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Ideas, Inc.
by J. Daniel Sawyer

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Dedication

For Harlan

Ideas, Inc.
by J. Daniel Sawyer

Chapter I

Stranded

TAKE IT FROM ME: DON'T start a road trip after midnight in a strange state in a car you've never driven before. We did, and we wound up with two flat tires at once in a car that wasn't carrying a good spare, at about 4AM outside of some place called Schenectady in New York because I ran over a bundle of tack strips that had fallen off some carpet installer's truck. I swear to God, anyone who uses the words "run-flat" in my presence is getting a knuckle sandwich.

That was bad enough. Worse, this was after not talking to each other for the better part of four days, including the whole plane ride out here, owing to the fact that he's a royal jerk. Four days solid in the company of my best friend, and we hadn't said a word to each other. Actually, the only reason we came out here together is the tickets were non-refundable, and we each had skin in this car—and we didn't trust each other to protect our investment.

We? That would be me and Lenny.

You see, we've been trying since junior high to

come up with a business idea that wouldn't send us to bankruptcy court or jail. Both of us love to work, but neither of us loves working for the man, or the woman, or the cause, or anything else that might give us a regular paycheck. We tried for a while to be rock stars, and it probably would've been great if either of us could carry a tune or sing on beat.

Now we were stuck outside some rathole in the middle of nowhere-in-particular, with only a quarter-charge on each phone—we'd both run 'em close to dry listening to music on our headphones in order to avoid talking to each other—and no reception anyway.

That, and I realized that I'd left my AAA card at home on my dresser, all the way back in Santa Cruz.

“Oh, this is just great, Caleb. What are you going to do for an encore, roast my cat?” That's Lenny. From the way he was talking you'd think it was his car. Not that it was my car either, but really...

“Shut up, just shut up, okay? I would have seen the strips if you hadn't been singing so loud and...”

“Oh, no, don't you lay this off on me, man...”

Well, it wasn't exactly friendly, but at least we were talking. Four days wishing he'd say something, now I couldn't wait for him to shut up.

Wasn't going to happen, though, so I did the next best thing. I got back in the car and plugged my phone into the car charger and thumped it until it woke up. Not that I knew who to call, but I figured I might be able to find an all-night garage. I mean, we weren't *that* far out in the middle of nowhere.

I swear to God, this is the last time I *ever* listen to my sister. This was all her fault anyway.

You know that thing you hear about Middle-America? How it's all small towns and apple pie and people just trying to make their way? Or the other thing you hear, about how it's all yokels and rape-hobbyists in flyover states with room temperature IQs? Well, last week Lenny and I got into a little debate about it. I had the superior argument, since I actually have an aunt in Illinois while all his family was stuck in Monterey being all coastal with their Korean Barbecue joint right there on the beach. He figured that he had the superior argument, on account of my personal connection to tornado country constituting a personal bias that was eroding my ability to formulate a valid argument.

We got into arguments like that a lot—usually late at night after we'd run out of movies to watch or homework to avoid or girls to investigate. By the time

we woke up the next morning we forgot about it, no harm, no foul.

This one was different. Next morning, he wouldn't let it go. Kept making snide little comments about my aunt being a fundamentalist and a red-stater and everything, so naturally I started calling him a small-minded elitist, and a provincial, and bourgeois, and other things that I'd picked up in our political science class that I knew would make him see red.

By the end of the week, he was looking for another roommate, and that was just peachy with me. I didn't want to be living with someone that prejudiced, and I sure didn't want one as a friend, and I didn't care that we'd been best buddies since we were six. Lenny was mud to me, or worse than mud. He was that slime you dredge off the bottom of the marsh in Pescadero if you want some top-rate fertilizer for your vegetable garden...not that I'd ever do that to a protected wetland, mind you, I'm just saying.

So when my sister Elsie came by that evening to help me with my vector analysis homework and saw Lenny's stuff in boxes, she got nosy. Man, did she get nosy. She refused to check my work on the next set of equations until I made with the explanations, so I told

her. I gave her the real story, too, not the slanted version Lenny would give her later.

“Uh huh,” she said with her eyebrow cocked at me like it could slice off my nose by remote control if she brought it down fast enough, “And you're going to end a twelve year friendship over *that*.” She picked up my homework and squinted at it. “Well, at least now I know why you need my help with this stuff—you're too dumb to do it on your own.”

I can't say I was convinced, even after she implied that my allegedly low intelligence was due to a secret predilection for implausible Freudian romances. She was only two years older than me and almost eight inches shorter, but when she pulled the older sister routine like that I always wound up sitting in the corner with an imaginary dunce cap on my head.

When Lenny got home, things went from annoying to unbearable, and I took off for a high-speed drive along the coast to cool off. Maybe Elsie would have given up and Lenny would have gone to his room by the time I got back.

No such luck, though. They were both sitting in the living room as if they were perfectly civilized people—which, as far as I can tell, is classic

camouflage for ambush predators. Lenny even had one of those tiger grins—the kind that serial killers in movies get when they're holding the machete behind their back—so I almost turned around and drove the two hundred miles to my parents' house for the weekend.

I didn't though. Lenny was a jerk, and I was already feeling stupid for not spotting it back in third grade when he figured out how to trick the teacher into eating Ex-Lax. I was sure as hell not going to let a jerk like that drive me out of my own apartment—okay, technically the school owned the apartment, but that wasn't the point. The point is, there's only one thing to do in a situation like that, and I did it: I walked in and pretended that everything was perfectly okay. I hung my coat up on the peg behind the door, went to the kitchen and got a glass of water, then walked by them and to my room as if they were on a date rather than waiting for me.

They didn't see it that way though. They snuck into my room like a pair of wolverines and laid this big idea on me. Well, Elsie laid this big idea on me. Lenny didn't say a thing, because, like I said, Lenny's a big fat jerk who wanted to add “uses big sisters to bully best friends” to his jerkiness resume.

Elsie gave us this long spiel about how we were both dumbasses, and how we had this trip coming up this weekend cause we were gonna go pick up this car. Gorgeous BMW convertible that we got for a song on Ebay. We'd had it checked out and it was all cherry, but it sold for way less on the east coast than we could get for it in San Jose, so we were gonna go and get it and then load it on a train and bring it home. We figured that we could clear over a thousand profit on the deal, even figuring in all the travel.

Problem was, we were supposed to go pick up this car, together, and drive it down to the rail yards in New Jersey and ride back with it.

“What you two need to do is drive that car back. Stop in every state, spend a day or two. You're both wanting to be scientists, right? So go settle it scientifically.”

Our obvious lack of interest didn't seem to make a difference. Elsie had made her mind up, and, as far as she was concerned, she was the responsible adult in the situation. She also knew where all the bodies were buried—okay, so the bodies were the bodies of my mother's camellia bush, but if she ever found out that we were the ones who accidentally set it on fire, our lives were officially over.

So that's how I wound up in the middle of nowhere near a town with a name nobody could pronounce, with a car I couldn't drive and a best friend whose first words to me in four days had me ready to punch him in the shnaz.

“...but noooo, you just keep driving right over them. Boom. You know what, dude, you got the brains of a god damn sea urchin.”

“Yeah, and your mom...”

We went on like that for another couple of minutes, circling the car and keeping it dead between us the way you do when you're trying to chase someone you want to kill, but trying to keep them from catching you for the same reason. We kept it up until we'd gotten all the way down to “I'm rubber and you're glue,” at which point we just kind of gave up and slumped against opposite corners of the car.

In all that time, we hadn't so much as seen a distant headlight.

I nursed my depression for a solid five minutes, and planned on doing it for the rest of the night, when Lenny screwed it up by cursing from his corner of the car. “Damn gadgets. Heya, Caleb, dude, how long until sunrise? I can't get a signal on this thing.”

I shrugged. I didn't know if he could see it, since

I had my back turned to him. “Hell if I know, man. Hours, maybe.”

“So what are we gonna do?”

“Are you kidding, man? I've got no idea, okay? I mean...”

A distant voice interrupted with an echoing “Excuse me!”

“What the...”

“Excuse me, sir!” I stood up and looked around for the source of the voice. “Sir! Excuse me!” It was coming from down the berm on the other side of the car from me—I was sitting at the back corner facing out into what would have been traffic, if we weren't in the middle of nowhere. A harried man in a business suit skidded down the embankment, found his footing, and walked quickly to me.

“Hi.” As relieved as I felt about seeing another human being, it took me a couple seconds to remember why I wanted to see one in the first place, so before I could formulate a follow-up sentence, he was on top of me with the handshakes.

“Oh, excellent, excellent, I'm so glad I caught you. Curtis Blassingame, pleased to meet you.”

“Um, yeah, I'm Caleb and this is...”

“Fine, good, yes yes. I couldn't help but overhear

what you said,” he handed me a business card, “and I think I may be able to help. If you'll follow me, just up here,” he pointed back up the berm, “we can go to my office, and you can get what you need. If you'll follow me...”

I looked at the card:

Curtis Blassingame
Senior Accounts Representative
Ideas, Inc.

“You have a phone in there?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Please, come with me.”

I looked to Lenny, who rolled his eyes, shook his head, and shrugged.

Jerk.

“Okay, you stay here,” I said, “I'm going to see about the phone.”

“Fine,” he said, and kicked the ground, sending a stone skittering down the road. Well, screw him anyway.

I followed Mr. Blassingame up the hill, which wasn't exactly easy work in the northern New York summer night air. Out in Santa Cruz, we keep humidity in saunas and let the ocean air condition the outdoors. In New York, they like saunas so much they just turn the whole outside into one for a big part

of the year, and then put air conditioners indoors so they can take the occasional break. It's no wonder they've got those ginormous buildings—who'd want to go outside during the summer when it feels like a steam oven?

Anyway, I'm no slouch in real mountains, but by the time I got to the top of that berm I was ready to give up and find a comfortable coffin.

"I know, son, I know," said Mr. Blassingame, "It'll be better when we get into the office."

"And how much farther is that?" I asked between breaths, my attention on my feet.

"Why it's right there. See?"

I looked up to see an expansive, boring-looking warehouse in the middle of an equally expansive, boring-looking parking lot. A few cars broke up the monotony, but it was definitely a graveyard shift crowd.

We stumbled down the berm, only half as high as it was on the highway side, and set off across the parking lot. There weren't any cars nearby here, and that didn't seem right.

"Um...Mr. Blassingame?"

"Curtis, please, Curtis. I'm just an account rep, after all, not a manager. Really, we're not all that

stuffy,” he grimaced and waved his hand in front of him, “if you ignore the weather.”

“Okay,” I regrouped, then tried again after a dozen paces, “Curtis, you said you heard us?”

“Yes.”

“How? I mean, I don't see your car out here. Were you taking a walk?”

“Oh, that. Don't worry about that, my good man. It's just my business. My job, you understand. Just doing my job. Ah, here we are...” Blassingame opened the front door of the warehouse with a sweep of his arm. “Please, come in, come in.”

I went in, found a nearly barren reception area without a receptionist at the desk, and a big *Ideas, Inc.* logo behind it, and under the logo the tag-line *The Writer's Best Friend*, whatever that meant. I had to wait while Blassingame pattered in after me, then circled around to the receptionist's side of the desk.

“Now, how can I help you?”

“Well, you saw. We've got two blowouts and no spare, and there's no cell reception out here. Can you call a tow truck?”

“A tow truck? Heavens, no, not at this time of day.”

I looked at the phone on his desk. “That's a

phone, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, of course it is, of course it is, we just don't...well...we're kind of a top secret facility here. The only contact with the outside world is the sales line."

At that point I figured I'd just been awake for too long, and had to be missing something obvious. "You said you could help us."

"I can."

After he didn't elaborate, I said, "Well?"

"I can help you."

"With what?"

"With your problem."

"Look, man, come on. I've had a really long day, and I don't have any idea what the..."

"Ah!" He pointed his finger at the air. "That is where I can help you."

"With...huh?" I felt a blast of humidity behind me and heard the door swing open, but I was too focused on trying to decrypt Blassingame's crypticness to worry about it.

"You said you have no idea." Blassingame said. "Ideas are what we deal in."

A voice came from behind me. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Ugh. Lenny. What a jerk.

Blassingame didn't seem insulted, though. "Just this." He produced a couple trifold brochures, held them out to us. I took one. Lenny took the other. We didn't look at each other. I opened mine up and looked through it—some kind of ad for a subscription service—while Blassingame continued. "We at *Ideas, Inc.* have a proud tradition. For three hundred years we've been supplying the best ideas, the very best, to writers and adventurers and inventors of all sorts. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin—early customers. Poor Melville didn't listen to us much in the early days, so he didn't sell well until after he died. But Clemens, dear Mr. Clemens, he was our best customer, our very best, until the twentieth century. Stupendous fellow, absolutely stupendous, always sending us cigars. Oh! That reminds me, I just must show you..."

He reached under the desk and, as near as I could tell, he pressed a button. The wall to our right slid down into the floor, and it was filled with something like a kazillion books.

"This is our fiction section, all the stories that we inspired. A great legacy, yes. You'll even find some Englishmen there—they found out about us when

Franklin took one of our brochures with him on his goodwill tour back in 1771. Since then our secret has been out, I'm afraid.”

Blassingame stood up and walked to the book shelf, took a book down. “This one's my personal favorite. Tick-tock harlequin stories, prose poems, dangerous visions that will haunt your dreams. Glorious. So many of our best ideas wound up in here. Fabulous, just fabulous. This is just a small part of our fiction section, of course. The rest of it is much, much bigger. It lives down on sub-level five, right in between the nonfiction and invention sections, and just over from the news section, which goes down for seven more sublevels. What Hearst would have done without us...” He seemed to remember himself. He shelved the book and turned his attention back to us, which is when I realized that my mouth was hanging open. I closed it. He said:

“The point is, gentlemen, and this is the point indeed: ideas are the only thing any of us need. Truly they are. Well, a good idea and the sense to use it. We deal in ideas. Normally, we deal on a subscription basis—you'll see the list of rates there. Five dollars per idea, with bulk discounts if you order more than ten per week. We can schedule regular delivery by post,

email, carrier pigeon, private courier, or telegraph.”

“We don't need ideas, buddy,” Lenny blustered, “We need a phone!”

“See, there's where you're wrong, young man, if you'll excuse my saying so. What you need—what your friend here,” he waved at me, “said he needed, very clearly, was an idea. You have no communications, you have no tires. What you need is an idea for how to fix your problem. That's where I can help.”

“What we need, you blue-nosed half-baked lunatic, is to get our car fixed...”

“Hardly. A man with a great idea can accomplish anything.”

“Oh I give up.” Lenny tossed the brochure on the ground and stomped out, waving his phone around looking for a signal.

I shrugged an apology at Blassingame. “He's not going to find a signal, is he?”

The rep shook his head. “Unfortunately, we are a top secret facility. All communications with the outside are strictly controlled.”

“Yeah.” I shuffled around, not really knowing what to do with myself. I didn't want to go wait by the car with the jerk-of-the-world, not out in that

humidity. Morning would just make it hotter. "Look, Curtis, really, I appreciate this and all, but..." I swallowed the disgust in my throat so I could get out the next bit, "Lenny's kind of right. I'm not a writer. Not an inventor. Not going into news reporting. I just need to know how to get back on the road."

"Ah! That's where the emergency packages come in. These are very popular with public officials, it never fails. Whenever there's a hurricane, whenever there's an election, we get a big order. Look at the back page."

I turned the brochure over. I started to read it, but Blassingame started up the spiel again, so there was really no point in trying to focus my over-tired eyes.

"You see, our emergency packages. Perfectly reasonable. A simple cash transaction, and you get the number of ideas you think you'll need, guaranteed top-notch ideas, mind you. You can always come back for more if you need them, or if you decide you want some to use once you're on the road."

I yawned, and not cause he was boring. He was too weird to be boring. "Oh, what the hell." At this point, I was desperate enough to try anything. We had to get to that motel before my head decided that the asphalt looked like a good pillow. I dug my wallet out

of my pocket, looked in the billfold. “Um...you take Visa?”

He huffed. “Young man, we are a top secret facility, do you think we'd use a method of payment people can *track*? Good heavens, our reputation would suffer incalculable damage!”

“Oh. Uh, well, I got like seventeen bucks.”

“That will do splendidly, yes indeed, splendidly. Just come over here,” he led me back to the desk, then laid a contract in front of me “and sign this confidentiality agreement.”

“Confi...never mind.” I looked it over.

I, _____, swear on penalty of the death of my mortal body and the ruin of my reputation that I will not reveal my relationship with Ideas, Inc. except to persons engaged in creative pursuits in the realm of entertainment, the arts, politics, disaster relief, journalism, engineering, and the social sciences. I further swear that the only mentions I shall make to such persons will amount to information that may enable them to access the service, should they find it advantageous.

And then a space for my signature, thumbprint, and Social Security number.

“Sure, right, whatever.” I took a pen from a cup

on the desk and signed it, then Blessingame took the paper away and replaced it with a small stack of Post-It notes. I stuffed the pen in my back pocket, cause hey, you never know when you'll need one.

“Good, good. That will be seventeen dollars, please.”

I forked over the cash, then held up the Post-Its. They were wrapped in cellophane, and there was some printing on the papers that I couldn't read on account of the big *IDEAS, INC.* logo silk-screened across the front. “So what's this?”

“Why, those are your ideas.”

“Okay...”

“You see, when you peel the top sheet away, the idea beneath is active. I've given you a standard ten pack—a bargain, since you're in such a fix, and we do so like to build repeat customers. The license on the top stipulates how the ideas may be used. In brief, you may use any number of sequential ideas in concert, but once an idea is discarded, it may not be used and any that came before it are rendered invalid—they won't work even if you try to use them, you understand. Once you reach the end of the deck, you'll find our hotline to order more ideas by your preferred delivery method. This pack is one of our

practical-emergency packs, so it should be just what you're looking for.”

“Thanks.” I stuffed it in my pocket, trying to ignore the nagging feeling that I'd just been hornswaggled.

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About the Author

A hat-wearing, obsessive-compulsive curmudgeon, J. Daniel Sawyer spends his days and nights chained to a desk in a vain attempt to write his way out of the loony bin. To this end, he wantonly abuses the English language in his sci-fi thriller series *The Antithesis Progression* and his hard-boiled *Clarke Lantham Mysteries* in between stints writing for various disreputable tech and news publications. On the rare occasion that he slips his bonds, he escapes to the wilds of the San Francisco back country where he devotes his energies to running afoul of local traffic ordinances in his never-ending pursuit of the ultimate driving road.

Should you be so inclined, you can communicate with this shady character, as well as find stories, podcasts, articles, and other literary abominations at <http://www.jdsawyer.net>

