

Seventy years ago

The sound of creaking floorboards from the hall woke John Bosman. He opened his eyes. Through the window, he saw a fire in the distance. Curious, John got out of bed and went downstairs. Wearing only boxer shorts, he walked through the kitchen into the mudroom. He worked his feet into his boots but didn't tie them. John noticed Harold's boots were missing.

John pulled the hook out of the eye and opened the screen door. The wood door remained open because it was a muggy summer night. When he stepped off the back porch, the fire on the horizon, to the west, immediately caught his eye.

The blaze was at Martin Mueller's place a quarter-mile down the road. John gathered in the scene. Thankfully, the house was not on fire; he could see the lights in the windows. It looked to be one of the outbuildings, probably the chicken coop.

Silhouettes of people milled around. They've given up the fight. Their only job now is to make sure it doesn't spread. Lucky for them, the calm wind let the flames and glowing ashes drift straight up and die in the heavy, humid air.

John considered getting in his old pickup truck and driving there, but it looked like things were under control. Besides, he didn't know how his offer to help would be received. If the house or barn had been on fire, he would have gone to help no matter how divided they were.

John Bosman and Martin Mueller used to be good friends. Good neighbors. Ten years ago, they helped each other build their barns. They helped each other fix their farm implements.

At harvest time, they would work together. Not now. Now they were separated by bloodlines.

Mesmerized, John watched the conflagration until the spirit of the fire began to dissipate. He returned to the house, kicked his boots off in the mudroom, went upstairs, and opened the door to Harold's room. John was greeted with a faint smell of kerosene. Harold, in bed—his back to the door and covered up—appeared to be sleeping. He noticed his son's clothes piled on the floor with his muddy boots. John returned to bed, but his worried mind prevented him from falling asleep.

Just before eight in the morning, Martin Mueller pounded on the Bosman's front door with the heel of his hand. John opened the door and went out on the front porch rather than invite Martin into the house. Martin backed up, so a handshake was out of reach. He reeked of smoke. Soot and sweat smeared on his face.

Martin got right to the point. "John, your boy lit fire to our chicken coop last night. It burnt down, and we lost all our hens. Times are tough, and we count on the birds for food. Now I've asked you to keep that boy of yours off our property."

John raised his hands. "Now wait, Martin—"

"No! I'm not going to let you talk this down. This all started when he beat up my boy Karl. He still can't hear out of his left ear. Heck, he's two years younger than Harold and fifteen pounds lighter. I should have called the Sheriff, but I came here and tried to settle this like a good neighbor. You promised you would take care of it.

Then, my wife saw him killing one of our barn cats with a fencing hatchet. Again, I came down. And again, you said you're gonna' take care of that boy of—."

"Martin, did ya' see Harold set fire to your coop?"

"Well. . . no, but we know it was set afire because we could smell the kerosene. And I saw a shadow standing in the field watching. I went toward him, but he took off running toward your place. I recognized his gait. Now, let's get that boy out here. I wanna' ask him some questions."

John held up his hands. "Martin, I'm afraid you ain't gonna' do any askin.' That's my job."

"Well then, the only way to make things right is to pay me \$500.00 for the damages. That has to happen by tomorrow, or I'm callin' the Sherriff."

Martin started to walk away, then turned. "Ya' know, John, something's wrong with that boy. He needs to be put away. You can't seem to get him under your thumb. You need to know this: if I see that kid on my property again, I'll capture him at gunpoint and tie him to a tree until the Sherriff comes. You best bring that \$500 to me." Karl stomped away, but the smell of smoke and a cloud of anger lingered in the air.

Harold has not confined his evil deeds and mischief to the Muellers. He took his dad's two beagles out hunting and returned with one. He said it ran off. His father found it in the woods with its head caved in. When asked, Harold lied.

In the wee hours, Harold took the truck. He drove into a deep ditch. When asked, he made up a story about seeing a hobo jump-start the truck and steal it.

After Martin stormed away, John stood outside for the longest time, thinking. Wishing. Wishing he would not have to

ask Harold about last night. John knows Harold will deny and lie. He finally went into the house and called Harold to the kitchen table.

"Sit down, Harold, and listen."

Harold slumped into a chair.

"We have tried our best to raise you the right way. Nothing seems to work. You are a liar, and you are mean-spirited. You come upon being this way on your own. Maybe it is in your nature—a bad seed." John nudged his son's shoulder with his hand. "Why can't you look me in the eye?"

Harold glanced at his dad, then looked away.

"We always protected you all the while knowin' about the evil you have done. We always thought families should handle their problems, but I can't control you, and we've given you too much rope. I'll tell you this. Your Ma and I must go to the bank and get some money to pay for your mischief. We are also going to get some advice about what to do with you. There will be consequences for your actions. Maybe they'll have to take you away."

Harold stood up, clenched his fists, and defiantly yelled. "Maybe it would be best if I just went gone. Then I won't be a worry to you. You probably wouldn't care anyhow. I'm sorry I can't be like your favorite . . . Margaret."

John lifted his hands in frustration and then dropped them on the table, giving up. "You make it hard to love you when you bring so much pain to the family."

"You'll be sorry." Harold stomped out of the kitchen, ran up the stairs, and slammed the door to his bedroom.

John's wife, Ruth, and daughter, Margaret, who listened to the argument from the living room, entered the kitchen.

"What are we going to do, John? He's got my stomach in knots" Ruth rubbed her hands.

"Well, we'll visit Pastor Ralph and tell him we want to see him this morning. While in Medina, we'll go to the bank and see if we can get a loan to pay Martin. We're already deep in debt until harvest."

John massaged his forehead. "Margaret, I can't get the tractor started. Harold is good at fixing things if he puts his mind to it. If you can get him to look at it, it's in the barn."

Late that afternoon, John and Ruth parked the pickup behind the house. Margaret sat on the back steps waiting for them. She got up, slowly walked to them as they left the truck, and looked at her father. "Harold's gone."

"What do you mean he's gone?"

"Well. . . I asked him to fix the tractor. I saw him go into the barn. I got busy doing the wash and cleaning the house. After a few hours, I checked on him, but he wasn't in the barn. He did fix the tractor, though."

"Where did he go?" asked John.

Margaret pointed toward the barn. "Last I saw him, he was by the barn and had a sack with him. I called to him, but he ran toward the main highway through the field. I couldn't catch him."

"Damn!" John nodded his head down like a chicken.

Ruth looked toward the road. "He'll come back. Won't he, John?"

John shrugged. "Don't know. If he doesn't return by tomorrow, we should tell the Sherriff. He's only fifteen."

John and Ruth entered the house and went upstairs into Harold's room. Besides what Harold was wearing, the only clothes

missing were a change of underwear, his Sunday suit, and his good shoes. Harold took his King Edward cigar box full of his personal items, jack knives, whatever money he stole from his mom, an heirloom pocket watch from his grandfather, cigarettes, and matches.

After thoroughly searching his room, Ruth noted: "I'm glad he took his Bible, maybe he'll find the Lord in his travels, and only the Lord knows why he took his suit."

Money in one hand, John knocked on Martin's door with the other. Before Martin finished opening the door, John offered a handful of cash to him. "Here's your money. I'm sorry for what my son did. I don't think you'll have to worry about him anymore." John turned and walked away.

"Come back here. We need to discuss this some more."

John kept walking and didn't turn around. "We're square, Martin. There's nothing more to discuss. Besides, the boy ran away, and I'm off to the Sheriff to report him missing."

The Bosmans sat around the kitchen table two days later, finishing a quiet dinner. Ruth set a plate for Harold in case he showed up. John looked at Harold's chair. "Maybe I'll be getting a call from the Sherriff saying Harold's in jail somewhere for breaking the law. That boy can't stay out of trouble."

"Don't say that, John. Maybe he found himself and got a job as a farmhand with another family," Ruth responded optimistically.

Margaret offered maybes. "Maybe he hopped a train, going west to work on a ranch roping calves. Maybe he went to Hollywood. He said he wanted to be a stuntman."

John and Ruth found some comfort in Margaret's maybes and laughed for the first time in days. They could picture him riding a horse, lassoing calves, or falling off a horse for a movie star.

Present Day

Margaret takes a sip of tea. "Barb, it's past the time we had this conversation. I'm eighty-seven years old, and mother earth is calling me."

"Mom," Barb reaches across the table and holds her left hand. "I'm sure you'll be going to heaven."

"I can't say how the Lord will judge me." Margaret looks out the kitchen window at the decrepit barn.

They both share a secret.

The secret has kept Margaret in the same house most of her life. She was born in the kitchen. When she turned nineteen, she married her neighbor, Karl Mueller. Soon after her father, John, decided to give up farming and got a job as a welder. Margaret's parents sold the farm to her and Karl well below market on the condition that they stay in the house. They still held out hope Harold would return someday.

"Barb, you're the executor of my will, and I know you'll divide things evenly among your two sisters. You also have my blessings to sell the four-hundred acres. I gave you the name of a developer hounding me to buy the property. The house is old, and the barn is sagging. He'll tear them down and build houses on the land

"What if Uncle Harold is still alive? He is younger than you. Should I search for him? He is the rightful heir to the property."

Margaret turns her head and looks down. "You only know part of the story."

"Mom, how come you never tried to find Uncle Harold? Grandma and Grandpa said he might be out West."

"I need to unburden my soul and tell you what happened to Harold." Margaret's eyes well up. "I can't hold the dam any longer. Let's go outside and take a walk."

While they stroll, arm in arm, toward the run-down, weathered barn, Margaret releases the story.

"After Mom and Dad left to see Pastor Ralph and go to the bank, I went about doing kitchen chores. I sensed Harold was standing behind me while I wiped the grease from the frying pan and anticipated he would poke me in the ribs and scare me. He didn't this time, so I turned and saw him staring out the window."

"Harold asked. 'Where did they go, Mar-grrrrr-rat?' Harold's term of endearment for me."

"I never minded him teasing me. I thought that's what little brothers did to get attention.

"They went to see Pastor Ralph and then get money to pay Martin Mueller, I told him as I placed the frying pan on the stove."

"Then Harold shouted. 'They're gonna' send me away to some prison for kids, aren't they? Well, I'm not going.'"

"Why don't you apologize? Why don't you fix the tractor for Dad? He would appreciate that."

"Harold smirked 'Yeah, I'll fix it. Fit it for good. When Dad comes home, tell him I'll be hanging around in the barn if he wants to see me.' He went out the screen door and let the spring slam it shut."

"Ten minutes later, while mopping the kitchen floor, I heard the tractor start up. I watched Harold back the tractor out of the barn, then return and close the doors.

"When I finished mopping, I carried the bucket away from the back of the house and threw the dirty water into the yard. Something drew me to the barn, maybe how quiet everything seemed. I walked back to the barn and opened the doors.

"Harold hung from a noose around his neck. He had a purple face and bulging eyes—a tipped-over feed bucket alongside his feet. I ran to him and grabbed him around the waist.

"Harold!" I yelled. "I tried to lift him and take the weight off the rope, but my senses told me he was gone. I released him and watched him slowly swing back and forth, looking for equilibrium.

"I got a ladder and leaned it against the beam. I found a hatchet, climbed the ladder, and gave the rope a couple of whacks. Harold folded up as he fell to the ground. I climbed down the ladder, knelt beside him, loosened the noose, and checked for a pulse. In my heart, I hoped to find one, but there was nothing.

"What should I have done? Cover him up until Mom and Dad got home? I thought about how bad they would feel about Harold killing himself. The Bible says that's wrong. If you kill another person, you can ask and then might receive forgiveness. Taking your own life? You can't ask for forgiveness; most folks

don't forgive that act. Then there is the guilt that Mom and Dad would carry throughout their lives."

Margaret pauses to wipe a tear from her cheek.

Barb grabs her mother's hand and pats it. "What did you do then?"

"Most folks think suicide is a shameful, cowardly act. I didn't want Mom and Dad to remember him that way. I didn't want Mom and Dad to see his bulging eyes and purple face. I made a choice. Some choices aren't right or wrong—they just put the future on a different path. One course might have less pain for Mom and Dad than the other.

"I went to the house and gathered up his suit, his good shoes he wore to church, and all the things he would take with him if he were to leave. . .run away. I put it all in a pillowcase. I considered taking his pillow for his head, but it might not have made sense.

"On my way out of the house, I got a cloth and a bucket of water. When I returned to the barn, I thought maybe all that happened wasn't real, but he lay there on the barn floor. So still. I removed his clothes because he messed himself up. I took the cloth and washed him down. I admired how muscular he was at such a young age. I dressed him. I wetted his hair and combed it, trying to get the cowlick down.

"I grabbed a shovel, hooked the trailer to the tractor, laid Harold and his belongings aboard, and covered him with a tarp. I took him behind the barn close to the tree line at the back of the property to a low spot where the ground was soft. I cut the sod nice and neat, dug the hole deep, and threw the dirt on the tarp.

"I laid him down with his belongings, folded his arms with his bible under his hands, and said a prayer. I covered him up and packed the dirt tight. Put the sod back in place. I lined up the spot with the edge of the barn, then walked off the distance to the tree line—five paces. I took the extra dirt and scattered it in the tilled field. I was so hurried that I didn't have time to cry.

"I returned a couple of days later and pounded a piece of copper pipe over the spot where I buried him."

Margaret leads Barb past the barn on a slightly worn path to the back of the property. She stops about five paces from the tree line, then sidesteps to align herself with the edge of the barn. She kneels and moves the weeds around until the end of the pipe is exposed. Seventy-year-old tears pour out of Margaret's eyes and fall onto her brother's grave.

After a couple of minutes, Margaret stands and grab Barb's hands. "After I'm gone, contact whomever you think you should and have Harold's remains dug up and buried next to Mom and Dad. I bought a site next to them for Harold."