



CHICKEN LIPS, WHEELER-DEALER AND THE BEADY-EYED MBA

AN ENTREPRENEUR'S
WILD ADVENTURES
ON THE
NEW SILK ROAD



FRANK FARWELL



Advance Praise for
*Chicken Lips, Wheeler-Dealer,
and the Beady-Eyed M.B.A*
An Entrepreneur's Wild Adventures on the New Silk Road

The most honest, insightful entrepreneur's memoir I've ever read. Today, it seems that everyone who undertakes a business venture is deemed an entrepreneur. Frank Farwell is one of the few who deserved and earned the title. *Chicken Lips* strips away the prevailing romantic illusions about entrepreneurship and provides an honest in-depth account of the WinterSilks story. Every businessperson or prospective entrepreneur can benefit from the lessons Farwell learned on the new Silk Road.

Bill Pinkovitz

*Professor, University of Wisconsin-Extension
Former Director, Wisconsin Small Business Development Center*

The reader sees here the link of the retail supply chain to China in a far more revealing story of complexity and personal risk than any Harvard Business School case. Farwell tells the gripping story of a commercial chess game in which the opposing pieces are unknown in number and in strength. He adds the story of bankers willing to buy rotten mortgages but reluctant to lend to the entrepreneur with emerging but delicate value.

John Balkcom

*President Emeritus, St. John's College, Santa Fe
Former Partner, Booz Allen & Hamilton*

I wish I had this book when I was teaching management and marketing and counseling small business owners. Farwell's story is based on first-hand experience and reads like a suspense novel. It covers target market, product mix, pricing, promotion, and distribution; planning, organization, and leadership; perseverance, adaptability to change, crisis management, watching the numbers, developing mentor relationships. . . . Name the issue and it is here, in a fast-paced, humorous style.

Allen Raymond

*MPA, Princeton University, Politics and Economics
Former Instructor, U.S. Military Academy*

As a business school professor, I can testify that we are now far better prepared to help budding entrepreneurs than when Frank started his business 30 years ago. But as a former entrepreneur, I can testify that nothing has changed. It's all there—the euphoric highs, the despairing lows, the pressures on the entrepreneur's family, and the sense of personal loss when the company is finally not yours any more. Entrepreneurs past and present everywhere will recognize themselves in Frank's story.

Patrick Turner

*Affiliate Professor of Entrepreneurship
INSEAD Asia Campus*

If you are considering a jump from the uncertain world of corporate employee to starting a business of your own, this book will encourage you while also serving as a cautionary tale. Farwell tells his story in a compelling and humorous fashion, taking you through the sometimes-harsh reality of entrepreneurship: people issues, personal sacrifices, international disasters, cash flow crises, evolving business processes, leadership challenges and financial intricacies. In the end, his passion for having his own business—and the desire to avoid being an employee—is the force that allows him to emerge victorious.

Dr. Deborah Streeter

*Bruce F. Failing Sr. Professor of Personal Enterprise
and Small Business Management,
The Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management,
Cornell University*

This book is required bedtime reading for every budding entrepreneur. At the end of a long hard day of having many things go wrong and a few things go right, it's reassuring to know that success is possible and that you are not the first to follow the often zigzagging trail a growing business follows.

David Ketchum

President, Asia Pacific, Bite Communications

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Frank Farwell

*Obsessed founder and former president of WinterSilks
(www.wintersilks.com)*



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To Sarah

*... and to Dick Norgord, Bob Beach, Dan Schwartz,
Rad Hastings, John Jeffery;
and in memory of Bob Barth and Smiling Dan.*

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PART 1

Building and Blundering

Even though it's been more than 20 years, I still can't believe it's really over. Not a week goes by that I don't think of her and our journey; sometimes I awake at 3:00 A.M., sweating and trembling, with some nightmare of deadlines and mishaps from the old days.

But it must truly be done with, because on this spectacular night, looking through my tent screen at the dying campfire and watching a cold, clear sky full of stars—well, I feel real freedom. There's no other feeling like it—especially when a person is up here on the edge of the big, magical lake, in the richest cradle of boreal forest and granite-studded coast between Labrador and Alaska's Glacier Bay. I savor every minute, breathing the sweetness of cedar and balsam by the shore.

When I say "her," I am referring to my former business. It's thanks to her that I'm free and able to be up here in God's country. Now, you might think that talking about a business is a stupid thing to do when I'm unshaven and happy, just me and my canoe under the cloud-dusted cold dome of a northern night sky, where stars peep out of the clear blackness like tiny silver candies on a dark chocolate cake. And you'd be right.

Except for this: Although a business can eventually offer the time and resources to take its caretaker to a new life, close to 95 percent of business start-ups fail within the first 10 years, according to the U.S.

Small Business Administration and other research groups. The winner's circle is an elusive 5 percent.

Despite these odds, entrepreneurs keep jumping off the cliffs of job security like a bunch of intoxicated lemmings, expecting to find some new elixir in the sea below. Usually only unforgiving rocks await them at the bottom. Even so, these leaps for freedom create new businesses like nothing else. It must be the human spirit, desperate to get out.

Back in 1979, I too wanted to get out—out of the tedious routine of corporate employment, that is. I needed to cut loose emotionally, financially, the whole enchilada. I had heard about the 95-percent failure rate but, damn, I didn't want some statistician's number standing in my way. So I just ignored it.

Clueless, I too took the leap, and the adventure began. It was a rough ride in the early years; there wasn't a boneheaded blunder I didn't make. But things got figured out and, well, my family lives by the greatest lake of them all now—the giant, clear belly of God. There is hardly a better place to sail, paddle, cross-country ski, or raise a child.

As years have passed into decades, I've realized there were plenty of entrepreneurs who had gone solo, as I had, yet few of them knew how to share what they had learned. It would be a crying shame for anyone to endure the hell I went through, so I figured I'd tell my tale, share a few laughs, and maybe help others' journeys to freedom become a whole lot easier.

You be the judge.

Cigar Butts and Newspaper Junkies

If you had told me 30 years ago that knitted silk turtlenecks and long johns would change my life, well, I would have written you off as a lunatic and run the other way. But chance and fate are strange, powerful forces. Match them with a young, fire-in-the-belly entrepreneur, and big things can happen.

That's assuming a person is willing to quit working for someone else and go for it. To do that, you've got to be a brave clairvoyant, or just plain nuts. Me? I'd say I was the latter.

Back in the hot days of late summer 1979, I hadn't fully realized it yet, but I was a complete, utter misfit of an employee, regardless of the job or industry that proffered a paycheck. I was either mediocre or bored out of my mind. Maybe both.

But when I quit gainful employment at 28 to become an entrepreneur, all the lights on my cranial circuit boards suddenly lit up and my spirit went off like a Roman candle on a clear moonless night. New life surged into my soul along with a dream of financial, professional, and spiritual freedom that gathered steam as the months of working for myself rolled by.

The next 11 years were off-the-charts demanding, way too exhilarating, just occasionally fun, and sometimes scary as hell. But they were more fascinating and profitable than working anywhere else. I got to plumb the sweet depths of American opportunity the old-fashioned way, playing the chess game of a lifetime.

Fear was a good motivator: Soon after the launch, my wife and I started running out of our savings. Despite my newfound energy, M.B.A. coursework, and subsequent reading and studying, I realized I was just another start-up greenhorn who had paddled himself into the dangerous Class V rapids of entrepreneurship.

Unforgiving economic wilderness, no compass, little remaining food, dangerous forces all around. Not good.

This narrative relates my adventure of starting what became the WinterSilks catalog (www.wintersilks.com). The sequence of mishaps and recoveries gives a living lesson on how to, as well as how not to, go out on one's own. Its real-life lessons are mixed with the often ridiculous ha-ha's of the day-to-day struggles along the way. It's a story for our staggered and slowly recovering global economy, in which the employment landscape has become an increasingly unpredictable playing field that can viciously shed salaried and hourly workers as if they were fleas on an intolerant beast. Knowing how to create your own job is more critical than ever.

I won't hide the fact that I got my tail kicked plenty of times. But persistence and common sense are amazing, compounding energizers. As soon as I figured out how to win with the cards that were dealt, well, life changed. My little company took off like a streak of aurora borealis. We had cash flow and profits aplenty, so once-flinty bankers opened up the floodgates to credit. Great people became key employees and managers, taking various loads off my back. We made the *Inc.* 500 list in 1986, 1987, and 1988, and we were co-winner of the 1990 first-place gold medal from the *Catalog Age* American Catalog Awards, apparel division. I felt like a Mississippi riverboat king with a pocketful of fresh cigars, a growing pile of chips on the table, and a family at home that would never have to worry or go hungry again.

Quitting corporate America to work for myself turned the tables of my life, filling me with passion, purpose, and empowerment. It was a precious reawakening from the tired-eyed, workaday commuter I had become.

I took the first steps over three decades ago, in the midst of a dark recession. As the years passed, I have come to realize that few people understand start-ups—even though they're the cornerstone of job formation in every economy. So I said to myself, *hey, I should tell my story, my entrepreneur's tale*. Otherwise I'd be complicit with those lame-brained, pork-spewing big-spenders in Washington

who claim *they're* the ones who create jobs. That's enough to make any self-respecting company owner pull over to the side of the road and puke.

So let me take you back to dewy-eyed Day One, where you can see for yourself how somebody like you or me can tread water through the “normal life” we are all expected to settle for, sniff out a little wisdom here and there along the way, and then break free to start the first sparks of a small business that one day can spectacularly catch fire. You never know—making the leap may give you happier work than you've ever known before. And if you hang in there, you might end up with a piece of a Kansas rainbow. Not to mention a bit of the gold that comes with it.

If you or a friend or loved one are a victim of layoffs or downsizing—or if you're still employed but unhappy, feeling lost in the maelstrom of office politics and bureaucratic decision-making—this story is for you. With a little reeducation, you can leave behind The Land of Modest Paychecks and Walking Dead. This book can start your journey.

My search for fulltime employment after college began in October 1973, in rural, east-central Vermont, and led to a seven-year foray into journalism. The first two years in Vermont provided valuable early career scars, especially for an entrepreneur. It was a template of experience without which I could never have envisioned and carried out the successes of later years.

It was the era of long sideburns and ridiculous bell-bottom pants, Vietnam, gas-guzzling behemoth cars, Nixon, Watergate, Woodward and Bernstein and their groundbreaking reporting for the *Washington Post*—and the subsequently fashionable status of newspaper reporting.

The craving for a newspaper job seized me, and I flaunted my thin resume of published college newspaper and C-grade small magazine articles around New York, Chicago, and New England, to no avail. Publishers large and small turned me down with little ceremony, as if swatting a slow-moving mosquito. Retreating to my great Aunt Hilda's cottage in Norwich, Vermont, I read the local paper, the *Valley News*, by the warmth of her fireplace. The next day, I wandered into its offices across the Connecticut River in Lebanon, New Hampshire and made a spur-of-the-moment inquiry.

"No openings," a harried secretary replied without breaking her impressive 85-word-per-minute stride on a slick new electric typewriter.

"Can I leave a resume?"

"We get tons. We'll just throw it out."

She exhaled a robust cloud of cigarette smoke and motioned toward stacks of resumes on a row of old metal file cabinets. Then she went back to her typewriter.

I turned to go, but before I reached the door a fellow with fuzzy muttonchops popped around the edge of the newsroom door, chewing on a pizza slice.

"Get down to the *Daily Eagle*," he called across the room. "Just hadda fight in the newsroom. Reporter's out of a job."

The rocket-fingered secretary slowed to 45 words per minute and repeated the news, in case I was too dense to appreciate it.

"Get thee to Claremont."

"Where's that?"

"South. Half an hour."

A break at last! I froze with excitement. *Thanks*, I mouthed to the newsroom guy.

Racing southbound on a narrow, two-lane highway, I steered with my knees while I opened the New Hampshire road map until it covered both front seats.

"Claremont," I muttered. "Why haven't I heard of Claremont?"

Twenty-four minutes later, my car sat smoldering in front of the *Daily Eagle* building. I burst inside at precisely the moment a tired-looking mustachioed man with a sour look on his face reached the bottom of the stairs from the newsroom.

"I heard you got a job opening," I blurted out.

He introduced himself as Andy, the editor-in-chief. He eyed me up and down, taking in my hopeful smile and outstretched resume. He hesitated thoughtfully, no doubt weighing the value of time and convenience. Then he said, "Walk with me to the Moody."

I noted that Claremont, a paper mill town, had aged ungraciously. It looked sad and withered, its streets lined with empty, boarded-up buildings with cracked and taped windows. The Moody Hotel, Andy's after-work watering hole, appeared to have been last remodeled about the time of the Spanish-American War. I sensed it might collapse at any moment.

While we waited for drinks, Andy scanned my meager collection of published clippings.

Time, place, and circumstance can be powerful. Two cold mugs of beer later, I had a job. On January 14, 1974, I started as a cub reporter for \$120 a week.

The paper had 7,000 paid subscribers and a staff of 30-something, including a one-armed, Vietnam vet circulation manager who gazed with unrestrained animosity at the six long-haired reporters and editors who populated the newsroom. Andy, a refugee from a New York ad agency, stashed bottled beer in the photo lab's icebox where I developed film every morning.

So there it was: a broken-down town, underpaid work, and long hours—a storybook first newspaper job. After my first six months as a reporter, working 50 to 60 hours a week, Andy took me aside. "I'm raising you to \$125," he said, as grandly as if he were sending me to Paris with a fat expense account. He pumped my hand enthusiastically. It felt like I had won a mini-lottery.

At the *Daily Eagle*, the technology mirrored the late stages of the Industrial Revolution. United Press International and Associated Press teletypes in the *Eagle* building tied us to the outside world, and when a story broke those teletypes came to life with a sudden, berserk thumping energy. As the teletype heads hammered out barely legible news of the day on worn-out ink ribbons, our second-floor offices with their slanted, unfinished hardwood floors and aged plaster walls shook ominously. Sometimes it felt like the Luftwaffe had come back to life and was carpet-bombing one of the poorest, most nondescript townships in the Granite State.

Before anything went to press, the *Eagle's* numerous typesetters and pressmen had to do their handwork, as well as set up the engraving machine for every photo illustration. Every day, after the managing editor—a slight, brainy, long-haired fellow—approved manuscript copy in the newsroom, the copy went into a wooden box in a dumbwaiter sort of device and was transported by a vertical clothesline pulley system to the typesetting room below the newsroom. First, the pressroom clerks keyed in every letter. The aroma of melted, lead-based metal wafted up through the copy chute, steaming the single-pane windows on winter mornings. Then typesetters inserted the resultant lines of metal type into a flat wooden printer's chase, one by one. Once the chase was packed full of type, a

machine pressed a pliable, rubber-like blanket over it. The blanket was then bound to cylinders on the huge printing press in the basement. The blanket's material repelled ink, except where the lead type and photo engravings had made indentations.

One day a French-Canadian typesetter—too drunk and hung over to handle the last-moment volume of deadline-bound copy coming down the chute—sent the copy back up, growling after it: “Use eet t'morrow or trow 'er out. Nobuddy'll miss this shee-it!”

The managing editor—who stood about five foot five and weighed maybe 130 pounds dripping wet—hollered back down the chute, “It's about Nixon, hot off the wires. He got pinned to Watergate. Run the story, you son of a bitch!”

“Nee-xon who?” The typesetter's voice echoed back up the tunnel, followed by a deep, provocative laugh that rattled the wooden box.

The managing editor stuck his head into the tunnel. “Nixon's done for!” he shouted. “So are you unless you get off your ass and set the type!”

Andy looked up from editorial-page copy that coughed sporadically out of his manual typewriter. The publisher left his corner office and walked ceremoniously into the editorial offices. It was five minutes until our press deadline, but the French-Canadian typesetter would not be appeased. He hollered a new stream of obscenities up the chute and went home to work on his snowmobile.

A few months later, in June of 1975, the *Daily Eagle* invested in new-fangled computer-driven, photographic-based cold type and not long afterward all but two of the typesetters were laid off.

That August I left the *Daily Eagle* and took a month to ride my bicycle through the labyrinth of central Vermont's unpaved back roads and pick wild berries. I was living happily on a shoestring, but uncertain what to do next. Clearly newspapering was not going to produce riches—just long hours and miserly pay. One night in my little rented mountainside house—which I shared with arborist and professional tree climber Leo Maslan and his dog, Spike—I got a call.

“Windsor needs a newspaper,” a low voice growled over the phone. “We should talk.” It was Armstrong Hunter, a former clergyman, now a weekly newspaper publisher and printer in Weathersfield, 15 miles southwest of Windsor. Armstrong was in his sixties; I had heard respectful comments from regional editorial staffers about his fine character, writing and printing ability, and good head for town government.

As darkness fell the following evening, I sat in Armstrong's home, a renovated barn. It was headquarters for the *Weathersfield Weekly*, which he and his family produced.

"How would we do it?" I asked him. "What would it cost?"

Armstrong scrawled anticipated costs on a paper napkin with a fountain pen. The edges of his figures bled through the flimsy paper napkin, creating a barely recognizable blur.

Holding his half-smoked cigar in one hand, he handed me the rumpled wisp of napkin with the other. "Ink, paper, printing, wages—see, doesn't take much," he said confidently.

I squinted at the blurry figures and got the feeling divinity school had not included finance and accounting classes. But the thought of a real newspaper start-up was intriguing.

Then Armstrong baited the hook.

"I'll throw in a thousand. You do the same. We'll be partners. You do the reporting and paste-up work up in Windsor, and you can shoot page film and print here."

Here in flesh and blood was a Grade-A newspaper junkie. All he needed to expand his mini-empire was a young, energy-infested cub reporter who could work 65-hour weeks, live on a pittance, and half-balance a checkbook.

"I think we'll need more capital and manpower," I said, excited, but dumbstruck with fear.

Armstrong grimaced and waved his glowing cigar butt dismissively. Clearly administration and finance were also repugnant topics to a man of the cloth.

"You know the guy the *Eagle* hired to replace you?"

I shook my head.

"John Van Heusen," he said. "Weathersfield boy. Smart as a whip, hard worker. Tractor fell on his dad. Journalism degree, University of Vermont, full scholarship. Get him to go in with you."

I got home late that night, my head spinning with the possibilities.

John Van Heusen was a more practical fellow than I; he seemed nonplussed with my sales pitch. But when he visited Armstrong, he too fell for the allure of having his own newspaper. By the end of the week the *Daily Eagle* had lost another reporter, and the *Windsor Chronicle* was on the drawing board.

I spent seven months co-founding and co-editing the *Chronicle*, a pipsqueak of a weekly, for an even smaller paycheck than I'd last had at the *Daily Eagle*. Some weeks there were no paychecks at all, because

John and I were part-owners, having coughed up \$1,000 each, and now had a growing stack of bills. (Armstrong and a well-heeled Windsor woman had also invested \$1,000, so we began with \$4,000 in the till.)

John and I hustled seven days a week trying to sell advertisements, write local coverage, paste up the paper, shoot it into film, opaque the resultant negatives, and then deliver it to newsstands and subscribers. Late one night before the first issue came out, I lay down for a rest on the office floor and was out cold for the night, having logged 98 hours that week. John made it three hours longer and then collapsed in a chair. Our schedules seemed like a private Olympics for workaholics.

We covered the Vermont State Prison, a drowning, main street gossip, high school sports, town selectmen meetings, regional school boards, the when and where of baked bean suppers, and pay rates for Rosie the Dog Catcher. Big stories, survival wages, miserably long hours, and few family, old friends, or support systems around. Armstrong provided a start-up mind-set and further immersion in printing and publishing. The lessons would come in handy later.

About a year later I went for an M.B.A. at Northwestern University, on the north edge of Chicago—one of the top 10 M.B.A. programs in the U.S. I lasted two semesters. As valuable and useful as an M.B.A. is, more school of any type was just not for me. So when I landed a summer job in New York at *Ski* magazine, part of the old Times-Mirror powerhouse, and then they offered me a full-time job as managing editor, I jumped at it—what a great excuse to quit school. *Ski* turned out to be good experience, but marginal pay. Two years later I migrated a few blocks west to *Yachting* magazine, then part of the Ziff-Davis empire, for much better pay and less workload. I edited feature articles and wrote some myself. Thousands of sailing aficionados would have killed for the job. But me? Well, penned up in a cement fortress, wearing an ill-fitting suit and tie, I missed the outdoors—Lake Superior, especially. The planets of professional bliss just wouldn't line up for me; I festered in malaise, not unlike entrepreneurs-in-the-making around the world.

About the only great thing that happened was meeting Sarah House, who startled me by saying yes when, on our eleventh date, I asked her to marry me. The wedding was held in a small white church in the tiny western Illinois town where she had grown up. We were feted by friends and relatives on a Mississippi riverboat and exchanged toasts at a bridal dinner in a hog barn spiffed up for the occasion. Her father had graduated from Harvard and the law school at the University of Michigan, and then returned home to a storied career

in the land he loved. Unbeknownst to me, his pretty blond daughter was another cornerstone in the foundation of an entrepreneur-in-the-making.

Sarah and I enjoyed the Manhattan career scene; we commuted daily from an old house in Piermont, New York, an hour north, along the west bank of the Hudson River. But after a year of this, both of us began quietly pining for something different, maybe even a return to the Midwest.

And so, late one summer afternoon in 1979, after two years with *Yachting*, I responded to a feeling deep in my gut: I cut the cord to the Land of Modest Paychecks and Walking Dead. All it took was a short walk down the hall to my boss's corner office. Maybe it was ignorance, maybe it was the arrogance of youth, but I made the walk.

Over the Falls

Of course, it took a catalyst to make me take that walk.

One afternoon that summer of 1979 I uncharacteristically ignored the mounting stack of papers on my desk and fell asleep just as my boss, Tony, walked by. He was editor-in-chief of *Yachting*, the son of a famous *New Yorker* editor and had a plethora of magazine articles and a few books to his credit. He was once a competitive wrestler, but his compact body had softened; there was gray in his thinning mat of red hair.

As he peered into my office, I think he heard me begin to snore. I must have sensed his presence eventually, and my head jerked to attention. I wiped the gathering drool from my mouth, sat up straight, and sputtered some ridiculous excuse. Tony stood there for a moment, his eyes wide with disappointment and fury, then walked away.

As his footsteps padded down the linoleum-tiled hall and the secretaries outside my office door tittered with new-gossip delight, I realized it was time to get out. My employer had taken a risk two years before and given me a good job, decent salary, responsibility, even a window overlooking Manhattan's Sixth Avenue and 43rd Street six stories below. I had performed reasonably, but had no passion for my work—and never quite enough income to keep from worrying about money. I felt like a furnace with only its pilot light on, trying to heat an entire house. I wondered how many in the vast midtown lunchtime crowds below felt the same. If my informal poll of friends and associates was any indication, the answer was: *most*.

Everyone, it seemed, wanted challenge, fulfillment, an ability to control their own career destiny, and immunity to layoffs.

I figured going solo might be the answer. So, a year after marrying Sarah, I marched into Tony's office, looked him in the eye, and blurted it out.

"I'm leaving to start my own company."

A touch of amusement sparkled in Tony's tired blue eyes. He told me, as gently as he could, that he'd seen others with qualifications far better than mine set out on their own, and all had failed or not amounted to much.

I just stared straight ahead.

Tony continued looking at me as if I had said I'd jump naked off the Brooklyn Bridge at lunch hour. He was probably thinking: *Why would a comfortably salaried employee quit a good job to start a company, when small business statistics clearly predict that a start-up's failure is all but assured?*

I shuffled my feet nervously as the seconds of silence stretched out to an agonizing half minute, then more. Tony waved a hand toward the window and lower Park Avenue, many stories below. "It's cold out there," he finally said.

I was suddenly aware that he thought I would fail. He was dampening my dream right at the outset. A slow-growing fear took shape deep in my gut, as well as a need to prove him wrong.

"I've thought about it for a while," I said. "I've got a new project going."

He slowly shook his head and forced another uncomfortable pause, giving me a last chance to retract the lameness of my statement. Finally, he shrugged and stuck out his hand.

"Well then, good luck."

The quitting part was done. I *could* go over the falls in a barrel, just like I wanted.

Late that afternoon, waiting in Grand Central Station for a train home, I thought *My God, what have I done?*

Three weeks later the editorial staff chatted through a customary goodbye luncheon. I think they were more interested in the company-financed lunch than in saying goodbye to me. Then I pushed through the revolving doors at 2 Park Avenue for the last time, giddy with a final paycheck and two weeks of accrued vacation pay in my coat pocket.

For a few precious hours I bobbed on a floating, excited feeling. I had cut my mooring lines and set myself adrift. I was free. Or so I thought.

Back home with Sarah that night, I called my Calvinist, Depression-era father in Chicago, and I could hear his dismay; his voice cracked over the telephone. “You need to finish an M.B.A. first.”

My mother? Her voice rang with excitement. “It sounds like a great adventure!”

She didn’t know what Dad knew. And had I known about the black abyss of small-business failures that would come before I, or anyone, reached the success envisioned, I might have given up my dream right then and crawled back to Tony, tears in my eyes, pleading for my boring old job and steady paycheck.

The truth is, I didn’t want to know about the abyss. Nor did Sarah, who that summer had traded her New York job with clothier Yves St. Laurent for a local one, sans commute, and was happy with the way things were, with a shy, nine-to-five staff editor for a husband. She supported my decision mostly out of newlywed loyalty. Maybe she sensed that my heart was slowly breaking, seeing dreams of living by the inland sea pushed back to an unattainable far horizon. That’s why I needed to make The Walk. And the embarrassment of falling asleep was the push I needed to make it.

It didn’t seem to matter that I had no business plan and little experience, just a lame-brained idea that would make any grizzled entrepreneur spit out his dentures in a spasm of laughter. I thought leaving my job and starting a company would be as easy as hopping onto a Second Avenue bus. Surely success and happiness would follow . . . wouldn’t it? I was just a 28-year-old kid disguised in a coat and tie, optimistic and dewy-eyed.

It was a good thing neither Sarah nor I knew what was to come.

I had told Tony the truth: I did have a new project going. I was pursuing an idea for a business—the revised edition of a cookbook that had already been through 20 printings.

My paternal grandmother, Edith Foster Farwell, had gone into a depression not long after the end of World War II when, having recently lost a child to suicide, she lost another child who had

just given birth to my cousin. Neither my father nor my grandfather would ever speak of this period, but I do know from quiet local gossip that her depression lasted a year or so and ended only after a friend introduced her to gardening. It turned out she loved working with the soil, and it brought her fully back to life.

She cofounded the Chicago Botanic Garden and cultivated extensive vegetable, herb, and fruit gardens in her backyard, along with beehives, a chicken coop and an apple orchard. For two decades she ground her own wheat to make bread, produced organic apple cider, and delivered raw honey to her two surviving children's families. On Sundays she fed her offspring a legendary, mostly homegrown luncheon. Streams of visitors came from around Chicago to see her gardens and marvel at the miracle of it all. When *Time* ran an article on medicinal and culinary herbs in the mid-1970s, my grandmother was one of the few people quoted.

During the 1960s she wrote a cookbook, *Have Fun with Herbs*, and was disappointed when it was rejected by several big-city publishers. She self-published it with the help of her son-in-law, a sales executive with a printing company in Chicago.

The book turned out to have legs—in fact, it went through the aforementioned 20 printings before her death in 1977, two years before I quit my New York job.

Why start a risky, unproven business when you can pick up one that's already got a head of steam? My grandmother's cookbook, reprinted so many times, was the obvious, can't-lose answer to my greenhorn businessman's dreams.

For five months before quitting my *Yachting* job I had worked every spare moment polishing up and enlarging the book. On daily train rides between Tarrytown, New York, and Grand Central Station and my day job in Manhattan, I had studiously focused on it. On weekends I had spent another eight to 10 hours. I had researched the herbal field, added more material, and prepared a new cover that I considered more pleasing to bookstores (my grandmother's book was spiral-bound, with homespun, black-and-white, antique-style illustrations).

A printing company in New Jersey asked for full payment up front; negotiations ended with \$1,000 down, balance on delivery, cashier's check only.

Three weeks later, in mid-October 1979, a few days after my last day of salaried work, I backed up Sarah's old station wagon to the

printing plant's loading dock. In went cartons of books; down went the springs of the weary car. It took two trips to and from the printer before the 5,000 books were stacked neatly in the basement of our house. We felt like new parents.

Three mail-order ads ran in various country-living magazines to coincide with the press date. I expected dozens of orders to pour into our mailbox daily.

But nothing happened.

"What's the count?" Sarah asked when I returned from the mailbox the fourth day after the publication date of our magazine ads.

"Not many." I saw her eyebrows rising; it was time to come clean. I hung my head. "Actually, zero," I said.

"Maybe they'll come tomorrow."

The next day, two orders arrived. "Here we go," I called out on the way back from the mailbox. Sarah met me on the front porch, and we looked at those first envelopes with wonder. Inside were checks made out to our newborn company, The White Pine Press, named after my favorite tree. People we had never met wanted our product and were sending us money; it seemed a miracle. That afternoon we packed and shipped each cookbook to its new owner as if sending a child off to school. From then on I felt excitement every time I saw the mailman. It wouldn't be long now until our anticipated avalanche of orders.

Days passed, but the order flow turned out to be rather modest: six orders of \$6.95 each a few days later. Then the daily order flow collapsed to zero or two. This anemic volume twittered precariously for four weeks and then died completely. We still had 4,971 cookbooks in our basement.

A week later, on a miserably gray and rainy day, there was nothing in our mailbox but second-notice bills from the magazines' advertising offices; we owed them \$3,000.

Thinking the first ads weren't big enough, I secured a good rate for a full-page, black-and-white ad in *Organic Gardening*—America's largest horticulture magazine, with two million paid subscribers, and a powerhouse for mail-order advertisers. I sketched out and oversaw production of the advertisement.

After that ad ran, results were about the same, relatively speaking, just on a larger scale. The book just wouldn't sell by mail, even with a cost-efficient full-page ad that reached a large, mail-order-oriented subscriber base.

“Death by cookbooks,” Sarah said at dinner one night, trying to get a rise out of me. I fought back a smile, but a voice inside my brain said: *Quit now, or get ready for a marathon*. The ton and a half of books in our basement began to feel like an anchor whose long chain was wound permanently around my neck. At night I got clammy palms thinking about the art production, magazine advertising, and other bills due. Many nights I thrashed sleeplessly in bed, trying to figure out how to come up with more cash flow.

During lunch breaks I often wandered into the basement to gaze at the books. I tried to will them away, but the dozens of boxes of books seemed to say: *Listen, knucklehead. We’re not half the book your grandmother’s was. We’re just another soulless paperback. Yeah, sure, we look better than Grandma’s book. But we don’t have its charisma. People bought her book because they liked her gardens and got to know her. You don’t know beans about gardening, herbs, books, or even business. What didja expect?*

It was true. My months of work had produced a mediocre book. It had been upscaled with new material, a two-color cover, and proper binding, but the original book’s homespun character had been neutered. I could sense my grandparents, side by side in their tree-shaded graves on the west shore of Lake Michigan, shaking their heads in disappointment.

As weeks crept by, our mailbox remained a lonely place. In the spring of 1980 I wondered what to do with the 4,612 cookbooks still in our basement (by then 388 had been sold and delivered to our small cadre of devoted customers, wholesale accounts, and a few sympathetic relatives who bought several copies each). I checked on the books every night before bed, feeling a sense of hopelessness. I needed to convert this inventory to cash, soon. How? Why weren’t customers banging on our front door to buy them? If only a torrent of orders would pour into our mailbox, we could ship all the books, cash an armful of checks, and pay off back debts.

Wishful thinking. The stacks of cookbooks just stared back at me day after day.

“*What’s he going to do now?*” I heard my aunt whisper to my father at a family gathering that Christmas.

“If it doesn’t work out by springtime, he can finish his M.B.A. in a year and still get a good job,” my father said.