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TOM BURNAM

The Grove

"Can't I make you understand?" the farmer said. He was a spare, tall man with dark eyes in a seamed face weathered by wind and blizzard, summer dust and summer sun. "My granddad planted that grove. When I was ten years old—."

The engineer gestured, a small impatient motion of his hand conveying only a generalized irritation.

"I know, I know," he said. "You told me all that."

The engineer was well-filled-out, not heavy-set exactly but certainly not slender. He wore scratched leather puttees, breeches, and a hat which, because it was new, he had only yesterday allowed his spaniels to worry until it had been tugged and chewed enough to take the newness off. He was squatting on his haunches; under his arm was a roll of dog-eared blueprints. They bore no relevance to this matter of the grove.

The transit-man and the chain crew and the stake artist, the latter a nineteen-year-old crew-cut city youth trying to earn enough money to get himself back to college in the fall, were sitting near the battered Highway Department station wagon, smoking and listening.

An edge of desperation crept into the farmer's voice. "You don't have to run the highway through there," he said. "It wouldn't cost one extra cent to swing it around the grove to the east. You could balance your cut and your fill better, in fact."

Tom Burnam says no one will believe that he was born in a log cabin on the shores of Swan Lake, Montana. He doesn't care if the art of conversation is dying, because he'd rather watch Wyatt Earp on TV than listen to most conversations he's heard. His fiction has been published in Harper's, Esquire, Colorado Quarterly, All-Story Braille, and elsewhere; his poetry in Saturday Review, Arizona Quarterly, and other magazines. Burnam is a professor in the Division of Humanities at Colorado College, supervising creative writing.

"Nobody worries about that any more," said the engineer. "We used to balance cut and fill in the old days, which is why we're having to relocate so many roads now. Now we just run 'em straight, and to hell with the dirt left over."

"Or the dirt you have to truck in from twenty miles away," said the farmer.

"Yeah," said the engineer. He squinted his eyes and appeared to sight along an imaginary line which cut through the grove.

"Run 'em straight," said the farmer, and spat into the dust. "Run 'em straight, so a bunch of hot-rodders can see how fast they can get from one saloon to another, and if they can't get there fast enough, why, they drink in their cars and throw the bottles and beer cans off onto the right-of-way."

The engineer did not answer. Being a neat-minded person, he secretly shared the farmer's disgust for those who threw out the dead soldiers and the crumpled popcorn bags and the Kleenex, always the Kleenex like a ragged trail for an idiotic game of fox-and-goose, but he did not feel any particular moral objection; to the engineer, it was a matter of neatness and order. Highways were made to run straight, with clean shining gravel at the shoulders and geometrically-spaced shrubs on the big cuts and a neat line exactly in the center with no ragged, fanned-out paint edges. And anybody who threw out a beer can or took a potshot at a road sign, destroying its neatness and unity, or drove so he had to slam on his brakes and pull off and tear up a shoulder ought to spend a year in jail. The mess, that was what the engineer hated most: messiness, disorder, untidy people with untidy minds.

For some time no one said anything. The farmer leaned against a front fender of the station wagon. He pulled a damp package from his sweat-stained shirt pocket and took out a rumpled cigarette, pulling and smoothing it between his fingers. The young stake artist, glad of a chance to lay down the heavy canvas bag filled with clean white pine stakes, leaned back in the shade of the station wagon. His sympathies, such as they were, were with the farmer; he had worked for the engineer long enough to wish that he had got placed on Larry's crew instead; Larry was easygoing, and besides his crew was running a line up in the mountains, where it was cool.

The transit-man, fresh out of engineering school, squatted like the engineer close to his instrument and scratched idly in the warm dust with a chip the stake artist had knocked off with the hatchet when he had shortened a stake to make a bench-mark.

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Jake and Andy, the chain crew, were not much interested in the argument but, like the stake artist, they were grateful for a chance to take it easy while the brass argued with another damn farmer. They did not feel strongly on any subject involving road-location; they were old enough to know that they would never, now, rise above their jobs; they were good at handling the hundred-foot-long steel tape, but they had long since been classified somewhere in the limbo between unskilled labor and craftsman-professional. Vaguely, without much thought, they tended to identify with the engineer though they complained bitterly, in private, about his peculiarities. They would have complained thus, and did, about anyone else to whose crew they were assigned. Farmers, true, were generally the enemy, always squawking about gates left open or wheat trampled down or some damn tree that had to be cut away to make room for chain or rod, but farmers were farmers, what the hell?

"I don't see much point in all this," the engineer said finally. "We're only running a preliminary survey anyway. Probably never get the road built."

"I've heard that one before," said the farmer bitterly. "That's what they said to Henry Bleekman. Now the highway runs right between his house and his barn. Every time he wants to feed his stock he's got to cross the highway. They didn't even put in an underpass."

"The law doesn't provide for a passenger underpass," the engineer said, with an air of great patience. "Or at least the highway department won't pay for one."

"They'll pay for a stock underpass," the farmer said. "Henry's trouble is he wasn't born a cow, I guess."

The engineer stood up and stretched, belching gently as he did so. "No point in all this," he said again. "Ready, boys?"

The farmer moved too, suddenly, almost violently. He took the short step or two to where the engineer was standing and said, looking him directly in the face, "You won't brush me off this way. I won't have it. You stay out of that grove, d'you hear?"

The engineer did not answer at once. He prided himself on the way he could handle farmers; he felt that now was the time to reinforce, by his silence, the majesty of the State, whose representative he liked to think he was: the end-link of a chain running through the District Office to the Bureau and ultimately to the Governor himself.

Slowly the engineer reached into the pleated pocket of his neatly creased khaki-colored shirt and drew forth a sack of tobacco and a sheaf

of cigarette papers. He placed the cardboard tag at the end of the string on the sack in his mouth, letting the sack dangle as he used both hands to form the paper into a neat trough, and he rolled the cigarette neatly, efficiently, but with a certain faintly insolent timing to his movements. Then, with deliberation, he reached into his other shirt pocket and brought out a wooden match which he scratched easily on the seat of his breeches. Lighting the cigarette, he permitted himself a long satisfying draw before answering.

"Look, mister," he said. "We've got the law on our side, you know. And we've got a job to do. And where the road's got to go, it's going."

"It don't mean a damned thing to you," the farmer said angrily, "that my granddad planted that grove, and I've watched over it since I was old enough to walk. It don't mean a damned thing that every time we have a family reunion we go to a special place in that grove and have a big picnic dinner, everybody there, all the kids and old folks and—"

The engineer cut him short. Already they'd been stalled here for forty-five minutes. "Sorry," he said shortly. "We can't afford to waste any more time like this. You want to be uncooperative, well, go ahead. But we're going to run that line."

The stake artist ground out his third cigarette since they had stopped to talk to the farmer, and started to pick up his canvas bag and hatchet. To his astonishment, the farmer turned on him.

"Don't you make a move, son," he said. "You aren't going anywhere."

"But—" the stake artist protested. "I was just getting my stuff together." He felt foolish, and he felt betrayed. Didn't the farmer know that he was on his side?

But before he could say anything further, the farmer turned on his heel. "Go on," he said over his shoulder to all of them. "Go on. But you'll do it at your own risk."

The engineer, who had walked over to the transit-man, turned. "Just what do you mean by that?" he said.

"Yeah," muttered the stake artist, who felt that he had been unfairly drawn into something that was no concern of his.

But the farmer said only, "You'll find out what I mean. You'll find out." He walked away toward his house. For a moment the group around the station wagon stood motionless. Then the engineer turned to them.

"Come on," he said harshly. "You going to let some damn clodhopper scare you?"

As the stake artist followed the instructions of the chainmen and the transit-man, marking the stakes with a heavy blue metal-sheathed crayon, pounding them into the ground where the chainmen indicated after centering them on the line established by the transit, he was increasingly depressed at the thought of the argument between the engineer and the farmer, and increasingly indignant that he should have been drawn into it. It wasn't his job to decide where the line went, or whose trees might get cut down if they ever did really build the new road. He was just a college student spending the summer at a job paying as good as most, and more interesting than some.

And why had the farmer turned on him? Was it just because he'd been the first to make a move, after the engineer told the farmer off? No; the transit man had moved at the same time, swinging his instrument in the direction they were going now. Couldn't the farmer see, said the stake artist to himself, that he was just doing a job?

They reached the center of the grove about three in the afternoon; preliminary lines like this went fast, stretching themselves out in hundred-foot gulps: set up the transit, run out the chain, place the stakes (no rocky ground here either, but good rich wheatland offering only a satisfying resistance to the pounding of the hatchet on the top of the stake), move the transit when you got too far from it, hundred-foot stride after hundred-foot stride.

Then they ran up against the tree. It was a tall slender white pine, stretching magnificently upward, dominating the smaller pines and firs in the shady grove. It stood smack in the way of the transit. On its bark was carved a series of initials. Some were dated; and some were quite old. This, it appeared, was where the family reunions were held: a crude bench had been built close to the base of the tree; homemade rustic picnic tables were scattered about and a rough rock fireplace stood not far away.

The engineer turned to the stake artist. "Chopped down any trees lately?" he said pleasantly.

"With this?" The stake artist indicated his hatchet.

"There's an axe in the station wagon," said the engineer.

"But—" said the stake artist. The transit-man interrupted him.

"We can offset the line easy enough," he said to the engineer. "Just a couple extra set-ups and we'll be right back on center."

The engineer flushed. "I know how to run an offset," he said. "But I don't see why we should bother. One tree down isn't going to matter. Whole damned grove will be down sooner or later."

"Be just as quick to run the line around," the transit man said hesitantly.

"The hell it would," said the engineer. "Look at the terrain. Take you an hour to get a decent transit set-up." He turned again to the stake artist. "Go get the axe."

As the stake artist reached into the back of the station wagon for the heavy double-bitted axe carried for just such contingencies, he felt resentment rising. Why couldn't he be kept out of this? Why should he have to be the one to take the first overt action against the grove?

"Ought to have a gasoline chain-saw for jobs like this," said Andy, the chainman. "Hell of a lot quicker."

"This won't take long," said the engineer. "Good for a stake artist to handle something bigger than a hatchet now and then, anyway. Gives him muscles."

The stake artist picked up the axe; calculating where to strike the first blow, he had just started to swing when he heard the farmer's hoarse yell. He hesitated and looked toward the direction of the voice. The farmer was running toward them through the grove, running awkwardly because the shotgun in the crook of his arm threw him somewhat off balance.

"Go on," said the engineer. "Chop it down!" But the stake artist lowered the axe. Jake and Andy retreated to the station wagon, where they half-crouched behind the hood. The transit-man stood by his instrument, unmoving.

"I hope you know what you're doing, mister," said the engineer as the farmer stopped some thirty feet away, holding the shotgun cradled in his arm.

"All I know is, that's one tree you're going to leave alone," the farmer said. He was breathing heavily, from exertion and excitement. He turned to the stake artist. "What are you doing?" he cried. "Do you want to chop down my grove?"

The stake artist did not know what to say. He felt trapped, and he felt helpless. He fingered the smooth handle of the axe, and lowered his head. "No," he said in a low voice.

The engineer turned on the stake artist. "You do what you're told," he said, "and you like it. Do you hear? You like it."

From behind the station wagon, Jake could no longer contain himself. "Oh, hell," he called. "Let's leave the damned grove alone. It's quitting time anyway, or damn near." He was immediately sorry he had spoken; he'd been with the highway department, one job or an-

other, for twenty years; still, he could be fired; he was just an hourly laborer, a working stiff.

The engineer, however, gave no sign that he had even heard. He said to the stake artist, "Start chopping."

Hesitantly the stake artist raised the axe again.

"You do, son," said the farmer, "and you'll be sorry."

"Oh, Jesus Christ," shouted the engineer. "Here. Give me that axe."

He seized the axe from the stake artist; handling it awkwardly, he raised it above his head. The sound of the "chunk" as the axe bit into the tree was terrifyingly shattered by the roar of the shotgun; his eyes wide with fear and surprise, the engineer gasped, leaned against the tree, and slowly slumped to the ground in a moment of appalled silence. A multitude of little ragged places had appeared high on his right shoulder and blood was seeping from them.

The stake artist was young and strong; what followed was more reflex action than anything else. In any case, after the shot the farmer had simply stood numbly, the gun lowered, as if astonished at what he had done. Still, as he leaped and bore him to the ground, the stake artist was surprised that the farmer offered so little resistance.

The stake artist picked up the gun, and hardly knowing what now to do—the farmer was sitting on the ground, his face in his hands—he held it pointed at the farmer.

"It's only birdshot," the farmer was moaning. "I didn't really mean it, I didn't really mean it, it just went off."

The stake artist was outraged. "Damn you!" he shouted at the farmer. "You might have killed me!" He knew the farmer had shot at the engineer and not at him; yet he kept repeating, "You might have killed me!" He broke the gun, ejecting the shells, the one fired and the one unfired, and grasping the gun by the barrel he swung it around his head and threw it as far as he could. It hit a small tree, breaking the stock, and fell into a clump of bushes.

Andy and Jake and the transit-man had gathered around the engineer. His wounds were not serious; most of the birdshot had missed, flying above his shoulder; a few pellets had caused the ragged holes in his neat khaki shirt from which the blood still seeped.

"Can you walk?" asked the transit-man. The engineer nodded.

"Break out the first-aid kit," said the transit-man to Jake. "He'll be all right." The three of them, Andy helping support the engineer, moved to the station wagon after Jake.

The farmer had by this time pulled himself awkwardly to his feet.

He was leaning against a smaller tree near the spot where he had fired. There were tears running down his cheeks.

"I couldn't stand it," he said. "The grove—I couldn't stand it."

The stake artist felt an overpowering urge to destroy, to rage and chop and maim. He picked up the axe and swung as hard as he could at the small scar on the tree where the engineer's only blow had fallen, and he chopped until he had wounded the tree fatally; it would die, now, even though the stake artist had not chopped it through and it still stood.

He paused, gasping, and wiped the sweat from his face. He was very much ashamed of what he had done. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the farmer, poking at his face with an old red bandanna, move toward him, and then the stake artist was astonished to feel the farmer's arm on his shoulders, which were still heaving from the frantic exertion of his blows.

"I'm sorry, son," the farmer said.

But the stake artist shrugged off the arm. "You've got no business acting like this!" he cried. "I killed your tree! Why don't you—Why don't you—" He paused. "This wasn't my fight," he said, but his voice was uncertain. "I had nothing to do with it. Go see the engineer. I never wanted any part of it."

"Come on!" called the transit-man. "We've got to get to town."

"O.K., O.K.," said the stake artist. His eyes sought the farmer's. "What did I have to do with all this?"

"You'll have to answer that," said the farmer.

The transit-man threw the station wagon into reverse; spinning the wheels, he backed into position to head for the highway, and town.

"Get in," he said, "or stay here. We're leaving." He shifted into low; the stake artist had to make a small running jump onto the open tail gate as the station wagon pulled away. He settled himself on the floor, back-to-back against the rear seat where Andy and Jake were.

The stink of exhaust gas sucked in by the open tail gate assaulted the stake artist's nostrils as he watched the figure of the farmer, who had turned at last and started walking slowly back toward his house, become smaller and smaller and less and less distinct through the dust kicked up on the gravelled road leading to the highway.

Jake, who had not had time for the final expert twist which would flop the steel tape into a neat coil, reached down to finish his job. Andy, sitting beside him, turned around and punched the stake artist playfully on the shoulder.

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"There's one for your professors," he said. "You can tell 'em all about the time you took a shotgun loaded with buckshot away from a mad clodhopper." His tone was not entirely without malice.

"It was birdshot," said the stake artist, uncomfortably.

"Hell, no," said Andy. "Buckshot. No glory going after a gun loaded with birdshot."

"Aw, lay off," said Jake. "He done a good job on that damn hayseed." Jake chuckled, the first time anyone had laughed since the episode. "That farmer sure went down like a ton of brick when old Stakey, here, tackled him."

The station wagon stopped for the highway and then lurched roughly ahead onto the pavement. "Take it easy," said the engineer, though his color had largely returned; the shock of the minor wounds was wearing off. "Think the boys at the State Office will recommend me for a purple heart?"

Jake threw his head back and roared with laughter, glad of any chance to secure himself again in the engineer's good graces. "By God, that's all right," he said. "A purple heart." Even the transit-man smiled.

"Let's not forget Stakey, here," said Andy. "He ought to get something out of it." His voice was friendlier.

Caught up in the common bond which united the five of them, partners in adventure, the stake artist felt the tensions they had experienced during the incident of the grove draining away.

"I'll settle for a bronze star," he said. "You can stick it—."

"Careful, boy," interrupted the engineer. They all laughed again, Jake until the tears came.

"I was going to say, on my stake-sack," said the youth.

The smooth black ribbon of highway receded as the stake artist watched. There was a quartering wind now, and the smell of the exhaust was no longer apparent. The stake artist slowly relaxed; he began to see the argument, the shooting, the chopping of the tree, the farmer himself falling at last into proper focus. It would be a good story, back on the campus; he visualized the ring of faces around him in the fraternity house, laughing fit to kill, as he recounted what he had already decided to call *The Battle of the Grove, or Clodhopper's Retreat*.