

None of Your Business! - can be categorized as satirical fiction, with the elements of a self-help-book. A blend of Kurt Vonnegut, Philip K. Dick, and Robert Heinlein's Stranger in a Strange Land.

None of Your Business!

By T.J. Sapp

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T.J. Sapp



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Print ISBN: 978-1-958889-32-9

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-474-9

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia, U.S.A.

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Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.
2023

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The Fall and Rise of John Mako - December 31

Falling through the air one hundred floors from the penthouse of his own *Mako Tower*, a monolith with its shining four letters spelling his name—*M-A-K-O*, was a curious sensation, though not nearly as curious as the impact of crashing into cement and having his bones crushed to powder.

On the plus side, Mako was wearing one of his best *Ermenegildo Zegna* suits. This one, a Swiss-made Milano-Wool-Viscose-Blend was his favorite color, blue. The only thing John liked better than a nice suit was a nice blue suit. So, he was at least thankful that if he was about to die, he was going to look the way he wanted to look. On his wrist, he was dressed down with a blue-dialed Breitling Navitimer Chronograph with a dark-blue leather band. Though it matched the ensemble, he'd prefer to have fallen to his death with a Patek.

It was not a typical day for John Mako. His broken body lay sprawling on concrete right in front of the entrance to his corporate headquarters. A fall from his office on the one-hundredth floor should have killed him many times over, and he was nearly dead—eighty-eight bones were broken to the point of near complete disintegration, and for emphasis, a bullet hole was lodged in his chest, and he was coughing blood, to the extent that he could cough. But now was not the time for dying; there were still important things to do as the richest man and CEO of the world's largest namesake Mako corporation, which he'd created. Luckily for him, the fresh powdery snow had given him life-saving cushioning.

But he was conscious enough to think back on what had led him to this moment and why this was the way it all needed to be.

His mind was not nearly as broken as his body, so it was easy for him to reflect on how he ended up in this position. It also gave time to

appreciate the little things, such as the fact the pavements outside his office were heated, a sensation he almost thought he could feel, although his body was in too much shock to really feel anything.

The past year had put everything in perspective, and right now, he was exactly where he needed to be, and for a good reason.

Part I:

Social List for Good Business Plans

One Year Earlier

Chapter 1: Mark Wessler's Van Life

Mark Wessler awoke to a pernicious chill entering the passenger rear-quarter-panel window of his Dodge Grand Caravan, which, at the moment, was also his home. Both rows of the Dodge could fold completely flat into the floor. Once upon a time, this had been very handy for the many runs to Home Depot, during the time he was making various tweaks and additions to the family home. The 4x8 sheets of plywood fit no problem, which had been used to help construct a deck that never got finished. Now one of those sheets remained as a mattress pad. He'd heard that sleeping on a hard surface was good for the back, but all he knew now was that he often felt sore.

The plywood was covered in a green bed sheet, once used on the family bed. The thermal sleeping bag was one he'd had for years, only used once for camping with his friends, and had languished in his closet until now.

Mark sat up—his back sore but (maybe) getting used to the hard, flat surface—and looked in the direction of the chilly wind that was hitting him right in the face.

The Scotch tape Mark used to cover his rear window was coming loose again. The green and red tape (a present from another van-lifer) certainly gave his car a Christmas theme, he thought as he looked around for more. This was easy because there weren't many places to look; a few garbage bags contained all of his possessions, one for clothes (the dirty tended to be on the bottom, but he wasn't too discerning about it), and the other bag for other essentials like a toothbrush, a box of granola bars, bottles of water, and the tape. Compared to some of his peers, his was one of the cleaner vans. Often, he'd meet another like him living in a maelstrom of junk. Mark had

too much pride for that. He'd often fought with his wife to keep their house (relatively) neat.

Messy place, messy mind.

It was his grandmother's lesson, and it stuck with him.

As a result, his van/home had an almost Zen simplicity. The 'mattress' sleeping bag, pillow, and two bags (which he could tuck away in a bin that once held the now-removed second row-seats) made this lifestyle choice feel reasonable—he was somewhat free and not tied down.

He got out of his van using the passenger side door and opened the bin, rummaging through to find the tape. He didn't have any scissors, but his teeth worked just fine, though he was in desperate need of a dentist—a molar on the bottom left side of his mouth was giving him little peace. An ibuprofen, granola bar, and some water for breakfast all helped.

Mark looked around, and then at his watch. 5:25 a.m. It was still mostly dark, although the night was beginning to dissipate over the horizon. There were more than ten other vans and various vehicles like his. Some looked quiet, with passengers who were still likely slumbering, while others were outside, making their own preparations to leave. And they were right to pack up when they did—the Walmart at this location expected overnighters to move out every morning by 7 a.m.

The Walmart parking lot was a safe haven, a place where one could avoid being harassed, for the most part. It was also a collection of like-minded individuals... or so he thought. One of the challenges of living in a vehicle was finding places that were legal to stay for the night. Too many times he'd stopped in what looked like a quiet neighborhood, only to face harassment from homeowners, police, or other homeless looking for cars to ransack. Not that they'd have much to take, anyway.

Walmart had gained a sort of mythical status as ‘camper friendly’, but even that was only true for certain locations, and all had different rules. The two other Walmart’s within nearby driving distance didn’t allow overnigheters, which meant this location could get crowded. For the past week, Mark had found himself following the same routine: out by seven, a short drive around for a good panhandling spot using an empty to-go \$1 coffee, and then using the empty cup to beg. His daily goal of \$10, usually reached by noon, was then enough to pay for gas, food, and other necessities.

Yesterday, for example, he’d made \$15 in two hours outside of a CVS Pharmacy. That had been enough for a new bottle of ibuprofen, two \$1 chicken sandwiches from McDonald’s, another box of granola bars, and a three-pack of boxers (his current-and-only trio of underwear had gotten just a little too skid-marked). If one thing had caused Julia to lose it, it was the stains in his underwear. She couldn’t stand seeing even the lightest skid mark, and insisted he replace them. While it didn’t really bother him so much to have dirty underwear (an itchy shirt was far more annoying to him, for example), he still always made sure to replace his dirty underwear. It was his way of honoring Julia, who’d put up with so much.

He thought his life had been difficult, a fussy wife nagging him about dirty underwear, who liked to vacuum one hundred times a day but left a mess everywhere. They’d both had fights about what a ‘happy home’ had meant. And all he could think about was taking the car seat out of the Grand Caravan and hitting the road.

And now he was really doing it. Only it didn’t seem so romantic anymore. Not after they spent weeks sleeping at the hospital after finding their son, Max, comatose with a mysterious (and expensive) ailment one morning at twenty-eight-months, which might have been preventable if they could have afforded the health care that Mark’s two part-time jobs at two different Mako Fulfilment Centers awarded him.

The \$500k medical bills and bankruptcy only compounded what was already broken.

And then, his wife turned to alcohol and painkillers, starting with the opiates she'd been prescribed for a weak shoulder from years of volleyball, leading to a fatal accidental overdose. It was all a cloud of misery—his own problems with alcohol had cost him his job, his house had been foreclosed, and then, there was the disappearing act of so-called 'friends' who could sympathize but couldn't seem to handle the stench of death that surrounded him.

Strewn around him, and now his most prized possessions, were his many blankets, necessary because it was a frosty December in Buffalo, New York. Besides some clothes and a few boxes of granola bars, there wasn't much else. Mark was always a man of routine, and even now, he had it figured it out. He woke up with sun every morning and did some stretching and then jogging in the parking lot in his PJs, which were also his activewear, and daily wear. After that he came back for breakfast/lunch, which was usually some sort of granola or energy bar, and sometimes, that was all he ate until late in the day.

After that, a bit of panhandling, where he would rotate between several venues. His current location was in a busy suburban strip mall, so his biggest decision each day was to pick his spot. His sign, simple black-sharpie-on-cardboard, had been the same for weeks, and was as honest as could be.

'LOST EVERYTHING: HOME, WIFE, SON. NOTHING CAN REPLACE. BUT A LITTLE BIT CAN HELP ME SURVIVE TODAY.'

It was on the grim side, but it was amazingly effective. More than one of his peers had bowed in admiration.

"That is boo-ti-ful, too boo-ti-ful." An old vet who referred to himself as TEXAS and had some kind of nerve or brain damage and

could barely speak would stare at the sign for what seemed like hours if they happened to be in the same spot. Mark avoided him.

Usually, Mark spent about six to eight hours outside without taking a break. His goal was to reach \$10. He usually made much more. He'd gotten a \$100 bill more than once. He was saving, with a purpose. He'd run the numbers for everything he needed. He'd done the research at the library—the right clothes, the right appearance; everything had to be right to get close.

The last time, when life was getting grim and the medical bills were piling up, Mark had driven to New York and waited outside Mako Tower for two days. He'd tried to talk to John Mako on the street, to appeal to him. And what had John Mako done? Thrown a few \$100 bills on the ground and said, "Few things in life are free."

The experimental treatment wasn't covered by the pathetic insurance that Mako industries offered. And not only did Max die without it, but Mark still got saddled with enough debt to ensure he lost everything...

Other than the damn minivan.

Mark ate his breakfast, a chocolate-chip-granola-bar, while he stewed on his plan.

Parked a few spots away were a young man and woman, probably in their early twenties, having a BBQ in the back of their van. They knocked on his window.

"Hey, buddy, want some breakfast?"

The couple was young and attractive, both covered in tattoos and piercings. Both had encountered these two age spectrums and knew them well. The two young people, Colin and Madison, were 'van-lifers'—young *nouveau-riche* (that's what a peer of his called them), influencer types who were basically young rich kids having a good time and choosing to live in their tricked-out van. They always loved to give tours, with their clever designs and full kitchens or other

creative uses of the space. Colin and Madison told the (long) story of how they had purchased and gutted their Dodge Grand Caravan and led him through the various installations of clever goods. They filmed everything.

“Would you like a tour of mine?” Mark always asked. Of course, they said yes, and he responded as he always did.

“Blankets, some clothes, and boxes of granola bars. But I’m planning to upgrade the granola bars to something fancy like cereal and milk.”

Madison and Colin laughed. They always laughed. On some level, the contrast between how similar yet different their lives were was amusing.

Their story was one of romance and adventure. Two college sweethearts, spending a year traveling the continent by van. They said if it went well, they’d do another van-trip in Europe, Asia, or somewhere else in the future.

Of course, they asked about Mark’s story, and he said no, as always.

But they pushed.

“What’s next for you, Mark? You shouldn’t live like this.”

“I had a job once, a good job. And a family. And a house. And a car. Now... I still have the car.”

“Do you have a plan for where you’re going?”

“Yes,” Mark would reply.

Mark was used to switching between one of his ten credit cards to help pay the bills. The jobs at Mako, which barely sustained his family, paid around \$40,000 a year. Living paycheck-to-paycheck was a desperate balancing act.

The first punch to the gut was the cutting of hours. All of the staff in the factory was cut to working thirty-five-hour weeks in order to undercut the threshold for full benefits. That wasn’t such a problem

until Max started to develop a cough, which turned out to be much more.

Of course, Mark looked for other work, mostly to get the benefits his family needed.

On television, there were the big announcements: ‘Mako’s stock hits all-time high. Worker restructuring a factor?’ Those bastards, profiting as everyone else suffered. They had to pay. Someone needed to send a message. Mark’s life had no meaning anymore, he only had one purpose, to make that asshole suffer.

Luckily, he had a plan. With patience, the panhandling had finally gotten him closer to reaching his target.

#

When Mark walked into a small but clearly expensive Manhattan store, *The Classy Man*, dressed in his worn baggy shorts and dirty hoodie, holding only a paper bag filled with cash, he reflected that his appearance was anything but. A thirtyish-year-old man in a striking pin-striped brown suit approached him, shaking his head.

“Sorry, sir, no handouts here.”

“I’m here to buy a suit.”

The man laughed and took out his wallet. “I really don’t have time for this, I have an important customer coming in at this moment. I will give you \$10 right now if you just walk out this door immediately.” He dug into his pocket and produced a \$10 bill, which he held out with his right hand, leaning back as far as possible and dangling the bill like a carrot. “Please, just take it and go.”

“Are you sure you can’t be of service to me today?” He held out the bag to the man, who backed away until Mark opened it and revealed the contents. For emphasis, he dropped the contents on a table covered with neckties, to reveal the green that was a definite pile of cash.

The man in the brown suit eyed him and the money, clearly thinking carefully.

“I’m here to buy a suit and everything I need to go with it. There’s \$5000 on that table. You can keep it all if you can help me find what I’m looking for.”

The man looked around. “I’m not being filmed, am I?” He shrugged. “I’m Brian, and I’d be pleased to assist you today.”

“Thank you, Brian. I’m Mark. I used to work in a Mako factory, so I’m not used to wearing a suit, but I have my first big business meeting coming up at Mako, and I need to look my best. I’ve done the research, and I know you carry Ermenegildo Zegna.”

Brian smiled as he scooped the money back into the bag, walked to the counter, and put it next to the register “Mako’s favorite brand. They make fine suits. Do you have an idea of what you’d like? And let’s just put your bag back here for ‘safekeeping’.”

Mark handed Brian a print-out from the library. While Mako’s custom-made suits were well out of his budget, the ‘off the rack’ ~\$3000 variety were more accessible, or, in other words, accessible to the regularly wealthy, as opposed to the elite.

Brian nodded and went to fetch the suit. Despite his grubby appearance, Mark had

ducked into a community center to shower, his long hair still just a bit wet. He’d planned to hit the barber first, but perhaps something subversive in him wanted to see the reaction of the posh salesperson to his appearance and bag of \$5000. It had definitely been worth it to see Brian’s expression change from condescending to groveling.

Brian returned with the suit, and Mark tried it on.

“I must say, your measurements were very accurate. I think the alterations we should make are just—”

“No alterations, I’ll take it as is.”

Brian guffawed. “But, sir, a suit of this quality, a tailored fit is *essential* to give the impression that you are striving for. I believe you implied this is something of a first experience for you, and you are trying to impress certain businesspeople in the Mako environment.”

“That’s right.”

“I do know that the kind of people who wear any quality designer suit wouldn’t be caught dead without a tailored fit.”

“So, you think they will notice?”

Brian chuckled. “It will be obvious to anyone with taste. It is a disgrace to a fine suit like this to wear it without proper alterations.”

Mark sighed. “You do realize I need everything—shirt, shoes, belt, tie, and anything else I’m forgetting. Can you do everything with the alterations for \$5000?”

Brian stepped back and stroked his chin. “I think it’s doable, a sacrifice here or there might be necessary, other than the shoes and the tie. However, as long as you remember to keep your jacket on, a shirt is not as essential, a \$500 Gucci versus a \$100 more standard brand is easily disguised. And the belt, well...”

Mark couldn’t afford to cut corners or details. He had to make the right impression. He knew Mako’s assistant, Megan, had a sharp eye. Online, he had read that everyone said that no one ever got to John without impressing her first. If she were anything like John, she would notice the details, and that would poke holes in his plan.

Mark held out the extra emergency \$1000, but pocketed \$100, which was essential to get quality grooming and a planned meal at Denny’s for morale.

“Will \$900 more help close the gap? I don’t want to cut any corners.”

Brian rubbed his chin. “One week it will take.”

“One week? Would a \$100 tip make any difference?”

Brian thought about it for a moment. “A rush order could cut the time in half, but a quality tailoring job will need at least a good four days.”

Mark had taken into account this possibility. Disappointed as he was, he knew that perfecting his plan might come with delays. And, now that he had no money, he needed to panhandle a bit more to pay for his grooming. And his Denny’s.

“Fine, I’ll see you on Friday.”

#

The next several days were a real challenge. Mark’s patience had started to wear thin, and he had been less fortunate than usual in his panhandling. That afternoon, he’d only been able to raise \$5, which was well off the pace. The salon where he planned on getting the “Executive Grooming” package cost \$150, and along with his (vital) celebratory meal, which he’d budgeted at \$20, plus a bit extra for gas and other essentials he needed for the 300-mile trip, he was running low on money and morale.

As he sat on the tailgate of his van eating a chocolate-peanut butter energy bar, a sudden wave of depression hit Mark. Was all the money, time, and energy worth it?

But the moment passed as he realized that it was people like John Mako who needed very much to listen to people just like him.

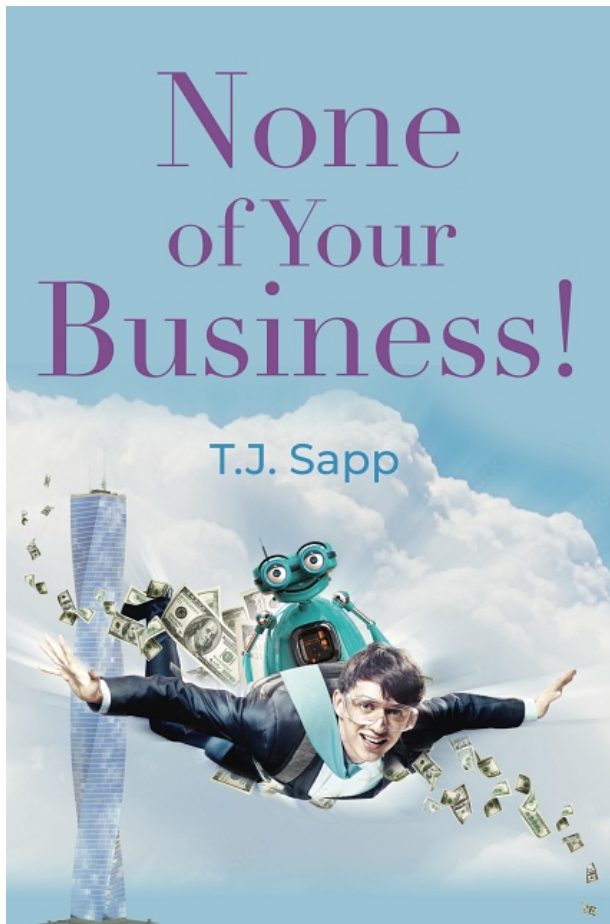
This was Mark’s fourth trip to Manhattan. This time, he would be patient. In his breast pocket was the .45 pistol that he had enjoyed firing in the woods behind his house when he was in a particularly bad mood, but now he had a different target in mind. And he couldn’t imagine one man in the entire world who deserved it more.

He got in his van and headed again for Mako tower. This time, he would speak with the man for the second and last time and let him know exactly how he felt.

About the Author

T.J. Sapp is also the author of the author of the time-spanning romantic novel *The Bigger Bang Theory* and many educational-themed works. For more information visit www.taylorsapp.com





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