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Woodland, California

Chester Eberstark awoke in darkness as he had every morning for sixty-six years—except Sundays, when he stayed in bed until the sun came up. People asked him what accounted for the health that kept him on a tractor into his early nineties. They seemed to want him to say it was eating the organic product his family farmed on two-thirds of their nine thousand acres of rice, so he told them it was his Sundays. He didn't like leading questions. He laced up his boots in the dark, opened the bedroom door, and stomped down the hallway to the kitchen. He couldn't say even in the spryness of youth that he'd been light on his feet.

"Buzz," Margaret called from the pantry, "there's a clean mug in the dishwasher."

He found the mug, took the pot from the coffeemaker, and filled it, slopping coffee on the counter.

Margaret emerged from the pantry with a jar of apricot jam. "Good thing you didn't spill it on your hand," she said. "Coffee's hot."

"The way I like it," Buzz said, as she flipped the eggs bubbling in a pan and slid them onto a plate.

For as long as they'd been married Margaret had gotten up

early to make him two eggs over easy, bacon, and toast from her homemade pumpernickel bread. Since at ages ninety-one and eighty-five he and Margaret were still alive and running Eberstark Farm, Buzz didn't see any reason to switch to oatmeal—even after their daughter Alice started making vegetarian dishes from their own brown rice, gently chiding them about their diet. Alice was all right, though. She managed the farm full time now, a fact for which he was grateful, since her brother Henry hadn't taken to farming. Still, the environmental law Henry practiced in San Francisco kept him involved in the farm. Having seen the Dust Bowl that resulted from poor stewardship of the soil, Buzz had pledged to take good care of his land when he moved his young family to California.

Spreading marmalade on his toast, he eyed the blotter-sized calendar on the wall. There it was in bold red, in a month's time: June 12, "Storm the Meeting." Would Lawrence Scheffield ever be surprised when Buzz, Alice, and her lawyer-brother Henry descended on members of the Saltsink District's secret meeting with the Department of Water Resources, one to which the North Canal District had not been invited.

Not so long ago, Buzz had run for and won a seat on the North Canal Water District. For although Eberstark Farms was north of the delta, it took its water from the Sacramento before it flowed through the estuary. Certainly his engineering degree from Stanford had helped, as well as the fact that he had opinions when it came to water issues in the valley and wasn't shy about expressing them.

It had started with the dam that went in on the Feather River, then the aqueduct Pat Brown built to carry water to Southern California. Southern California paid the bill, but continued to get most of its supply from the Owens River in the eastern Sierra. In the west, water running uphill toward money was being pumped over the Tehachapi Range.

Later, when Jerry filled his father Pat's shoes as governor, he wanted to build a canal to divert more delta water to the aqueduct. When Jerry was elected to two more terms thirty years later, the canal morphed into a tunnel. Two tunnels in fact, behind which the Saltsink District and its business partners were the driving force.

Canal or tunnel, it would divert enough to shut down Delta farmers and kill an estuary that had already gone to shit. Literally. Just below the North Canal, the Uplands Sanitation District was flushing wastewater into the delta, and the Saltsink District was pumping it out.

"Did you say something?" Margaret asked.

Buzz stared at the calendar, and she followed his eyes. "Why do you let him get to you?" she said.

For Buzz, it came down to the fact that both cotton and rice farmers were compensated by the government and both were major consumers of water. Saltsink's water was subsidized, while

Eberstark's wasn't, but that was it in a nutshell. So to speak. "For Lawrence," he told his wife, "it's about draining us all dry."

Margaret shook her head, not because she disagreed but because she'd been listening to him rant about Lawrence Scheffield for years. The way Buzz saw it, a man was essentially competitive, and the difference between his practices and Scheffield's was bound to piss him off.

The back door opened and Alice entered, graying blond hair tucked under a Chico Wildcats ballcap. Alice was tall and blue-eyed like her dad, beautiful like her mother. The photo from his wedding day had long since been tucked away in a drawer, but Buzz knew it by heart. Margaret had looked like Barbara Stanwyck then, and still did.

On their first date in Red Cloud, he'd convinced Margaret to go with him to see her latest movie.

"What makes you think I look like Barbara Stanwyck?" she'd said, and to this day teased him about his pick-up line.

Alice's marriage had not fared as well as her parents', and both boys had chosen Chico because while it was away from home, it was close enough for them to keep an eye on their mother. Danny, the younger one, wanted to become a professional ballplayer, and Chris, about to graduate with a degree in agriculture, was coming back to help run the farm.

Alice's dog Stix, the terrier mix, slipped in under her feet, licked the toast crumbs off the floor, and lay down. Margaret was finishing the dishes, and Buzz could see their daughter wanted to take over. Up until a few years ago Margaret had done the housecleaning herself. Now she hired a woman to come in once a week but still made lunch and breakfast, shopped, and did the bookwork for the farm. Alice cooked dinner, but despite being two heads taller, she hadn't been able to wrestle the dishwashing away from her mother. She picked up a towel and dried the frying pan Margaret handed her.

"What's on for today?" Margaret asked.

"We're starting the weed crew on the water grass," Buzz said.

"Why don't you take west field 102," Alice said, "and I'll supervise 105."

Supervising wasn't the half of what Alice would do. She'd pull out the weed grass alongside the rest of them. Even before he got too old to weed, Buzz had always walked out from his truck and watched. His crew knew what they were doing, and it was a chance for him to converse with them.

After more and more of their crew came from Jalisco, Michoacán, or El Salvador, Buzz had started listening to cassette tapes in Spanish. "¿Donde está la pala?" he repeated back to the tape as he drove across the farm in his truck. When his hearing got worse, he turned up the volume. He didn't realize how loud it

was until he noticed his crew looking up and spotting the truck when he was still two fields away. That was embarrassing, but by then he could carry on a basic conversation, and he gave up the tapes. The only time he lost the thread was when talk with his foreman Diego veered away from farming practices. Then Diego would switch to English, and the two of them engaged in a tug-of-war between Spanish and English.

Buzz put his breakfast plate and cup in the dishwasher and walked down the hallway to the bathroom. He had to pee more often since he turned ninety. He'd bragged about how long he could hold his coffee all the way into his eighties. Not anymore. It took longer with stiff fingers to fasten his pants too, and by the time he'd washed his hands and returned to the kitchen, Alice and Stix were waiting in the truck.

Each field was a rectangular basin enclosed by a lip too narrow for driving, which was why Alice dropped Buzz at the edge of the field she'd assigned him. He walked with his chair out to where the crew was weeding. He might still be able to drive a tractor, but he couldn't stand for long periods anymore. Spring, when they flooded the fields for planting, was nearly gone. It was his favorite time of year, the little yellow planes buzzing the fields like bees, dropping in low to release their cache of rice seed. Soon after, bright green blades of grass started popping out of the water, and sheets of emerald gleamed to the horizon.

It had been two weeks since they'd drained the fields, and

Buzz's boots sank into the ground but came up dry. He unfolded his chair and placed it on the narrow levee of dirt nearest Angel and Jorge.

"Dime que tenemos." he said to Angel, tilting his hat to shade his face from the sun. Tell me what we've got.

"Water grass . . . red berry," said Angel.

The aquatic weeds would dry up when the field was drained for harvest. That, along with pulling the water grass, was the extent of weed control on most of the farm.

"¿Como está Yolanda?"

"Bien. Trabajando," he said, jerking his head toward Inland Fields where his wife was working.

Buzz watched a great blue heron stalking the edge of the next field, the S of its neck straightening toward something in the grass, probably a mouse. The herons hunted the flooded fields too, and fished in the ponds and rivers.

"La niña esta enferma." Angel's daughter was five. "Tiene un resfriado," he said, and shrugged. It was just a cold.

Buzz inhaled the tart smell of new rice and the slightly rancid smell of mud. For forty years, ever since Eberstark Farms had stopped burning the fields, he'd been able to breathe deeper.

Some of their methods for working the rice straw into the soil had been a disaster, but the new plows worked. They mixed the cover crop in with the straw. It was more expensive than burning, but it beat air pollution and fertilizers. The last third of Eberstark's fields were not pesticide-free, but they came close. Not like that bastard Scheffield, CEO of the 118,000-acre Sunrise Farms in the Saltsink District two hundred and thirty-six miles to the south. His biggest crops were cotton and almonds, but his real business was water. The previous year he had sold enough to fill 1,800 acres with a foot of water to his own business partner Patrick Smith for his housing project in the dry Tehachapi mountains. This was after complaining that allocations from the state had deprived Sunrise Farms of the supply it needed. But the selling price per acre-foot that year far exceeded its value for cotton and almonds, so he fallowed some fields, took the water the state had given him, and sold it. Patrick Smith passed the cost of the water on to consumers in the housing project. Scheffield also sold bottled water from halfway around the world, where he extracted more of it than any other company in the South Pacific.

With almonds, grapes, cotton, and tomatoes grown and distributed by the company, Sunrise's motto was "From Our Valley to Your Health," making it sound like a cozy little valley rather than a vast empire of acres. The health part of their motto was full of holes too.

Scheffield's presence was everywhere worldwide: in the almonds people ate by the handful, in their cereal or protein bars,

and in the cans of tomatoes they opened for spaghetti sauce, in the cotton T-shirts they wore, the grapefruits they sliced open on Christmas morning, and the plastic-bottled water they were gouged five bucks for in their hotel rooms.

Mad all over again, Buzz snapped his chair shut as Angel and Jorge moved away toward a fresh crop of weeds. He tromped back along the edge of the field to the road, where he unfolded the chair and sat waiting for Alice to appear in the truck.