

I STARTED THE JOB A FEW WEEKS AGO, but before we talk about that—

I have a short employment history. In so many words, I can't keep a job. I get fired, or laid off. I oversleep and show up late, or go to work drunk.

But I wanted to change. Driving to work, the first day, I had it all planned out.

This time I'll get it right. I won't screw up.

I wasn't going to fall asleep on the clock. This time I wouldn't call off unless I was really sick. This time, it would be good.

I was half right.

Even in the early morning the day had already started to fray around the edges. I woke up fifteen minutes late. I was surprised, because I was sure I was going to get canned, but when I showed up after 7:45, the bus was still there.

“Get in the god-damn van,” growled my supervisor.

We met at Job and Family services and the supervisor, Jim ‘Fudge’

Campbell, picked us up in a red van. The job was Field and Streams and it stemmed from a government grant to clean up Ohio's waterways and give some out-of-luck Ohioans a steady job.

In the van my adrenaline was pumping but I was happy.

I didn't get canned!

There was a bad flood that year. Someone said that was the reason we did what we did: *flood prevention*. We removed fallen trees from of the river, sawed them up, and threw the pieces up on the bank. After they hit the bank, it wasn't our problem anymore. The landowners could sell the wood or take it or leave it there. Maybe the logs would just sit there until gravity worked its magic and they rolled back into the river.

My co-workers were like me: down on their luck, looking for a job—any job—desperate. One of them stood out in particular. His name was Chester, but we called him Spain.

Everyone was polite to him. It came easily enough; he was an old man and he worked hard, but when he was gone, we talked. We laughed.

He was that guy.

He left the United States and moved to Spain fifteen years ago and, for lack of a better term, bummed around. He had a daughter that he never saw, an ex-wife he hated, a mother with whom he lived (in her basement), a dead father who used to race stock cars (named Chester Lester) plus three sisters he described as “despicable creatures.”

I’m not lying. Apparently this really happens.

“The biggest difference between Spain and the U.S.,” he said, “is that in Spain, if you don’t work—you don’t eat. Here, if I don’t work—I can still eat.”

Chester liked to share these little pearls of wisdom with us.

The reason we called him Spain wasn’t because he used to live there. Not really. Every other sentence that came out of his mouth would start or end with “in Spain.” At first it was almost charming. But he talked too much and most of the things he said

were ludicrous. It was mean to make fun of him, but he was asking for it.

The first day we actually worked, after all the paper work and educational videos, after the CPR training and the PPE tests, I was sitting in the bus, half-asleep, when I heard him say,

“Yeah, my mom just barges down-stairs, doesn’t knock or *anything*. I think that’s kind of rude. That’s sort of rude, aint it?”

Oh god, he lives in his mom’s basement?

I looked over to Joe.

Joe and I had grown up together and we got on fine since the minute we started work.

He was that guy.

I looked over and started laughing. Then Spain hit us with a bombshell.

“It doesn’t help that I’m a nudist,” he said. “Been a nudist for fourteen years now.”

“He was an old man and he worked hard, but when he was gone, we talked. We laughed. He was that guy.”



Joe and I tried to hold back the laughter but after a few terse seconds we wouldn't hold it back any longer. But it didn't seem to bother Chester. I found myself wondering if he was compulsive liar—saying anything just for the shock value of it—but then I looked over at him and I knew he was telling the truth.

Poor guy.

We arrived at the job site and our crew got out and started to unload the van. Chainsaws, come-alongs, rope, a wheelbarrow, a cooler full of ice and bottled water; *remember, stay hydrated: heat stroke*. We unloaded the shovels and rakes, the heavy copper-colored chains, and the pry bars.

The site we were working that day was back in the woods. Before, we drove the van pretty close to the job site, staying on the shoulder beside the cornfields and plowing through the weeds. Not today.

The walk from the van to the site was a quarter mile if not more. That doesn't sound like much, but when you're carrying a cooler that weighs sixty pounds if it weighs an ounce, or pushing a wheelbarrow up and down hills that reach angles of fifty

degrees, it might as well be five miles. It wasn't bad if you didn't have to push the wheelbarrow or carry the cooler, all the heavy equipment was in the wheelbarrow. If it wasn't your turn then you carried something light, a gas can or a jug of oil. Today it was my turn to carry the cooler.

I got to the site and I was dripping sweat and we hadn't started working yet. At that point I gave up on trying to be positive.

Some days are bad no matter what you do.

Fudge told us to form a human chain starting in the middle of the dam and ending on the bank. Joe was first in the chain, followed by me, then Spain, and after him another guy, Tyler.

Joe picked up the biggest pieces that he could without losing his balance and falling into the river. "As big as Fudge's arm," one supervisor said, but it was a joke. Fudge had huge arms—we couldn't pick those up.

Joe passed me the limbs, ash, pine, and oak, and I passed them to Chester who gave them to Tyler.

When Joe and I started working, we worked fast. What's the point in going slow? The day goes faster when you measure it in work done instead of minutes and hours. After a while, Chester and Tyler started to fall behind, so I stacked the logs in front of Spain. Joe wasn't going to wait for me so what was I supposed to do?

But Chester turned around and saw the logs stacked in front of him and he didn't like that.

"Don't put them down, he said. "I don't wanna have to pick them up again!"

It wasn't what he said that pissed me off. It was the way he said it. Like he was better. But he wasn't. He was everyone's joke.

"In communist Spain," I deadpanned, "car drives you."

So I stopped piling the logs in front of Chester. Instead, I started handing him twigs. Sure, he could tell me what to do, but I wasn't going to listen. Damned if I would cave to the narcissistic prick.

The third time I handed him a twig he snatched it out of my hand,

breaking it.

Screw that, I thought. It's on. The day moved slowly. For every log that we pulled out of the river we found another beneath it. The ones at the bottom were bigger and waterlogged and, of course, heavier.

I was sitting in the middle of the dam pulling up pieces as big as my forearm and throwing them on the bank. Another guy, Colin, was standing in the river beside me. He had a pry bar and was loosening the logs so we could loop a rope over them and drag them to the bank.

We'd loop em and then Fudge would yell "**one, two,**" and then we'd pull. **One, two and pull! One, two, pull!**

Colin got a small one loose and threw it into a place where the river had run around the dam, eroding the soil and creating an indentation in the bank. Spain was working beside us then. He got one loose and threw it on the bank.

"Hey, throw those over there in that hole," Colin said. "We're gonna fill it back up."

Spain gave him a strange look. Then

he got another one and threw it on the bank. Colin looked over at me.

“Seriously, we’re supposed to fill that up,” he said to Chester.

“I’m not filling it up.” Said Chester. “You fill it up.”

“Okay...I’m just doing what my boss told me to do. But screw that, right? Let’s just all do whatever we feel like.”

He looked over at me.

“Asshole...” He said under his breath.

“Yeah man,” I said. “Ole Spain over there, I was handing him logs—he couldn’t keep up... so I started stacking them in front of him. The smack bunny turns around and says ‘Don’t put them down! I don’t wanna have to pick them up again!’”

“I know,” said Colin. “I’m gonna end up punching that dude.”

“Dude,” I said. “Guess what he said earlier.”

“That he used to bang dudes in Spain?”

“Ha ha, no! I mean, he probably did, but that’s not what he said. On the way to work I heard him talking to Elmer.”

I did my best imitation of Chester’s voice, high pitched and fast paced.

“Yeah she just walks down there without knocking! I mean, that’s like my room.”

I went back to my own voice.

“I guess he lives in his mom’s basement, but that’s not even the best part. A few second’s later he says— And it don’t help that I’m a nudist. Yeah, I been a nudist for about fourteen years now.”

“Watch out Elmer.”

We both laughed at that. I thought I was gonna cry, laughing so hard. Then Joe walked over.

“What’s so funny?” he asked. “Spain over there telling jokes again?”

I told him about Spain’s nude experience with his mother, post-infancy.

“Aw dude, that’s priceless.” Joe said.

“Hey mom,” he said, impersonating Chester, “*Does it look better tucked in,*

or out?'

“Wait, shhh! Shhh! Listen.”

Chester was talking to Elmer again. “Yep. I don’t wear underwear anymore,” he said. “My momma found out and she said: your sisters wear underwear, your dad wears underwear... Well I’m not my dad and I don’t wear underwear!!!”

‘Hahahahahaha!’ We laughed even harder.

“Dude,” Joe nudged me, “I wonder how his mom found out he didn’t wear underwear.”

“They were probably getting ready to have sex and he just whipped it out of his zipper,” said Colin.

“Aw dude! That’s wrong.”

“Huh, the sad part is that it’s probably true,” I said.

“What a creep.”

“I know,” I said. “He’s been a real douche nugget today.”

I told Joe about the twigs and how Chester told Colin off. Then he nudged me again.

“Dude, I got an idea.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Let’s play a game: Closest To Spain,” he said. “Whoever can get closest to Chester, without hitting him, wins.”

“Joe, I think that’s the best idea you’ve had all week.”

So we started playing. By that time Spain was on the bank, cutting up logs with the chain saw; the perfect place to throw logs at him while being able to deny that it was intentional. I threw the first stick.

We started with small pieces, bigger than twigs, branches. Many fell a few feet away and a couple hit pretty close. Only inches away. Ten minutes later I threw one, a small one, but it bounced and hit him in the foot.

“I win!” I said.

Chester looked up and gave me a dirty look.

“Uh, oh! I think he’s catching on,” I said.

“Screw him! What’s he going to do?” said Colin. “Run away to Spain?”

“Ha ha! Good point,” I said.

“By the way,” said Joe, “you didn’t win.”

“What the hell do you mean I didn’t win?” I said, “Did you see that? I hit him!”

“*Exactly.*” said Joe. “The game is *Closest to Spain*, not *Brain Spain*. You hit him: you lose.”

“Aw, that’s quantum theory. When did you become a lawyer?” I said. “Screw it, I’m going to work for a little bit. I don’t want to get fired over his lemon face.”

“Dude, Larry doesn’t even care,” said Joe. “I told him about it and he just laughed.”

“What?” I said, “You didn’t say my name did you?”

Joe had no common sense. After all those classes we took on safety, safety, safety. No way Larry was going

to let us get away with throwing logs (some of them big enough to injure) at a co-worker. No way in hell. That was a safety hazard.

“Nah, man,” he said. “I just told him about the game.”

“You idiot!” I glared at him. “I can’t get freaking fired.”

“Whoa, simmer down there. It’s all good. I promise.”

“It better be *all good*,” I said. “ ‘Cause if I get fired because you told Larry, you’re going to be spending your next few checks on a hospital bill.”

“Ha ha, yeah right.”

“You just shut the hell up about it.”

“Dude,” he said. “I really don’t think he cares...” but I interrupted him.

“I don’t give a damn! Just put a lid on it.”

“Whatever,” he said.

“Yeah, whatever to you, Einstein.”

I was mad at him. There was no way we were going to get away with it. Christ, for all I knew that was as-

“I could feel the situation starting to spin out of control. Sure, it was Joe’s idea to play the game. But hadn’t I egged it on? Hadn’t I fed the flames when Colin got mad at Spain and hadn’t I thrown the first stick?”

sault and battery. Larry was going to laugh?

I stopped playing, but Joe didn’t. He started throwing bigger logs. Chester had really gone and screwed the dog. Not only was he everyone’s joke (because of the way he acted), now he had become Joe’s punching bag.

Joe was angry. I had called him out in front of everyone, but I didn’t catch any flak for it. Chester did.

I could feel the situation starting to spin out of control. Sure, it was Joe’s idea to play the game. But hadn’t I egged it on? Hadn’t I fed the flames when Colin got mad at Spain and hadn’t I thrown the first stick?

I was in the water when it happened and I heard it before I saw it. I lifted a log up out of the water to wrap a rope around it and I was thinking I would apologize to Joe and end this whole macabre thing.

And then everything went to hell.

Spain was standing on the bank sawing a log when Joe threw the last one. It floated up and over in a sickening curve and Joe’s aim must have been off or he just went crazy for a minute because when the log stopped climbing for altitude and started down, it was heading straight for Chester. It was a big log. It must have weighed thirty pounds.

Joe saw what was about to happen and he tried to take it back, but it was too late.

“Chester, look out!” he yelled. But Chester couldn’t hear him over the saw. Then the log hit him in the back and he fell on the chainsaw.

I said I heard it before I saw it, but it wasn’t the stomach-turning crunch of the log hitting Chester in the back that I heard, and it wasn’t the screech of the saw as it clove through his skin, flesh and bone, taking his arm off above the wrist. It wasn’t any of that because before all of that happened I heard a scream.

A high-pitched, deafening scream that clawed it's way out of the mouth of a girl on our crew. The girl's name was Amy, but it didn't matter. It didn't matter because when the blood starts flowing and the bones snap, when the lungs fail and the heart flutters, the only things that matter are to stop the bleeding and to breathe.

When I looked over, what I saw was Chester laying on top of the log, his chainsaw still running, his hand lying beside him, the stump of his arm shooting blood in dark red arcs. I saw everyone rush to help him, Larry reaching him first and hitting the kill switch on the chainsaw, screaming for the first aid kit and tearing his work shirt into a tourniquet. Amy calling 911. Joe's face: a mask of horror with a touch of revulsion, before he leaned over the dam and gave up his lunch to the river below.

Then after that, I saw the things that woke me up at night: Fudge picking up Chester's severed hand and putting it in the cooler full of ice, Larry pulling him back off the log and the way his arm flopped back when he did, the light blue tourniquet soak stained a dark purple, and Chester's eyes, angry and righteous like a medieval Jehovah.

The ambulance didn't arrive after too long, but the tourniquet worked and

Chester kept his life, and that was the end up the day. The rest of us went back to the office and filled out reports. I was sweating bullets while I wrote down the lies that I would stick to.

It's strange, because the thing that bothers me the most isn't how Chester lost his hand (although that's inextricably tied up in it), but how Joe never told anyone about the game. Sure, he would have been him snitching on himself, but I thought he would. To pass the blame on and say *it wasn't just me, it was all of us*. But he didn't.

Sometimes I wish he had and we all had come clean. Then I wouldn't have to deal with the guilt. I wouldn't feel sick every time I saw an amputee, and I wouldn't glance out my window at the warm sun and clear blue skies and think I was somehow cheating God and myself.

Eventually, by inept bureaucracy, and falsehoods on the part of Joe, Colin, and I, the state decided it was an accident.

But I still think about it, and late at night when my mind keeps turning, and I start to think in images and metaphors, I can't help but realize that I too lost something that day.