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# A Hot Week in August

by Marshall Bowles

Mason dropped the shovel onto the dry, rocky ground. He leaned back against the truck beside Earl. "You don't want to travel through Europe?" Mason said. "Everybody wants to do that."

"I ain't got no interest in traveling nowhere," Earl said. He pushed back his dirty baseball cap and swiped his hand across his forehead. He flicked the sweat off of his fingers. Some of it splashed onto Mason's boot.

Mason frowned at the small wet spot on his boot. He used the heel of his other foot to try to scrape it off. "I'm just saying, you ought to get out and see the world. There's more to life than Greenville."

Earl didn't look at Mason. Instead he stared straight ahead, out over the tall brown grass in the field. It hadn't rained in a month, and the land was suffering for it. One spark, and the whole state would go up. Everybody was worried about it, but there wasn't a whole lot they could do.

"There's nothing out there I need to see. I'll leave the exploring to young folks like you," Earl said.

Mason shook his head. "You aren't that old yet. What are you, like thirty-seven?"

"Thirty-three." Earl said. He turned halfway around and reached into the bed of the truck. He popped open the lid of the cooler and pulled out a soda. "Want one?"

"Nah, I'm good right now," Mason said. Earl closed the cooler. He leaned back against the side of the truck and opened the can. Mason kicked in the dirt with the toe of his boot, making a small divot in the ground. A bit of dust puffed up into the air.

The firebreak stretched off into the distance to their left. This was their fifth day on the job. Backbreaking work from sun up to sundown, using shovels and pickaxes to cut a wide dirt channel along the edge of the field. Old man Comstock didn't want to use a tractor out there—he said the noise would scare his prize-winning roosters. He was a crazy old coot, but Mason was glad to have the work, even if it was just part time. Jobs were hard to come by these days.

"How do you know?" Mason said.

"Huh?" Earl said, looking Mason in the eyes for the first time in the last hour.

"How do you know there's nothing that would be interesting to you in Europe?" Mason said.

Earl pursed his lips. "I don't want to talk about it."

## A Hot Week In August

By Marshall Bowles

"You don't want to talk about it because you don't have a good reason. You're just making excuses," Mason said.

"Whatever," Earl said. He reached in the truck and grabbed a shovel. He jammed the tip of the shovel in the dirt at his feet, then pulled on his leather work gloves.

"Break's over."

They spent the rest of the afternoon in silence, cutting a channel in the bone dry earth at a snail's pace.

A grasshopper hiding somewhere in the tall grass made its mating call. The high-pitched screeching sound echoed across the dry field. The air was heavy today, without even the slightest breeze to help alleviate the heat. Mason and Earl were only twenty yards further along from where they were yesterday. Mason figured it was good progress, all things considered.

"I've been thinking," Mason said. The two men were sitting on the open tailgate, eating their lunches. Mason had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on wheat bread. Earl was eating beans out of a can.

"You do too much of that," Earl said around a mouthful of beans. "You're going to hurt your head."

Mason ignored him. "I figure the reason you don't want to get out of Greenville is because you've never left this town. You don't know what you're missing because you don't know what you're missing."

Earl dipped his spoon down in the beans and stirred them around. "That's about the dumbest thing I've ever heard."

"Maybe," Mason said. He took another bite out of his sandwich.

Earl scooped a spoonful of beans into his mouth. "Not everybody's got to think like you do. Different people see different things as being important."

Mason finished his lunch. He tossed the empty sandwich bag in his lunch box and opened another bottle of water. Earl scraped the last of the beans into his mouth. He tossed the empty can over his shoulder into the truck bed.

"What's important to you?" Mason said.

Earl grabbed his shovel off the ground. "Right now, it's finishing another twenty yards before sundown."

By the late afternoon of the following day, they had reached the southern corner of the field, where it butted up against the forest. Towering columns of clouds had been forming in the distance for the past few hours, promising the relief of rain but carrying the threat of fire-starting lightning strikes.

Mason stood up tall and stretched his back. A faint rumble of thunder echoed from a distant cloud. "Maybe we should call it a day."

## A Hot Week In August

By Marshall Bowles

Earl kept cutting a groove in the rocky soil with his pickaxe. "It ain't that close. We can keep going."

A drop of sweat ran down Mason's neck to his already soaked shirt. He was covered in grime that had mixed with the sweat to form a paste coating his skin. He took a long shower every night to scrub himself clean, but it felt like there was more grime every day.

The edge of one of the clouds moved past the sun, providing welcome relief from the intense heat. "I'd rather not be out here when a storm comes—"

*BOOM!*

The shock wave slammed into Mason so hard his bones vibrated. All he could see was white, brighter than the sun, searing his eyes. It was over in a split second, and he could see again. The sound of thunder reverberated off the distant hills, and his ears rang. Splinters of wood began falling out of the sky.

Earl was on his back in the dirt. His eyes were wild. "What the hell was that?" he yelled.

"Lightning!" Mason said. He pointed at a nearby tree. The trunk was split in two, almost down to the ground. Earl scrambled to his feet and ran to the truck. Mason crawled in the cab after him.

Within seconds, the sky opened up and rain hammered down on the truck. It was like someone poured a bucket of water on them, the rain was so thick they couldn't see out of the front windshield. They sat there in silence, watching the rain, both trying to calm down after the close call with the lightning strike.

After a while the rain lessened, though it didn't stop. Mason wondered if Comstock would tell them to stop work on the firebreak now. He hoped not. As much as he didn't like doing backbreaking work, he really needed the money.

"My old man died when he was fifty-three," Earl said. He looked out at the field, the tall brown grass now bent over from the power of the storm. "He worked in the warehouse his whole miserable life, and then he just died. He never got to enjoy living."

Earl leaned back and looked up at the roof of the cab, his head resting against the back windshield. "But at least he had a steady job, enough to support my mama and me. All those jobs are gone now. I'm as miserable as my dad ever was, except I don't have nothing. I'm never going to have money to buy a house and have a family.

"I don't care about nothing outside of Greenville because I can't barely survive here," Earl said. "And you're in the same boat as me. Out here working a job that don't pay shit because there ain't nothing else."

Earl turned and looked Mason in the eye. "What's important to *you*, Mason?"

Mason started to speak but realized he didn't have an answer. Earl stared at him for a long time. Mason looked away. "That's what I thought," Earl said.

The rain slowed to a drizzle. The men sat in the truck, not speaking, watching the rain. The entire length of the firebreak was a muddy trench. Mason wondered if it would still stop a wildfire. Would there even be a danger of that now? Probably not for a while.

# *Prostitute*

*By Sara Lufrano*

Clyde watched Andy give the presentation. Clyde thought about Andy's ugly downturned mouth, his eyes that bulged whenever someone who had a title talked, that his jacket didn't sit squarely on his right shoulder.

'Tell me no, Andy, tell me no. Be that guy,' Clyde thought.

Clyde leaned forward in his chair, put his forearms on the table, and sighed before speaking to halt the conversation. "I think," he started, "that we should shut down half of the software department and move those funds over to HR." He paused. "Andy, what do you think?"

"That should work," Andy said nodding his head too much. Clyde knew that it was without thought that he came to this conclusion.

'Andy,' Clyde thought, 'what the fuck?'

Clyde and his only-actual-friend Rick were at their usual bar.

"I'm giving them a reason to tell me no and they don't."

Rick reached over and wiggled Clyde's earlobe. Clyde shooed his hand away.

"Rick! Fuck, dude." Clyde smiled through his annoyance.

Rick laughed, and then puckered his lips while he talked. "I know who would tell you no and show you a good time."

Clyde took a healthy gulp of his whiskey. "Sounds like I shouldn't ask."

"Get a prostitute to step on your balls."

Clyde screwed up his face at Rick. "No. What?"

Rick swished his whiskey in his tumbler. "Isn't that what being told 'no' is. A kick in the nuts?"

Clyde opened his mouth to speak but Rick raised a finger to silence him. "But you, Mr. All-Important-Sullivan, have never been told no. Must be nice."

"It isn't."

Clyde thought about getting hit in the genitals and cringed.

"Have you ever done it?" Clyde asked.

"Don't need to," Rick took a drink and squirted a small bit of it between his teeth and said, "I get my balls broken all day."

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"Oh, yes Mr. Sullivan, that's a great idea." A woman in a smart suit said.

"No it isn't." Clyde looked at her. "You," he pointed to a man in smart suit, "was that a great idea?"

"Oh yes Mr. Sullivan, that's a great idea," he said.

Clyde was amazed and looked from person to person. "I want to cut pensions and give the top 1% a raise."

They all nodded their heads and mumbled in agreement.

"That's fucking stupid!" Clyde yelled.

Clyde and Rick were at the bar again. Clyde was drunk anyone would have known. His shirt was un-tucked, his hair fluffy, his mouth hung open when he wasn't talking, his body hung heavy from the barstool.

"It would hurt, man. No," Clyde said.

Rick pointed at Clyde. "You're God damned right it would."

Clyde raised his lip, "Couldn't she just tell me no and then, like, pinch my arm or something?"

Rick put his finger in Clyde's ear and moved it in a circle. Clyde pulled away almost falling off his stool.

"That kind of 'no' would be meaningless. You need real pain. Right in your scrotum." He winked.

"Uh," Clyde was disgusted.

He thought of this woman punishing his privates. She had a featureless face except her mouth making the sweet shape of the word no. Her beautiful mouth and that wonderful word made him smile.

Clyde cleared his throat and looked toward Rick but not at him. "So, how would I," he cleared his throat, "someone go about," he paused, "finding a woman who will, um, step on my balls?"

Clyde paced his floor and wiped the sweat from his hands on his pants.

His phone rang with the caller ID of doorbell. He took a deep breath and marched to the door.

There she was, the woman who would tell him no.

She pushed past him and stood in the middle of the room with her back to him. She wore a khaki colored trench coat, bare legs to her black lace up combat boots, not military grade.

Clyde shut the door and turned but didn't step any closer to her.

"Come here," she said over her shoulder.

He took a few steps inside. "Do you want to sit or have a drink?"

"No."

He furrowed his brow and lifted his lip at her quick response.

"Okay." He stepped closer to her. "Want me to take your jacket?"

"No."

He closed his eyes and his face scrunched up like he smelled hot, wet garbage.

"Fine." He walked around her in a wide berth until stopping in front of her.

"Are you going to do any of that, 'get on all fours like a dog'?"

He looked in her eyes. They were grey-blue and deeply beautiful. Her lips were full and painted a ruby red. Her cheekbones were high and accented by her short dark brown bob hairstyle. Her face was sultry and sensual and he was smitten.

"No." She gently shook her head. Her face was blank. Then her lips turned down, her forehead wrinkled up. Her eyes went wide as she turned into a different person.

Clyde watched this horrific transformation as if he was a statue unable to move.

She bent down a bit, twisted her shoulders to the right, stepped her right foot back, and with the full force of her body drop kicked Clyde directly in the balls.

All the air in Clyde's body disappeared in a noise he had never made before. He crumbled to the floor gasping for breath and coughing. He grabbed his package and wiggled on the floor.

She stood over him and patiently waited until he was still and had his breathing under control.

He looked at her from the corner of his eyes afraid to move. "Alright, you got me good, you can go now."

She dropped one knee in front of him, leaned down to look him in the face, and smiled with those beautiful eyes and full lips.

"No."

She balled up her fist and punched him in the dick.

Clyde spun a pen around the fingers of his right hand. Andy was back asking for more software engineers because progress was basically halted after Clyde's earlier suggestion.

"You know, Andy, why don't you go down there and get them back into shape? You know how to do that right?" Clyde asked with a smile.

Andy nodded. "Yes. I'm the senior office manager but yes. I'll learn how to program."

Clyde nodded. "I like you, Andy."