've gotten used to it. We use ~~the~~ what we don't eat to barter for firewood, filtered water, veggies, etc. Don't know how things are down in Wichita, but I thought you might like to know that this is being done and maybe give it a shot.

It's difficult work, and the whole place can get pretty damned smelly. Fortunately, the pool area doors seal well. The main thing, aside from feeding and harvesting the fish, is keeping the pumps active to get the waste out and the fresh water in. It's a pain, and it's dirty. But it's a job everyone does every now and then. Even me. I'm just thankful that the tenants are pitching in.

Life is still hard here. We had another bad winter two years ago. My daughter, Eileen, died of the flu that January. Things got so bad between my wife and I after that, so pointless everything seemed, that sometimes I wished the whole town...

Sorry. There's not much else to say except that I hope you and yours are well. Take care

— Dick Wesley

P.S. - Almost forgot. Congress moved back into the capitol building later that year, but they're still renovating the building even today. I don't know if you ever made it up to Des Moines, but the capitol building was a beaut, with a shiny gold-hued dome atop it. Now the dome is tarnished. It's been left that way. For the best, I think.