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TO PLOW A FIELD

Michael Cervini

The old man climbed into his tractor, gently settling himself into the ancient rusty seat. A scrap of foam rubber and a few rags stitched together made up the cushion upon the metal frame. He set his water jug beside him in the cab. Reaching over, he opened the windows and switched on the fan.

Today was sure going to be a scorcher, he thought. One of these days he was going to have to break down and buy a new tractor, one of those fancy ones with air-conditioning and a radio. He started up the engine and put it into reverse. Looking over his shoulder, he lined up with the plow sitting outside the barn and backed up to it until he felt the familiar nudge that told him he was positioned just right. He climbed down and hooked up the plow and the hydraulic hoses which would raise and lower the blades as he plowed up his fields.

It was late August, and time to begin plowing up his fields to get them ready for the winter wheat he would plant in September or October, depending on the weather. Pulling out onto the dirt road between two fields, he looked up at the sky. Not a cloud up there. Just a burning sun making everything so bright it seemed to blot out even the shadows. Looking off to the side, out across the fields, he casually watched the bugs, grasshoppers and locusts, darting around. They never seemed to have a plan, never seemed to know where they were going to end up next. The dust his tractor kicked up, as it traveled down the

dirt road, must have agitated them. They just jumped and flitted about, and annoyed him.

He drove on past his near fields toward the far ones. He would start there and work his way back. He liked doing it that way, so the last part of his work would be the easiest and closest to home. It would take him the better part of a week to finish all his fields and when he thought about it, he considered that there was really nothing very easy about it. It was dull and monotonous sitting in the cab all day, and with hot sunny days like this, the sun beating through the glass of his cab would fry him. But he was used to it. He was tough. And he knew how to take care of himself out in these open fields. Always make sure your tractor is in good running shape—it's your only way back home. Carry plenty of water with you—you could sweat to death before you even knew anything was wrong. He had always heard that it was wise to bring food along too, and an extra jug of water, just in case. But he never ate while out in the fields, and never needed much water. He'd been doing this for so long now he could handle any problem that might come up.

At last he reached his farthest field and swung his tractor around to the far edge to begin plowing in long straight rows back toward the next field. As he looked back across his fields, he saw the heat waves fluttering up from the ground distorting his vision of anything beyond. Not that there was much to see. The house and barn were long out of sight and there was nothing but wide open flatness in between. Sure was going to be a scorcher today. He was a methodical man, not given to superstitions or fears. When

there was work to be done, he did it no matter what. Heat didn't bother him any more than cold did. It was just mother nature, and he was always one with the land, working it and taming it, until it produced for him what he wanted it to produce.

As he plowed down the first row, he wiped the sweat and dust off his brow with his sleeve. Seeing the thick, damp layer of dirt on his shirt, he looked around, then sniffed. He'd gotten so used to it that he hardly ever noticed the musty, biting smell of the dirt floating up around him. But thinking about it now, he felt like sneezing. He reached for the jug of water and took a swig. That would do him for a good while. He just had to get his mind off that sun beating on him. He knew it was going to be hot today, but no hotter than any that he'd seen before. It was only a typical Oklahoma summer day. He'd listened to the radio that morning before he set out. Record breaking heat they'd said. Stay inside if possible, or at least stay covered. What did they know? They didn't even call themselves weathermen anymore. Meteorologists, they liked to call themselves; college kids depending on radar imaging and other such nonsense. The old man would have been willing to bet that not one of them had ever worked in a field in their lives. They had no idea how to take care of themselves on a hot day.

Row after row, he plowed on, sweat dripping off his forehead, nose and chin. He squinted to see the row in front of him off to his left where he had already plowed. It was important to keep straight lines. He never wore sunglasses. That was only for the younger generation and he had

never gotten into the habit of wearing them. Unconsciously, he reached for the water jug again. Sure was getting hot, he thought. He figured it would get well into the nineties today, but to hell with what those weather kids said. Though it did seem like it was ninety already, and dry, too.

The sun climbed higher and the old man began to sweat less. It was beginning to evaporate from his body before it had a chance to drip off him, but he only noticed the brightness of the sun, and the heat. "Yep, gonna be a rough one today," he mumbled out loud to no one. "Might even be into the hundreds by now."

About an hour later the old farmer felt he needed a break. Be good to get out of this glass oven and stretch my legs, he thought. He switched off the engine and climbed down from the cab. Carrying his water jug, he walked around into the shade provided by the tractor. Leaning against the tire, he took a long cool drink and contemplated the sun, the brightness, and the heat. Definitely into the hundreds, he thought. Maybe even a hundred and ten or twenty. He wasn't even sure anymore. But it didn't matter. He had work to do, so he started around to the cab to hoist himself back up.

That's when he heard it, a low, steady hiss. He paused for a moment; then he knew what it was. "Damn," he said. "I hope this don't ruin my whole day. I can't afford to be driving way out here too many times just for this one field." He opened the metal cover over the engine and looked at the source of the noise. A thin jet of steam was spewing from one of the radiator hoses. No matter. It was only a loose connection between the hose and the engine block. He

grabbed a screw driver from the cab and tightened the fitting, and then gave it an extra twist for good measure.

Climbing up into the cab, he wondered how much coolant he had lost. He'd find out soon enough, he figured. As he started up the engine again, he kept an eye on the temperature gauge. So far, so good. He put the tractor in gear and continued on down the row.

Not twenty minutes later, however, he saw the needle of the gauge climbing up toward the 'overheat' zone. "Damn," he said again as he shut the engine off. Sitting there thinking about his alternatives, his mind was working more on how to finish the field, not how to get him and his tractor back home. He never doubted for a minute that he'd get it back home. He just wanted to finish this one field today so he wouldn't have to come back tomorrow.

There was enough water in his three-gallon jug to keep the tractor going until he finished. By then it would be cooler out, and with less strain on the engine and radiator, he should have no trouble getting home. Looking around, he could not find the jug. Then he realized he had left it on the ground beside the tractor when he first noticed the leak.

"Damn heat. Making me lose my wits. Now where did I stop back there?" Walking back to where he thought he'd left the jug of water, he glanced up at the sun, but only for a second. It hurt, really hurt.

"Well, maybe it is gonna be a record-breaker today," he said. "Already feels like it could be. It damn sure is hot." He didn't usually talk out loud to himself, but today was an exception and in this kind of heat it was okay to make exceptions.

As he looked around for the jug, he was conscious of the burning sensation on the back of his neck and the dryness in his mouth. His mind wandered off to when he would be sitting around with the guys telling them about how he plowed up a field and fixed his tractor too, on the hottest day of the year.

Far off, he spied the plastic container lying on its side between two newly plowed rows. Approaching it, his apprehension grew to anger. He kicked the empty, lacerated jug up into the air. Between the shimmering heat and the blinding brightness, he had plowed right over it.

The old man walked back to his tractor. It was a source of comfort to him, a home away from home. Leaning against the front of the thing, he noticed for the first time that he wasn't sweating as much as earlier in the day. Maybe it's getting cooler out, he thought. But he knew that couldn't be. The sun was high in the sky now and it seemed to be cooking him from the inside out. His tongue felt parched and thick. If only he could have one drink.

The engine was probably cool enough now to check the radiator. Maybe, he thought, there was enough coolant left in it that he could nurse his machine back home. He'd just unhook the plow and return tomorrow. There was no doubt in his mind now. He wasn't going to finish this field today.

But the radiator was bone dry. He chuckled to himself as a perverse thought crossed his mind. He couldn't say which was dryer, him or the radiator. Turning to face the direction of his house, he considered the only option he had left, and started off, walking, in that direction.

At first he stayed on the dirt road, out of habit. But as his feet grew heavier, he decided to

cut across the fields, making a beeline for the house. It would be shorter, he thought. And no sense wasting time out here doing nothing but frying under this sun.

A half an hour later he began to wonder if it was such a wise idea cutting across the fields. It might be shorter, but it was much harder walking. The road was flat and smooth. The fields were rough, with little ruts, ridges, and the left-behinds of the last harvest. He'd already stumbled once over a large dirt clod and skinned his shin badly. The bugs kept annoying him, too. He swatted at them incessantly and cursed their buzzing around his head, though he was aware that it was him, disturbing their resting places as he walked, that caused them to fly up at him.

He stumbled on, his mind wandering. He thought about his friends and the story he'd have to tell about this. He thought about home and having a long cool drink of water. But mostly he just thought about how hot it was and how the sun seemed to burn right through the top of his head. He pulled off his cap and stroked the hair on his head. It was dry. That's funny, he thought. There's usually a river of sweat up there on days like this. "Damn, it's hot," he said out loud.

Stopping to put his cap back on, he looked around. Somehow he'd gotten off course, veered a little too far to the right. He looked up at the cloudless sky, then back toward the horizon.

"Gotta pay closer attention to where I'm headin'. Can't be wandering around all day now."

However, he decided this would be a good time to take a quick break. He was feeling tired and knew he still had a long walk ahead of him. A short rest would be all he needed. So he sat down and closed his eyes to ward off the sun. In a few minutes he was up again and heading off on

his new bearings, in the direction he knew the house to be in.

Onward he walked, wishing he was making better time. His feet were getting sore and each step hurt more than the last. He had to squint so much now that his eyes were beginning to ache. He raised his hand to his eyebrows to shield out the sun's glare. It helped a little, but not much. Most of the brightness was being reflected up from the ground in front of him. He plodded on, keeping to his bearings as best as he could.

Presently, he remembered a small pond, little more than a mud hole, that almost always held at least a small amount of water. He remembered passing by it recently and seeing some water in it. There might not be much, and it would be as muddy and dirty as he'd ever seen. Normally, he would never consider drinking it, but he knew this was not a normal situation. He was angry at his predicament and knew he had to get a drink somewhere to cool his parched tongue and cracked skin. He'd already accepted the fact that he would be suffering from dehydration when he got home, maybe even a severe case of it. But that was treatable, and with a day or two of rest he'd be good as new again. Finding something to drink now would lessen his dehydration, not to mention his thirst, only causing him to remain home until the next day. So he turned and headed off in the direction of the pond.

Onward, he walked, occasionally scanning the landscape for signs of the pond. With his hand held over his eyebrows, shielding the sun from his eyes, the old farmer thought he saw the pond off in the distance. He walked in that direction and didn't look up again until he was at the pond's edge. What he saw surprised him, then angered him. It just wasn't fair, he thought,

this streak of bad luck. In front of him lay nothing but dried, cracked earth that had once been the pond's bed. Dropping to his knees, he looked at the hard-baked clay around him, patched together like an ill-fitting jig saw puzzle with large gaps between the pieces. He clawed at the pieces, frantically in his mind, but slowly and without strength in his efforts, trying to get at the water that he hoped lay beneath. The only rewards for his efforts were scraped and cut fingers, and a growing nauseous feeling in his stomach.

Fighting back the nausea, he now understood that his situation was getting desperate. He was surprised at his own weakness and angered at his cruel fate that left him here in the middle of nowhere, under a boiling sun, without water. As he picked himself up from the pond bed, a small ache lodged itself in the pit of his stomach. He ignored it and started walking.

Instinct began to take over the man. He no longer tried to think. There were no more decisions to be made. He had to get out of the sun. He must keep moving. Time was running out on him. It was now a race.

Barely able to see through the blinding brightness, he staggered on, stumbling at times, but each time picking himself up again and continuing without pause. He hoped he was heading in the right direction. He had to be; he had no choice.

Heat can be an illusive thing. It comes without immediate pain, nor does it come all at once. It is subtle and sly, sapping the body of moisture and strength without one being readily aware of it. It is like a slow moving poison that invades the least felt parts of a person first. The heat the man felt was only the heat affecting his

skin and his tongue. The danger he never sensed was the temperature of his blood rising beyond its limits.

At one point he fell down hard and lay there for a few moments before trying to get up. When he did, he doubled over again with an excruciating cramp in his stomach. He would have cursed everything from mother nature to God himself, but he could no longer speak. The heat was suffocating. His tongue was swollen and he gasped for each breath. His lips were cracked and bloody, his skin red and peeling. As he lay there holding his stomach, he felt a trickle of blood filling his right eye from a cut on his forehead. The sensation caused him to rise again and stagger onward. And all the while the sun beat down on him mercilessly.

Walking was now a tortuous task. Each time he lifted a foot to take another step, stabs of pain shot through his hands. He could no longer stand up straight, and twice he doubled over and dropped to his knees from the cramping inside of him. Each time he got up again and forced his legs to move, though it couldn't really be called walking. Only a pathetic combination of stumbling, falling, crawling, then rising up to stumble some more, kept the man moving forward.

The old man moved blindly on, no longer considering whether he was going in the right direction. Once, when he fell down, he became aware of a slight movement just inches from his nose. Wiping the dirt from his chin, he looked and saw two small locusts partially hidden under a large old leaf. They looked like they were eyeing him, wondering what he was doing out in the sun, wondering why hadn't he found shade like they had. The farmer tried to chuckle as he

contemplated the locusts hiding themselves beneath the stalks and old vegetation, shielding themselves from the sun.

Then he thought about the stark vegetation in front of his face. Should be moisture in those things, he thought. So he grabbed some of the weeds in his hand and stuffed them into his mouth. It tasted bitter, horrible. Prickles stuck his tongue and lips, causing him to gag as he tried to suck the moisture out and swallow it. He retched and would have vomited, but there was nothing in his stomach. The unbearable heat had long since affected his mind, as well as his body. But this he never sensed. He only felt the dryness in his mouth, the pain in his stomach, and the blinding stabs of light in his eyes.

He had begun hallucinating without even being aware of it. His mind drifted back to images of far-removed places and people. He sat down at times, dreaming. Sometimes a smile would spread across his face, then a trickle of blood would ooze out from his cracked lips and his moisture-starved tongue would greedily suck it in.

Soon enough, however, he'd be back in the present, cursing his predicament and his rotten luck as he dragged his body onward. It wasn't fair that this should happen to a good man like him. He fell yet again, then got up yet again.

"I don't deserve this," he whispered. "Not me, dear Lord." The old man just couldn't accept what was happening. But then he was off dreaming again of youth and strength and happier days.

Finally, he fell down again, hard, and doubled over on his side, unable to get up. In his last lucid moments, he recalled a story he had read many years ago, as a boy. He'd long since forgotten about it, until now. Funny how

such unrelated things can come to you at the strangest of times, he thought. It was a story about a man who was traveling alone during the winter in the Arctic, in the Yukon or something. The man had frozen to death. Funny, the old farmer thought.