

## Opportunity

I know you'll think I'm mean and not a very good neighbor, but I have a valid reason for not answering the phone when 83 year old Willard calls from down the road. Believe me, the two dollars paid each month for Caller ID is well worth it.

He might be phoning to ask me if he can come and live with us because his wife threw him out again. Or maybe he wants to use my barn to hold another reunion of his Korean War buddies this summer, all of them boozy and half of them kleptomaniacs. One wonders how well they did under pressure while in combat. When a fight broke out at their reunion last year, Willard tried to call the police but he couldn't remember the last digit of 911. "Nine one ... what?" he kept shouting over the melee.

Willard often wants to involve me in his schemes to get rich by selling something to the government, the public at large or the just our neighbors. This week he didn't even call before arranging to have a truck deliver his latest idea.

"I gotta leave it here," said the truck deliveryman as we stood down by the road just outside my old barn. I looked over his shoulder to see Willard step off his front porch and come walking up the road.

"Here's the valid shipping document," said the trucker. "This here's the address and I gotta get it off the truck so I can pick up a load of bowling pins at the factory in town."

"I don't care if you're picking up the Queen Mother," I said. "I'm refusing delivery of this ... this ..."

"Sandwich machine," said the trucker. "Not in great shape, but that's what it looks like to me. We have one at the shipping terminal. Half the time the sandwiches taste like machine oil, but that actually helps the taste of the tuna fish."

"Look, I don't need a sandwich machine. I didn't order a sandwich machine and I'm not going to take delivery of a --"

I paused while Willard walked up to us. Only Willard might think of a use for an old vending machine with a sign on the front that read "Wholesome & Fresh." Who but Willard would see a use for a machine that in its day delivered food when you put a lot of quarters into the slot, pushed

the D5 button and watched your baloney sandwich make its way around to you on a lazy susan and drop through a hole down a chute to your waiting hands.

"Willard," I said without much hope for a sensible answer, "this must be something you ordered. Please tell the man he's delivering the machine to the wrong address."

"But Dave, I got it for free and we need to keep it here."

"I told you, Willard, no more hare-brained projects and never again in my barn."

"But there's a small fortune to be made," he said.

"Oh sure, every crazy idea you ever had was going to make us rich as Croesus."

"But this idea won't fail, greases or not. Let me just explain."

The trucker tried to interrupt. He wanted to drop the machine off the back of his truck and get going. Neither Willard nor I was listening.

"Willard," I said, "I don't understand --"

"I'll try to explain and I can only hope you have the imagination to appreciate it."

"Try me, Willard."

"What's up at the end of the road?" he said.

"The mountains, Willard."

"And what flows down the mountain?"

"The creek, Willard." I was getting more impatient by the second.

"A *fishing* creek," he said. "The hundreds of fishermen who pass this barn each day are a market ready to be exploited. All we need is a tireless salesman. Since that would not be you or I, we can harness modern electro-mechanical technology as our slave."

"You're saying this machine --"

"Day and night, no long lunch hours or maternity leave."

"You're going to use this to--"

"Exactly," he said as the trucker nudged the vending machine from the truck bed on to the powered rear gate. "This is our get-rich answer to a poor retiree's prayer."

Willard stepped up to the powered gate and raised a hand in salute to the sandwich machine. With a flourish his other hand swiped over the words "Wholesome and Fresh," painted on its bottom panel.

"Gentlemen, I give you the world's first Worm Machine," he announced in a voice of wonder.

"It makes worms?" I said

"It delivers them in packages," said Willard.

"And this is the perfect spot, right next to the road with power from the barn. And lights, of course."

"Why not music, too?" I said.

“Customers put a dollar in the slot,” he said, “and a styrofoam coleslaw cup of worms packed in dirt comes sliding down the sandwich chute.”

I laughed. “With ketchup or mustard?”

The trucker spoke up. “How’s a guy driving by gonna know the sandwich machine was converted to worms?”

Willard tapped the bottom panel with his finger. “I can easily re-paint “Wholesome and Fresh” to read “Wholesome Worms.”

“Wholesome wo-“

“A new concept in bait sales,” he said. “How’s this jingle? ‘For a Wholesome Fish you need a Wholesome Worm.’”

“What the hell is a wholesome worm, Willard?”

“It’s the name of our new company, The Wholesome Worm Company.”

Neither the trucker nor I knew what to say.

I counted five spaces on each of the ten stacked trays. “That’s 50 cups of worms, or ... carry the one ... 600 worms you’ll have to dig up every night if you want to sell each cup for a dollar to earn \$50 a day.”

“Should come to more than that,” Willard said.

“Nope. And who’s gonna dig the worms out of the garden every night?”

Willard thought for a moment. “We can buy the worms in bulk from Louie over on the woods road. We’ll pack the containers each night, fill the machine and come back the next night to rake in the profits.”

“Well, I’ll bet Louie will want at least 50 cents a dozen wholesale,” I said. “That means we’ll only net \$25 on fifty cups. Less the cost of cups and everything. And there aren’t a hundred fishermen going past here to the creek every day. Maybe five or six and usually they’re fly fisherman with their own flies. We’ll be lucky to split two bucks a day.”

A pickup truck pulled off the road and came up to the barn while we spoke. The driver stepped out and walked over to us. He wore jeans and a flannel shirt. A fishing vest rounded out his costume along with a canvas hat that said “The Big One” across the front.”

His eyes were fixed on the machine and he said to no one in particular, “Is that a worm machine?”

Willard hooted.

“How did you know?” I asked.

“A couple of farmers over on the Beaverkill used to have them next to their barns. They’re really convenient. Just drop a dollar in the slot and ‘Presto.’”

“Presto,” said a smiling Willard, “the sound of profits ringing in my ears.”

“Used to have?” I said.

“Yeah,” the man replied, “after a while everyone noticed the worms weren’t catching any fish. They smelled like sewing machine oil.”

“I told ya,” said the trucker.”

“So they sold the machines cheap,” said the The Big One, “even gave a few away. That’s why I stopped. Thought you might be selling it.”

“What are you planning to use it for?” said Willard.

“You see those mountains up there at the end of the road?” said the man. “What do you think is up there?”

“A fishing creek,” said Willard.

“In the winter,” said the man.

“Oh”, said Willard, “you mean the ski resorts?”

“Right,” said the man, “and what do the hundreds of skiers who go by here every day need?”

Willard looked at me. I rolled my eyes and said, “Not worms, probably.”

“Gloves. Ski gloves,” said the man. “I want to put this machine right here and sell gloves. I’ll rent the space in front of your barn, pay for the electric and tightly wrap gloves in elastic and sell them in the machine.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “I think I should tell you—“

“Well, you think about it,” he said. He handed me a business card and walked over to his truck.

“We could make a fortune selling gloves.”

I started to follow him. “But, let me—“

He drove off.

The trucker spoke. “Gloves might make more money than worms.”

“How many skiers,” I said, “do you think go by here each day on their way up the mountain?”

“Not hundreds?”

“Tell him, Willard.”

Willard reluctantly shook his head. “None.”

“That’s right,” I said. “The road is closed in the winter. The skiers take the state highway.”

The trucker looked at Willard and then glanced back my way. “What do you guys want to do with this machine?”

Willard watched as I held The Big One’s card in the air. The old fellow sighed and nodded. I passed the card to the trucker and said, “Take it to the glove man. Tell him ‘our compliments.’ And suggest he find another road.”

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