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The Illustrations are on this CD.

The Construction Prison CD

Zan Mann



Baja Bay Books

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This book is a work of fiction loosely based on actual events that happened over 50 years ago. Except for Herman, which is part of my deceased father's real name, all character names were either created in the author's mind or have no connection to this novel.

Other than information that is in the public domain and some events that are based on my father directly and my grandmother, Gennie, directly any similarity between locales and events depicted in this novel are purely coincidental.

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Caution

Do not try anything described in this book.

Nearly all of the methods depicted in this novel are now hopelessly obsolete. One should **not** use this book as a reference for construction purposes.

Take it from an old broken up carpenter: Safety glasses, safety shields and proper safety equipment are a **must** on all construction projects. **No exceptions!**

Introduction

This novel is **not** about the construction industry. It is about a young man who was forced from his home to fend for himself in any way he could. His struggle to survive was haunted by memories of his horrific childhood.

The liberal use of dialog and light graphic nature of this novel allows the reader to feel as though they are seeing the characters in action at arm's length.

Religious choices and child abuse issues are an integral part of this novel's plot; however, the literary decency is not watered down by the use of risqué four-letter words.

In July of 1955, Zebadiah E. Smith left Buckeye, Arizona in a worn out Ford Sedan. He was going to Atlanta, Georgia, where he believed he could get a good paying job. However, he ran out of money in Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

He started with nothing and worked his way up to what he thought was a secure future. But, each time he believed everything was going his way, something would happen to force him into taking another job doing menial labor.

However, Zeb, as his friends called him, was no quitter. He was bound and determined to beat the odds and escape from his construction prison.

Will he ever make it to the top and stay there?

*To My Fellow
Construction Workers
All Over the World*

To Mary, my wife of 29 years

To Our three Children

To My Daughter

*To My Mother, Whose Hardship in
Dealing with my Father has been
an Everlasting Inspiration to Me
She Passed Away
November 12, 2006*

*And most of All
To My Beloved Grandmother Gennie
who Gave us Big Meals and
Made Christmas Morning Sparkle
Even Though I Know She had
Virtually no Money to do so
She Died of Stomach Cancer
When I was about Fourteen.*

First Job



He shifted back and forth in a hardwood straight-back chair in the Hattiesburg, Mississippi local employment office while he waited for his name to be called for a spot labor job. It was Thursday afternoon, July 7th. The heat and humidity were taking their toll on workers that summer. This was not where Zebadiah Emmanuel Smith dreamed of calling home, but this was as far as he could go toward Atlanta, Georgia without getting a job. His money was nearly gone, and he did not even have a small prospect of finding work any time soon.

His pride would not allow him to call his father, who lived in Buckeye, Arizona, to ask for help. It had been over twenty hours since he had anything substantial to eat. This was the second day he sat for hours hearing the interviewers call everyone else's name but his. The sweat was poring off his brow as he started talking to a man named Benjamin McIver, a tall well built Irishman. Ben began talking about the ducks and chickens he had to feed when he got home. Zeb's eyes widened as the thought of chickens took him back to when he was only ten years old:

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“Zeb! Get over here right now!” He knew that when his father, Herman Zebadiah Smith, a big man dressed in gray clothes, barked an order at him, he had better get there fast or feel his father’s wrath. When Zeb stood before his father, he said, “What is the matter daddy?”

“I’ll tell you what is the matter. First of all, I am not daddy to you. I am papa and don’t you ever call me daddy again!

“Remember last night when I told you to close and latch the hen house door?”

“I closed the chicken coop door just like you said.”

“Did you latch the door?”

“I am sure I did.”

“Well! This morning I went into the chicken coop and found five dead chickens. An animal got in there last night and ripped them apart, and it is your fault. It looks like you need a good lesson in manhood. There is a price to pay for your failure to obey my orders. Go and get me a strong stick.”

“I didn’t mean to forget to latch the door. Please! I didn’t mean to.”

“Are you going to get the switch or do you need a little help first?” Zeb knew about his father’s raw violence and did not want to anger him any more than he already did.

A while later he brought the stick to his father. “Please don’t. I won’t forget again. I didn’t mean to leave the hen house open last night. Tears began rolling down his face as his father’s hand grabbed him by the arm and spun him around as he raised the board into the air. With one powerful swing Herman assaulted his back side. Zeb had already raised up as high as he could without leaving the ground. This infuriated his father. He said “It’s time you showed a little backbone and take your licking like a man.

At the dinner table Zeb was forced to apologize to his mother for leaving the hen house door unlatched. It made him sick to admit it when he did not know whether or not he was at fault. Herman built the chicken coop and did not do a very good job of making the latch. But he dared not question his father about the latch or even utter a single word about it.

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Ben said, "Are you all right?"

Zeb came out of his trance with a start. "I guess the heat got to me and made me a little drowsy, that's all." They talked about there lot in life for several hours. Finally, Zeb, as his friends called him, decided to give it up for the day. He rose slowly and said goodbye to Ben. He walked toward his coal black, 26-year-old Model A Ford Tudor sedan. "Oh no," he muttered under his breath. He knew the carburetor in his car leaked a little gas most of the time, especially when he shut the engine off, but somehow he had forgotten to turn off the fuel valve before he went into the employment office. While he was away from his car, gas had been very slowly leaking out of his car's updraft carburetor onto the ground.

He opened the hood and quickly turned off the gas valve located on the carburetor. He grabbed an old pan he kept behind the front seat, got out of the car and placed it under the leak.

Suddenly, a deep voice from behind him said, "Having trouble son?"

"No, my carburetor float valve is stuck open again."

The man walked up to Zebadiah's left side and said, "My name is Willie Waterman, but most everyone calls me Bear."

Willie was a giant man who tipped the scale at 225 pounds. His salt and pepper beard shined behind his dingy store bought glasses. He had a 35 inch reach which helped make him a formidable boxer, and his obvious muscular appearance said, "I am the boss around here." However, behind his rough exterior was a teddy bear softness he kept well hidden from the outside world.

"I own Willie's Tree Service, a local tree outfit on the outskirts of town. I could use a good tree man. 'Don't find many people nowadays who want to work. That is why I spend a lot of time here looking for tree men."

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“My name is Zebadiah Emmanuel Smith. People call me Zeb and a lot of other awful names.” He was lanky and had desert tanned skin. He was sputtering into manhood. His clothes looked like hand-me-downs. His shoes were weather worn and the soles were so thin that his socks would get wet whenever he walked through a puddle of water.

“Bear, I’ve been looking for a spot labor job for two days now, and I haven’t even heard my name called once.”

“You are a little on the slim side for tree work. But, if I hire you, do you think you got what it takes to become a first-class tree man? Will you give me a day’s work for a day’s pay?”

“I need a job awful bad, Bear. I’ll work hard for you. Real hard.”

“I like your attitude. You’ve got the job. I will pay you ninety-five cents an hour, and a dollar bonus for any day we get over ten trees done. Deal?”

“Deal,” Zeb echoed.

“What we’ll be doing is clearing a parcel of land on the north side of town. The trees have to be cut down, the limbs chopped off; and they have to be cut into 8-foot logs, and then they have to be loaded into my Chevrolet pickup.

“I almost forgot. The logs also have to be stacked up neatly behind my house.”

“Is there anything else I need to know about the job?”

“Yes. I left the good part for last. We have to root out the stumps after we cut all of the trees down. That’s not part of the dollar bonus deal.

“What I mean by rooting out the stumps is, first we dig out and expose the roots, then we chop most of the them off. When a stump is all loosened up, I back my truck close enough for us to put a log chain around it; then I get into my truck, step on the gas and jerk that there stump right out of

the ground. After that, we get to bury up the holes where the stumps were. Sounds simple don't it? ... Let me tell you right out straight, the tree business won't be easy on you."

"I will do a good job for you Bear."

"Have any money? Got a place to stay?"

"I have a little over a dollar left, and I have been sleeping on the back seat of my car."

"Here is a fin. You can get a room for a week on the east side of town and still have enough left over to get a little breakfast tomorrow."

"Now, I expect you to be at my place at seven o'clock in the morning. Don't let me down."

"I will be there, Bear."

"Don't forget to tell the night clerk to wake you at six in the morning. The tree business doesn't wait for the roosters to crow you know."

"I'll help you get your old car running and then you can follow me to my place and have dinner with us. I was in the employment office several times today and was told that you hadn't eaten anything all day, so don't say no."

"Now, Let's get to work on your car."

A while later, Bear said, "Hit the starter."

The engine sputtered for a while before it broke into a rhythmic Putt-Chee-Kah, Putt-Chee-Kah, Putt-Chee-Kah.

"Zeb, your old car runs real good. How did you come by it?"

"My father gave it to me on my 18th birthday which was May 17th of this year. But, he really gave it to me instead of paying me for working with him most of my life on his cotton farm out in Buckeye, Arizona."

"Why didn't you stay and keep working on his farm?"

"Bear, I couldn't take another summer working outside in the burning desert sun. I had to get away from my father. He

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came from the old country, and he is as stubborn as a whole barn full of mules. He would always tell me that I was one of his worthless sons. After I graduated from high school this June, he told me to either work the farm, get a job or get out. And he said he did not care which option I took. I reckon he had his reasons, but I really wanted to go to college and amount to something. He said college is a waste of time and that real men work with their hands and their back, not with their mouths and pencils.

“There aren’t many jobs around Buckeye or Phoenix, Arizona in the summer, so a friend of mine, Richard Longmont, told me there are a lot of good jobs in Atlanta, Georgia. So, I started toward there. I did not expect it to be so difficult to go from Buckeye to Atlanta. I got this far before I ran out of money.”

“So much for your life’s history,” said Bear.

“You think I’m a complainer, don’t you?”

“No! I do not Zeb.”

Bear changed the subject and said, “When you came across country, you probably got some stale gas at one of those stations that doesn’t get fresh gas very often. These old Model A cars have a habit of kicking up a fuss when their carburetor gets all varnished up from bad gasoline. I just cleaned out the carburetor, so some fresh gas just might keep her from leaking again. If that does not work, I have a friend who has a wrecking yard in back of his house. Mr. Singer might have a good carburetor for your car. He sells parts real cheap. You’ll have to get the carburetor yourself, because he does not remove any parts from his old cars.”

“I will have to wait till I get some money Bear. I only have the fin you gave me plus a dollar and change left.”

“I did not give you that fin; it is an advance on your pay. We work hard to make it here in Mississippi. If you stay here,

you will have to work hard too.”

“ I will work real hard for you every day. I promise.”

“Come on Zeb, let’s head on out to my place. I know the Mrs. will have a table full of good food waiting for us. And I’m starved.” Bear led the way as the two vehicles made their way to the south-western side of town where Bear had a two story, five bedroom house nestled in the trees. Three of his six children remained at home to occupied three of the five bedrooms. Two cats, five geese and a dozen chickens gave life to Bear’s place. The two vehicles pulled into the driveway as his family peeked out from behind the thin curtains to see who was coming. Bear got out of his dark-blue 1949 Chevrolet pickup truck and closed the door.

Zeb drove up beside Bear and said, “Where do you want me to park?”

“Under that tree over there will be good. The tree will keep some of the sun off of your car.”

After he parked and got out, Zeb said, “Is your pickup truck new?”

“No. She’s about six years old now. This truck has hauled many tons of logs over the years. It is my sidekick.

“Let’s get on up to the house and let the Mrs. know we have company for dinner. She is a real fine lady. I met her when I spent some time visiting my older brother in Bowling Green, Kentucky. My brother and I were having a bite at the diner where she worked. First thing you know, we were going out, and it didn’t take long before I knew she was worth more than all of the gold in the whole wide world. A couple of months later we got hitched.”

The steps creaked and sagged as they made their way to the front door. The burr-zang sound of the screen door spring and the squeaky hinges told all inside that daddy was home. The windows were all wide open. A homemade, 24 inch,

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exhaust fan mounted in the center of a window at the end of the hall barely changed the temperature inside the house.

Bear's wife, Carol, was five-foot-four and weighed 135 pounds. She had shoulder-length brunette hair that was freshly washed and covered with bobby pins. "Carol, this is my new tree man. He goes by the name of Zeb Smith."

"Howdy ma'am." Zeb did not feel comfortable around women. He had been on his father's cotton farm all his life, and even though he would sometimes dress like some of the city folks in Phoenix, he never developed any of their city ways.

"Sure is hot in Hattiesburg ma'am," said Zeb.

"You get used to it after a while, but on real hot days you'll do a lot of praying for a cool spell," said Carol.

"Zeb will be having dinner with us."

Carol's eyes told Bear that he'd dragged in another shaggy dog. Lord knows they did not need another mouth to feed.

"Zeb, have a seat on the couch over there. I will be in the kitchen for a while," said Bear.

No sooner than Bear closed the door behind him, his wife cut loose on him.

"We ain't hardly got enough food for us and the children, let alone some stranger you picked up in town."

"I hired him to work on that new clearing job I got last week."

"Dear, that kid is too skinny for tree work. What's he going to do for you? Bring you your two man saw, because he sure ain't big enough to put it to work."

"Come on mom. His father kicked him out. The way I figure it is, if he had the gumption to go all the way from Arizona to here on his own, I will give him a chance. I gave him a fin to get a room and told him to be here at seven

o'clock in the morning.”

“Dear! You can kiss that fin goodbye. Because he isn't going to show up at seven in the morning.”

“The boy has not had anything to eat for at least a day. He needs our help mom.”

“One of these days you are going send me straight to the graveyard. Do you hear me?”

“Now that the sermon is over, can we get on with dinner. I'm hungry. What is for dinner?”

“Ham hocks, black-eyed peas, corn on the cob, left over grits and apple pie. I do not think that city boy will take to our kind of eating.”

“If he doesn't, he will just have to starve, 'cause you will not be fixing him any special food. Fair enough? ... Is dinner ready?”

“Give me five minutes to set an extra plate and get back to myself.”

Bear turned and walked to where Zeb was sitting. He started to settle down into his big easy chair, then he quickly stood back up again. “Zeb, would you like a glass of ice cold tea?”

“Sure would go down good Bear. 'Haven't had anything except water since day before last.”

“This here hot spell won't last long, you will see. Why it'll be winter before you can shake a stick. But the Mrs. was right about praying for a cool spell. You'll see that tomorrow when we get started clearing the trees off the 5-acre parcel Mr. Pigeon just bought. There will be frost on the ground before we finish clearing out all of those trees.

“I got the job of clearing that parcel because Mr. Pigeon and I go back a long way. ... Okay, to be truthful, nobody wanted the job except me. It's not going to be easy work, but the money is good. He always pays me on time. Business has

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been a little slow lately, so I have to take any job I can get. That's why the Mrs. went on the way she did. I know you heard us talking in the kitchen. I admit I've made some bad choices in the past about hiring tree men. But, I am past 45 and can't work as hard as I did just a few years ago. Why, I remember when I was just a young upstart riding on a rattler headed for Chicago."

Zeb's face told Bear that he did not know what a rattler was.

"Oh, a rattler is a freight train. When the train stopped at the train yard, I jumped off and tried to hide behind a boxcar to wait for the yard bull to leave, so I could sneak into Chicago. You see, a yard bull is big feller who tries to keep bums and hoboos from riding trains for free. I didn't get to hide fast enough. The yard bull saw me dart behind a railroad car. He was a big black man who was at least a hundred pound heavier than me. Okay. Maybe fifty pounds heavier than me. He came up behind me and said, 'I saw you hop off that rattler over there. You probably heard about us yard bulls beating the tar out of hoboos, haven't you?' I sheepishly said yes to him."

"What are you 'bout 15?" he said.

"No sir, I turned 20 a few months ago."

"You're just a kid. What you doing hoppin' freight trains?"

"Things haven't been going too good for my family back home, so I thought I might be able to get a job in Chicago."

He said, "That's enough talk, now you are going to get it. Hold out your hand."

"I was afraid to hold out my hand, but I did anyway because I figured, if I did what he said, he'd go easy on me. He reached into his pocket as he began telling me how dangerous it was to hop trains. I thought he was going to pull

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out something to whip on me with, but he pulled out a small roll of bills and peeled four dollars off the top and put them in my hand. Then he said, “Hide ‘em in your sock. This part of Chicago ain’t a place where saints hang out.”

“Thanks Mr. ...”

“Name’s Curtis. You make a lot of money someday, you come back and see Curtis and give me back five dollars. If I ever catch you near my trains again, you’re really going to get it. “Now, scat on out of here and stay away from the waterfront district. It ain’t no fit place for a kid to be. ‘You hear?’”

“Yes sir. My name is Willie. After that, I got out of there as fast as I could.

“I really needed the money to get something to eat.”

“Did you ever get to see Curtis again?”

“Sure did. Around Christmas that year I saw him walking into a department store. I walked up to him and said, ‘Curtis is that you?’”

“He turned and stared at me for a minute before he said, ‘Are you that skinny kid named Willie, I once told to stay off my trains about six months ago.’”

“That’s me.”

“How you doing?”

“I am doing well. I got the five dollars I owe you. I reached into my sock and pulled out a wrinkled up ten dollar bill and put it in his hand and said, ‘Thank You.’ After that, he told me he knew I was a good kid. But, before he could turn me down on the sawbuck, I ran away as fast as I could. I knew he would tell me ten dollars was too much. He had that kind of pride.

“Anyway. Before I got into downtown Chicago, I was walking on a street in the warehouse district when an old man called for me to come over to him. His raspy voice

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scared the socks right off my feet. I had heard a lot of bad things about Chicago. I walked toward him and stopped just far enough away from him that I could run away if he tried to grab me.”

He said, “Are you one of those bums hopping freight trains down at the railroad yard?”

I said, “I admit, I rode on a freight train to get here, but I ain’t no bum. I want a job that pays enough money for me to get a place to stay and put some food on the table.”

“This is your lucky day. My Name is Albert Frisque. I own this textile warehouse. I had a man quit on me last week, so I could use some extra help.” Albert was muscular and looked healthy for a man in his late sixties. He was five-foot-eleven, clean shaven and had a few thin patches of white hair around the edge of his head. He was wearing wireframe glasses and a black thrift store suit that was slightly wrinkled.

“You can work for me. Mind you, it is no easy job loading and unloading bolts of cloth from trucks. After you get some food in you, I think you will make it all right.” That was twenty-four years ago. Old man Frisque made a man of me. Somehow I always wished I could have gotten a better education, so I could get a job in one of those fancy office buildings in downtown Chicago.

Bear, “You shouldn’t feel that way just because you work with your hands. I know a bookkeeper who does my father’s taxes back in Arizona. He is only 39 and he can’t even walk up a flight of stairs without a cane. He sat in his easy chair till he got all stiffened up.”

“Dinner is on,” Carol called.

“Zeb. Let’s eat,” said Bear.

They walked through the kitchen to the dining room. Two unfinished wooden tables were pushed together and had a flower patterned table cloth on each. The chairs were all

different as if selected from various discards. The dishes were spotless and the flatware was dull and scratched up but clean. The wooden floor was time worn and the walls were yellowed.

“Have a seat at the table Mr. Smith,” Carol instructed.

Carol came from a proper Kentucky family where it was unthinkable to address a stranger by their first name.

“My husband tells me you come from Arizona.”

“Yes ma’am. I had to get away from the summer heat.”

“Heat. You are going to find out what heat really is here in Mississippi. The heat out in Arizona is a dry heat. When it gets real humid and the temperature soars above 90 degrees, you will lean against a tree, close your eyes and ask God for a cool breeze.”

“The heat out in Arizona may be dry, but a hundred degrees in the shade is still very hot.”

“Why did you come to Hattiesburg Mr. Smith?”

“I was on my way to Atlanta when I decided to see if there was any work I could do around here. I was about to give up when Bear walked up to me and offered me a job cutting down and clearing out trees. He won’t be sorry he hired me, I promise you.”

“The tree business is real hard work and a man has to be up to it. My husband has hired a lot of men over the years and only a few have worked out for him. I hope you are one of them. He is not all that young anymore and could use some good help. He’s real generous, but be forewarned that he does not like to be taken advantage of. And he gets awful mad when someone tries to cheat him.”

“I worked hard for my father out in Arizona, but he was never satisfied. I know Bear will tell me the truth about how hard I work.”

“You are right about that, but he will also tell you if you

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do not work hard for him. He hate slackers.”

Dinner went smoothly as they traded stories about their past lives. When dinner was over, Bear said, “Zeb it is eight o’clock and about time for you to go into town, so you can find a place to stay tonight. Me and the Mrs. usually bed down real early. It won’t seem like more than a wink before you will be on your way back out here tomorrow.”

They walked to the front door and started toward his car.

“Bear, the dinner was real good. I liked the apple pie. I haven’t had any food that good since I left Buckeye.”

“Mom will be pleased to hear that you liked the dinner she made for us. Now Zeb, once you get onto the highway, stay on it until you get into town. Dirt roads around here are like the branches on a tree. There are a whole lot of them that go nowhere.”

“When I get on the main highway, I will stick to it like glue.”

They stood there talking for a while, but the mosquitoes were biting so fiercely that Bear said, “It is about time for me to get on up to the house and for you to shove off before these pesky insects eat us alive.”

The sun was low in the sky and the birds and animals were turning up the noises of the night. A quiet loneliness crept over the area as Zeb said good night to Bear and started his Model A Ford. Within a minute, he was heading toward town. He soon became aware that the road he came in on was not as smooth as he had remembered. At each intersection, he stopped and wrote down the names of all the roads, so he could find his way back to Bear’s house in the morning. The last thing he wanted was to lose his first job.

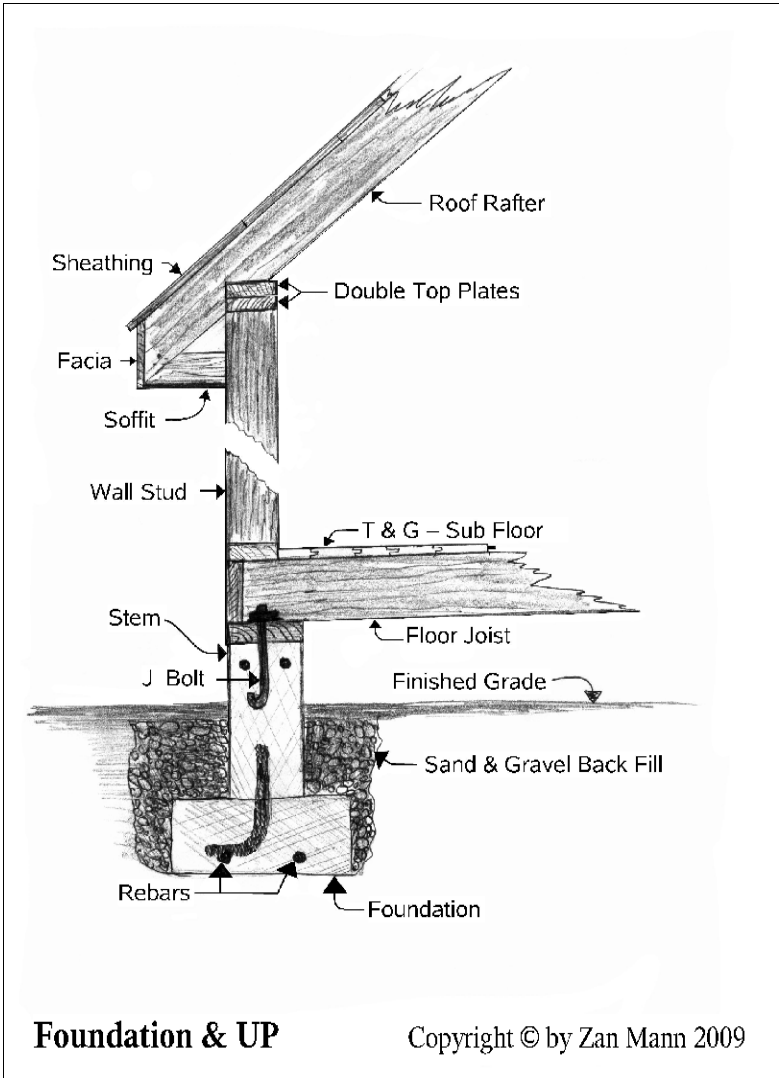
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Sample Illustration



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