

The First Two Pages: “Burn” by Michael Downing
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An essay by Michael Downing

When *Rock and a Hard Place Press* put out a submission call for stories about climate change, I jumped at the chance. *RHP* publishes stories that strip the world down to its human core, people struggling to make sense of what’s been broken or what’s gone wrong. For this anthology, they wanted stories about ordinary people living with the consequences of climate change.

I grew up on the Jersey Shore, so environmental issues have always been important to me. New Jersey gets mocked for the factories, smokestacks, natural gas refineries, and power stations up and down the Turnpike, the view most people see when they land at Newark Airport or watch the opening credits of *The Sopranos*. But that’s not the state I know. It’s called the Garden State for a reason. Beyond the industrial corridor are farmlands and rolling hills, the raw expanse of the Pine Barrens, over 1.1 million acres of protected wilderness, one of the last intact pine ecosystems on the East Coast. There’s also more than One Hundred Thirty miles of exceptional beaches I’d put up against any other coastline in the country.

I’ve spent years watching developers and corporations chip away at that landscape. I was part of a group that fought to stop developers from urbanizing the

Pine Barrens with another airport and more shopping centers. I'm an active member of The Surfrider Foundation, an organization that fights to protect our oceans, beaches, and rivers. I've seen the barrier islands overbuilt with mansions that were subsequently leveled when Hurricane Sandy roared through in 2012, even though barrier islands were never meant to support that level of construction. Then saw the Shore rebuilt with even bigger homes that pushed natural resources to the breaking point. Watched rivers poisoned by chemical companies and dunes flattened in the name of progress (which too often means more homes and overdevelopment). I've also surfed those same beaches, coming out of the water with raw sewage clinging to my wetsuit.

So yeah, when I saw that submission call, I didn't hesitate.

Damn right, I wanted to write a story.

I could've gone in a few directions with the story, but I kept coming back to a farmer, a man whose life was tied to the land the way mine once was tied to the Jersey Shore. Someone whose world was turned upside down by the same corporate mindset and urbanization model that's been chewing up coastlines for decades. That became "Burn."

The story is set in Georgia, where I live now. Different state, same battle lines. In "Burn," Matty Crowe, the main character, is a fourth-generation farmer. His family has worked the same soil for almost a century, and that land defines

him. But after an oil company cut a pipeline through his property, then years later decides to build a transfer station, everything unravels. The encroachment on his land is more than just a personal violation; it's the same thing that's happening everywhere; a slow, relentless erasure of the natural world for profit. I wanted to write a story that showed how climate change doesn't arrive in storms and fires alone. Sometimes it comes in contracts and machinery, in the quiet destruction of the places people depend on to live.

Matty is a good man with a moral code that's been handed down from generation to generation, just like the farm. But there comes a point when doing the right thing no longer works. "Burn" is about what happens when that man, the one who's always played by the rules, finally decides to push back.

That's the opening to the story and sets the tone for everything that follows.

Matty Crowe always played by the rules, even when it was a hard choice. Never took risks when he didn't need to. Didn't cheat. Knew the difference between right and wrong. Most times, that worked out okay.

This wasn't one of those times.

Tall, broad shoulders, hair cut short, skin tanned from years working in the sun, Matty stood still, his hands steady, eyes locked on six hulking yellow Caterpillar bulldozers. The bulldozers were parked at the Southeastern U.S. Oil Company's construction site, along with a massive front-end loader that was angled diagonally nearby. Grey silhouettes against a slowly darkening sky. The engines still had that sharp smell of oil, dust, and diesel, the heavy odor of raw, rich dirt clinging to the rollers and track train rails. It was quiet now. During the day, the site hummed with the sound of metal grinding against rock, the noise low, staccato vibrations shaking the ground. Matty had spent the last two weeks watching workers tear up the land—his

land—digging trenches for the oil company’s new compressor station. He didn’t sell the land, it had been part of his family’s livelihood for generations, but when the county played the eminent domain card, taking twenty-five acres they needed, he was out of options.

At least legally.

It was barely eight, still light, but late enough that none of the work crew were on-site. The world around Matty felt still, tense, with the kind of silence that would snap back when something broke. Matty could feel the anger in his gut, a simmering rage that had been building for days, weeks, maybe months now. Probably longer.

He lit the tail end of the rag stuffed in the closest bulldozer’s gas tank. He didn’t flinch, didn’t hesitate. Felt the weight of his breath, a slow inhale that didn’t settle the tension inside as the cloth caught. The flames spread quickly, faster than he thought they would, licking the metal, burning into the tank while simultaneously following the gasoline trail Matty had laid out between the machines. He backed up a step, then a few more before turning and running to his pick-up, watching over a shoulder as the flames engulfed the bulldozers. For a moment, everything stopped, then the sound of the world came rushing back, louder, sharper, clearer. The noise was a crack in the night, an explosion that twisted metal and steel, shredded rubber, decimated the machines, and swallowed the work site as dust rose from the dirt.

The roar of the blast sent shockwaves rippling through the air, triggering a memory from Fallujah: Matty’s Hummer rocked by an IED planted in the desert dirt, flipping end over end like a toy, in slow motion. The noise reverberated, just like it did then. Smoke curled up in the air, thick and black, visible in the sky. Matty felt the weight of the fire as he raced away, glancing in the rearview mirror at the flames consuming the construction site.

He didn’t slow down. Kept his eyes straight ahead with his hands fixed firmly on the wheel, his heart pounding in his chest.

He smiled. Felt whatever had been gnawing at him release. Not completely, but enough to make him feel better, at least for a little while.

There was no turning back now.

There were two key elements I wanted to establish in the first two pages:

Matty’s moral code, and the pacing of the story. From the first paragraph, I needed

readers to understand exactly what kind of man he is. Matty isn't a criminal. He's a good man committing a criminal act—a man who's lived his whole life by a clear sense of right and wrong, until that belief system no longer protects him. His actions are guided by conviction, not chaos.

When he sets fire to the bulldozers and destroys the worksite, it's not a rash decision. It's something that's been building for a long time, a slow burn of anger and betrayal. He's turned the choice over in his mind for months, weighing it against the very code he's lived by. Matty's the kind of man who's always tried to do the right thing, serving his country in Fallujah, sacrificing for others, and I wanted that sense of duty to complicate everything he does. The flashback to his time in the war isn't just backstory; it reveals both his moral compass and the skill set that makes his final decision possible.

Matty's character *is* the story.

That's the most important part of the first two pages of "Burn."

The explosion is meant to feel clean and irrevocable, like a moment that shatters the quiet and pushes the narrative past the point of return. I wanted the pacing to echo that transformation: the calm, deliberate buildup giving way to sudden violence. When I wrote the scene, I saw it unfold like a film, with wide shots of the silent worksite, the metallic stillness of the machines, and then the blinding flash that changes everything. I tend to write visually, and my characters

don't spend much time lost in thought. They act—sometimes recklessly, often imperfectly, most times without a clue about the consequences, but always with intent. That momentum, that refusal to stand still, drives the story forward.

I struggled with that, at least initially because I didn't want "Burn" to turn into some kind of revenge fantasy. Didn't want Matty to become some kind of caricature from the Marvel/DC-verse of superheroes. I wanted him to be an "everyman" who is forced to be someone he doesn't want to be.

There's also deliberate ambiguity in Matty's actions. The same government that probably labeled him a hero for what he did in Fallujah would call him a terrorist for what he does on his own land. That tension is the heart of "Burn." I wanted readers to sit with that contradiction, to feel sympathy for a man who's forced to question what *right* even means when the system that trained him to fight abroad leaves him no choice but to fight at home. For someone like Matty, survival has always been a matter of instinct. Coming home didn't end the war; it just gave it a new battleground.

The closing paragraphs on the second page offer the release he's been chasing: "He smiled. Felt whatever had been gnawing at him release. Not completely, but enough..." That understated "not completely" keeps the story from slipping into revenge fantasy. Matty's satisfaction is fleeting, partial, because the moral damage remains. The final line—"There was no turning back now"—

works on multiple levels: plot, psychology, and morality. The choice is irreversible not just because the law will hunt him down, but because he's crossed the threshold that defined his identity. The man who "always played by the rules" has just rewritten them.

It's the launching pad for the rest of the story.

For me, "Burn" isn't just a story about vengeance or justice, it's about dislocation. About what happens when people who've done everything right suddenly realize the rules no longer apply, that the world they trusted to be fair has quietly tilted beneath them. I wanted readers to feel that shift in the first two pages, the unease of watching a man cross a line not out of hatred, but out of love for something he refuses to lose. Matty's not trying to save the planet; he's trying to save *his piece* of it, the part that gives his life meaning. When you strip away everything else, that's at the core of the first two pages. Matty's fighting climate change on his own turf, by his own rules, on his own.

Those first two pages are the heartbeat of "Burn." They're where readers meet Matty at the crossroads between belief and desperation, a man standing on the edge of what he's always known to be right. I wanted that opening to feel like a spark in dry grass, small at first, then unstoppable. Because at its core, this story isn't just about one man setting fire to a worksite; it's about what happens when ordinary people are pushed past their limits, when loyalty and justice no longer

align. It's also about the quiet ways climate change erodes more than the land and how it corrodes the bonds between people, communities, and the places they love. Matty's actions are both an act of rage and a kind of mourning. And like the beginning of every story and every novel, if the first two pages get readers to sympathize with Matty and keep reading, those two first pages have done what they're supposed to do.

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Michael Downing is a writer originally from New Jersey, now living in Georgia. He was the Founder/Creative Director for StoryTellers, a community-based non-profit in Asbury Park, NJ and Georgia that developed and promoted literacy through writing for under-served teenagers and young adults. His latest book, *Saints of the Asphalt*, is available online and at select bookstores. Along with his story in *On Fire and Under Water*, his story "By The Numbers" was included in the *Under The Thumb* anthology published by Rock and A Hard Place Press and guest-edited by S.A. Cosby. Over the past twenty years, his short stories have been featured in a range of literary magazines and anthologies—some of which have been nominated for Pushcart Prizes. He remains unmistakably Jersey: full of attitude, edginess, and Springsteen songs (but absolutely none from Bon Jovi). He can be found at: www.downingfiction.com