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# The Hapless Homesteader

*Yep, that's me! By Dr. Daniel Michael*



**A**fter all these years, I was finally going to realize my dream of moving to a small piece of land and starting a homestead, complete with garden, orchard and vineyard. My wife, Eva, and my daughter, Anna, were equally thrilled with the prospect of living in the country. But none of us were prepared for the work—or the problems.

Standing on the back porch of our new home, I saw an orchard filled with fruit of all kinds, beehives with workers busy pollinating my plants, a vineyard producing wine-worthy grapes, a kitchen garden Martha Stewart would envy, a bevy of geese wandering around a freshly dug pond, and, yes, a good ol' country dog—big as a bear and gentle as a lamb—lying at my feet.

The reality? Fruit trees planted at great expense—in the only natural runoff in the yard. Septic tank lines where I wanted my vineyard. A kitchen garden so inadequate that Martha Stewart would have laughed until she needed oxygen. Some very possessive mallards that reproduced like rabbits and turned the pond we dug into a mud hole that leaked no matter how much water—and money—I poured into it. And as for that good ol' country dog: Belle is as big as a bear and eats like one, as well. But gentle? She's developed a taste for mallards.

Those were the results of my first year's efforts. Fortunately for me, my dad, in his early 80's, was a fount of knowledge on animal husbandry, agriculture, and life in general. He was more than willing to help his ignorant-but-enthusiastic son. I picked up the phone every day with questions, struggles, and complaints.

Anyway, I was getting better at this country-living stuff. At

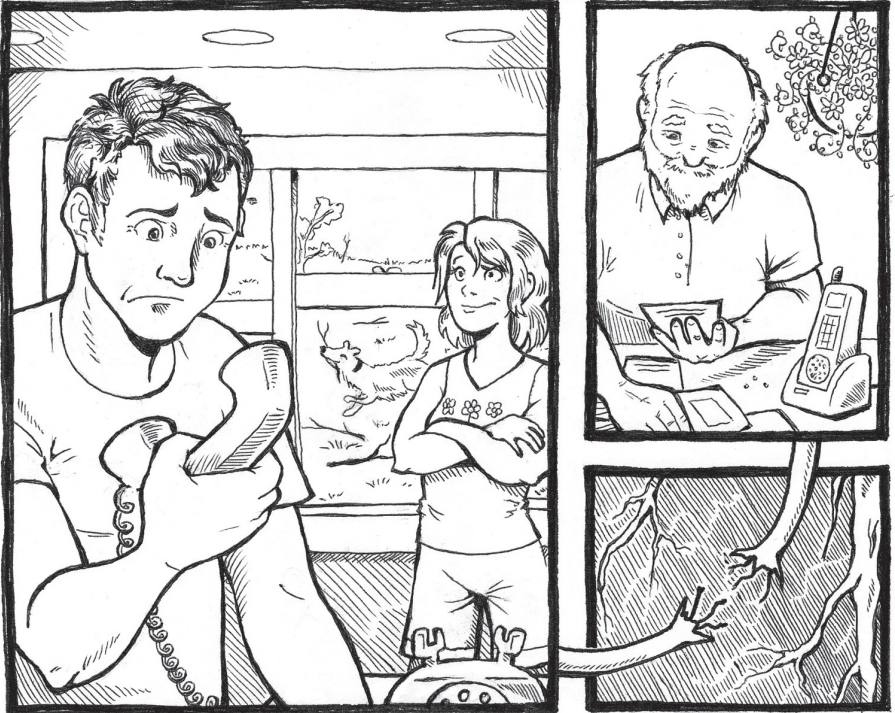
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*I had to call  
Dad to report  
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The phone line  
was down.  
Again.*

least *I* thought I was. After I put up a gorgeous wooden fence along the front of the house, I picked up the phone to report my success to dear old Dad, only to find that the line was dead!

Somehow I had cut through the phone line.



“Remember when I told you that you should call before you dig?” Eva said gently. Forty-eight hours and one large service fee later, we had our phones back.

My next project was to plant Hollywood junipers along the fence. “Incredible,” I told Eva. “I found a nursery that’s going out of business—and got 20 trees for just 50 cents apiece!”

“Are you sure you can plant them there safely?” Eva said.

Safely? How could I have a problem planting trees? Well, I did. That hard-packed red clay fought against my shovel most of the morning. The trees got planted much shallower than they should have been, but at least I got them in the ground. And look how straight and even they stood down the fence line!

I had to call Dad to report my success. The phone line was down.

Again. “Remember me mentioning ‘safely’ when you started?” were Eva’s ever-gentle words. We were out of phone service for yet another 48 hours—and out more money, to boot!

Moving far from where I imagined any phone line had ever lived, I began my orchard for the second time. (The first time was in a flood area, remember? I lost 11 trees that season.) This time I saved money by buying bare-root plants. These little trees had no dirt around the roots; they looked like dead sticks. I was a little skeptical they’d survive, but they were much cheaper, and I needed to save some money.

The planting was moving along quite nicely: I was actually enjoying myself. Big ol’ Belle was enjoying herself, too. She would bring me a stick, and I would toss it as far as I could, so I could work uninterrupted. A minute later, she would nudge me, stick in her mouth, begging for more play time. She was relentless. I kindly obliged, tossing the stick again and again as far as I could.

Later in the day, my wife came out, no doubt to admire my progress. “Where’re the trees you planted around front?” she asked. “I thought you were starting there first thing this morning.”

“What are you talking about?” I said. “I spent hours out front. I planted 20 trees there. And I’m on my last leg back here.”

It was then that I looked around and saw all the sticks laying in the yard, the ones I had been tossing around all morning. Some were half chewed up, some were broken, but they all looked eerily familiar.

“Belle!” I cried, as I ran toward the front yard. One lone tree had survived her onslaught. Digging from hole to hole, Belle had brought her supply of sticks to me from my future glorious orchard. She’d managed to pull up every single tree but one. And I had tossed them all over the yard, never realizing what I was doing!



I was overcome with anger, sadness, despair—and every other word that would fit this circumstance. I looked at Eva and moaned, “I need to call Dad. He’ll know what to do.”

She grimaced and said, “That’s what I was coming out here to tell you. The phone lines are down.” ❖