

Bavarian Cream Pie

by H. W. Moss

October, 1958. Everyone goes through life. No one has an option.

The train ride from Southern California took three days. Although airplanes made the trip cross country in a matter of hours, there were four passengers, which included the babysitter, and this on top of massive medical expenses made air travel impossible to afford.

Fifteen hours into day one, Las Vegas slipped by in the early morning hours before sunrise, an island of bright lights in an otherwise empty desert. Misses Swift made sure the sleepy eyes in her care saw it recede into their past.

There was an hour layover in Chicago on day two where Misses Swift made use of the delay to call the father back home. She returned as the train threw off a whistle indicating it was about to depart. She said, "Boys, I'm sorry to be the one to have to tell you this, but your mother passed yesterday morning."

Steve said, "What does that mean, 'passed'?"

This question made the woman uneasy. She was tiny, not much taller than the eldest child. She pursed her lips, removed her wire rim glasses and polished them, placed them back on the bridge of her nose and appeared ready to say something to clarify the subject, but instead said nothing.

The youngest asked, "Is Mom in heaven?"

"Yes, your mother is in heaven."

The two youngest boys began to weep. The oldest was unable to react. There was a disconnect between what he was told and where he was standing such that he saw nothing, heard nothing, yet his senses were aware of all that transpired in the cavernous hall of Union Station: the smell of electricity and diesel, the sounds people made walking or running to catch a train, the woman who stopped and inquired of Misses Swift.

“What’s wrong? Why are those boys crying?”

“They just learned their mother died.”

They left Chicago, ironically the city of their mother’s birth, as the journey continued another day and night into Pennsylvania. Gradually, the information sank in that the wondrously beautiful, creative and intelligent if frail and for the last year bedridden parent, was no more.

They were eleven, ten and seven years old. It is uncertain any of them understood how their lives would be impacted; they certainly did not fully comprehend the meaning of the information they had received.

Dead. Their mother was dead. Ok. But she’s back home in the county hospital in Riverside.

Absorbing this loss would be slow and, even after a lifetime, may never have diminished. All they really knew was their father sent them chaperoned by the old woman to live with his brother on a farm 3,000 miles from where they were born.

When it was clear Elizabeth was probably not going to last another week, the father inquired of his married siblings whether or not they could take the boys. Then he offered his sons an opportunity to stay together and live in Pennsylvania, or two of them could go

live in Florida while the other brother would be shipped to Pennsylvania. They chose to stay together.

The destination train station was a single story structure surrounding a large open space filled with wood benches. The four waited in a group until a middle aged man and woman approached. The woman asked if this would be Miss Swift.

“Misses Swift, yes.”

Idell was short and plump, but a head taller than Misses Swift who looked shrunken beside her. The man, however, towered over them all. He was skinny and his face was gaunt, the skin close to the bone and, as he approached, Steve nudged the youngest of the three boys to make sure he shared in the observation: the man walked with a loping gait like a ship tacking into the wind.

“Well, this here’s your Uncle Carl and I’m your Aunt Idell. We’ve come to take you out to the farm,” the plump woman said.

The couple held lighted cigarettes which they puffed frequently and from which they tapped ashes onto the station floor. Before Carl spoke, he cleared his nasal passages with a loud inhale that sounded as if he were scraping paint off a wall, then spit into a handkerchief he produced from one of his pant pockets. “Station wagon’s over there,” he said as he motioned with his cigarette toward the parking lot behind the building.

He did not offer to shake hands for which the boys were grateful. His right hand was missing two and a half fingers.

Within minutes they were driving through countryside which was fields and barns and hay stacks and older homes built far from one another, an isolation unknown in the boys’ home town with its population of 19,542 and an urban environment of sidewalks

and houses, many of which were built within the last ten years, bunched up next to one other with green lawns in front and separated by hedges with topiary bushes and shrubs.

Idell leaned over the front seat to peer at everyone in back. She blew smoke and said this was dairy land and farm land and there were caves and lakes that froze over in winter.

Carl drove without speaking, but every few minutes he loudly cleared his sinuses and spat into a sheet of white tissue which he plucked from a box on the dashboard. He pressed each fouled Kleenex into a ball he deposited in a small paper bag with a hole punched through the top side allowing it to hang from the handle of the open ashtray.

Both he and Idell smoked constantly.

“This is Pennsylvania Dutch country,” Idell continued which prompted Carl’s one and only statement during the entire ride.

“Throw Mama from the train,” he said and began a loud, hard laugh which caused him to lurch into an uncontrolled cough as smoke from his last inhale blew around the interior of the vehicle.

Misses Swift rolled her window down and indicated to the older boy, who sat on the other side of the bench back seat, he should do the same with his window.

When the coughing fit at last subsided, Idell said quite inexplicably to the passengers in back, “A kiss. A kiss.”

This so amused Carl he burst out laughing again, but without the follow up convulsion. He merely cleared his nose and throat and spat into another tissue.

The four lane highway became a two lane road with a middle third for passing, whittled itself down to little more than one lane in each direction sparsely dotted with

ramshackle buildings all old. Occasionally they passed through small towns separated from one another by barren fields, their harvest in bales waiting to be stored in round barns or open sided sheds.

The station wagon with its six passengers pulled into a dirt driveway that ran parallel to a two story wood frame structure. They came to rest just past the front porch.

“Everybody pile out,” Carl shouted. He gagged another mound of phlegm into a tissue and balled it into the bag before exiting.

Five young people, four girls and a boy, stood on the porch in single file facing the car. The boy was in front and beside him the girls in descending size, from tallest to the smallest.

“This here’s Mike,” Carl stated and lifted an arm to point him out. “These are yer cousins, Mike. This here’s Harold, and Stephen and Shaw-Wen.”

“Shawen!” the seven-year-old piped up. He was indignant. “It’s Shawn, not Shaw When.”

Carl glared at the boy without speaking. He seemed to be taking great pains to control his temper as he turned again toward the lined up siblings.

He said, “Next to Mike, that’s Mary the oldest, then Patty, Peggy and Katy. Mike, you show them upstairs to their rooms. Girls, take their luggage up.”

Certain his commands would be carried out precisely without further instruction, Carl galumphed past and through the porch screen door which slammed loudly behind him.

The house had five upstairs bedrooms and a bathroom accessible only to the master bedroom where Carl and Idell slept. Everyone else had to troop downstairs to use the very public second toilet off the kitchen.

Mike informed Harold they would share Mike's bedroom; Steve and Shawen would share a room of their own. Three of the girls slept in one bedroom, but Mary had her own room. Misses Swift was assigned to sleep in Mary's room temporarily. Turns out Patty had given up her room for the two boys, moved in with Peggy and Katy and resented this displacement.

Mike was not easy to calculate and Harold was uncertain if he sensed rancor over having lost his own solitude. Mike did show an interest in the circumstances that brought the boys into his house.

"Your mom died, hunh?"

"Yah, I guess so. She was sick." Harold was unsure how he felt about this since the entire concept was abstract and a country crossing away from the reality of it.

"Well, I'm sorry I guess. But you can't touch anything in this room because it's my stuff. Okay?"

Harold mumbled assent.

"That's where you sleep." Mike took Harold's suitcase and tossed it onto a trundle bed with a single mattress that was set up under the room's one double hung, single pane window. Bedclothes lay in a pile upon it.

"Sheets, pillow case, blanket," Mike said. "I had to give you a drawer so the bottom one," he pointed at a six level dresser, "is yours. You can put your clothes in it, but don't mess with my drawers, okay? Cuz that's my stuff."

Whether the attitude was due to his forced sharing or a native dislike of strangers, Harold could not tell. Harold kept his mouth closed and snapped open the two clasps on his suitcase. The first thing he retrieved was his silver cap pistol and holster. He began buckling it on in a sort of automated daze. There was just too much to take in and he preferred the sublime imaginative mental state the toy gun gave him.

Mike sneered. "What in hell is that!" His scorn was obvious. "You have a cap gun?"

"Yah, sure. Don't you?"

Mike looked at Harold as if he smelled bad. He reached behind the open closet door and picked up a rifle.

"I got a real gun. Not some baby toy. It's a single shot .22 and I am not going to tell you where the shells are. Here." The weapon was modeled on a Winchester lever action, but smaller than the real thing. Mike opened the breach, made sure it was empty, closed it and handed the gun to Harold. "Take it by the stock, hold it like this. Don't touch the bluing on the barrel or your fingerprints will leave oil and water that can rust it."

Harold stood in absolute fascination. He was holding a real rifle that shot real bullets.

Idell's voice came into the room. She shouted from the base of the stairs: "C'mon down. Dinner. Everyone."

Mike took the rifle out of Harold's hands and replaced it behind the closet door. Then he led the way to the bottom of the stairs where the four boys arrived outside the kitchen in a cluster, randomly. The four girls were already there waiting, and began to file in one by one.

Carl was positioned at the head of the table and watched as the young people entered. It was clear they performed for him: his demand they arrive in order of age with Katy trailing.

There was no speaking as all eight children found high back chairs, four on each side of the table with the two adults at either end. Idell directed Harold to the end next to Carl opposite Mike. Harold pulled his chair away and began to descend to the seat when he caught Mike's eye across from him.

“We wait for permission.”

Within arm's length of where Carl sat, a four foot long leather strap with a metal handle was draped over the knob of the door that hid an ironing board inside the wall, a feature of the 1920's style kitchen.

Harold's chair seat went back under the table. Idell looked around proudly as Carl began scooping mashed potatoes onto his plate. He paused to gag and spat into a tissue which, this time, he wadded up and placed in a bowl in front of him that Idell put there expressly for this purpose.

Idell made a motion with both hands that meant be seated. Chairs scraped, everyone sat.

Once Carl stopped serving himself, the bowls of food began circulating. Harold was sent the mashed potatoes to take some and pass on, and Mike the fried chicken. There was a lettuce, cucumber and tomato salad and brown gravy in a gravy boat and thick pieces of bread cut from fresh baked loaves.

Butter in a round as big as the saucer it sat on followed close behind the bread.

Mary circled the table and poured big glasses of fresh milk from a pitcher.

“Mike’s gonna have to pick up two gallons a day now,” Idell said to break the silence. “Maybe you can go with him, Harold, and help carry the extra gallon.”

“What do you mean?”

“Fetteroff’s dairy is about a mile down the road. We get our milk from there and pasteurize it in that machine.” Idell pointed at a round silver device big enough to hold a gallon that rested on a separate table in the corner. “Fresh milk has to be pasteurized. And the cream comes to the top. The cream is your Uncle Carl’s, not for you boys.”

Carl hawked another ball of spit before he held a crispy fried drumstick to his lips and took a bite. Between chews he returned to the subject he had so pointedly refrained from addressing upon arrival. He looked down at the far end of the table and said, “If it’s Shawn, why in hell didn’t your mother spell it that way? Shawen? I mean, what’s that? Some kind of ethnic Irish spelling?”

The boy’s face turned beet red. He sat next to Idell and opposite Katy who was smaller and two years younger. Katy put a hand to her mouth to stifle a laugh and pointed a finger at Shawen.

No one spoke for several seconds. Idell again broke the silence. “C’mon Munchkins. Pass the salad. And for dessert we have Bavarian cream pie.”

The meal was excellent; everything was home grown. But the dessert was incredible. Made from sugar and eggs and milk and a boiled vanilla bean split before the mixture was heated and gelatin added, the liquid was poured into a graham cracker crust to rest in the refrigerator. When chilled, a layer of whipped cream deep as a tablespoon handle was lathered on top.

The pie reminded Harold of his mother's home made cream puffs filled with a delicate custard interior, covered with melted chocolate which, until this moment, he was sure he had never tasted anything more wonderful.

Harold noticed their traveling companion was not at the table. "Where's Misses Swift?"

"We made an exception and she's taking a bath. She asked to have dinner in her room," Idell explained. "She's leaving tomorrow and said she wanted to rest up for the trip."

Carl said, "First time I ever heard of someone getting jet lag from a train ride."

Everyone had a slice of pie. In the midst of a delicious mouthful, both Carl and Idell lighted cigarettes. The match smell first, then the gray smoke of the burning cylinders filled the room. They shared from a package that was passed down the table from Carl to Idell. Wings. They smoked a brand called Wings Harold noted as he handed the pack down the line. Dad smokes Camels.

"May I be excused?" Patty asked from the middle of the table. "I have homework."

Carl waved dismissively and she backed out of her chair and left the room.

"What do you mean you made an exception?" Steve asked.

"Water's precious around here," Carl replied. "We get well water and we're on septic, not your city sewer lines so you boys have to be careful not to waste water. You take your baths on Saturday night whether you need one or not. During the week you can take a whore's bath like the rest of 'em." He gestured with his cigarette hand toward the table as a whole.

Mary was already up and clearing the table. Peggy sat unmoving and simply stared across the table at her cousins all in a row.

“Wow. California. What’s it like where you live?”

Harold had a ready answer, but said nothing. He was suddenly reminded of his loss and choked up before he could reply. Everything seemed so normal and then the reason they were there in a foreign country among people they did not know eating dinner in a house they never saw before today was strangely repressive.

Steve seemed under no such duress. He said, “It’s hot in summer, really cold in winter. The smudge pots in the orange groves make me sick.”

“What are smudge pots?”

“Oranges on the trees can freeze so they take old oil and burn it in these metal pots and it sends out black smoke that makes me cough.”

“Do you get snow?”

“Naw. Ain’t that cold in Riverside.”

Carl shouted in bombastic response from his end of the table, “Don’t say ain’t! It’s not in the dictionary. We don’t say ain’t around here.” He ended with a hacking throat clearing spit.

Peggy said, “We get lots of snow. We had two snow days last year. You can’t go to school sometimes in the winter cuz of snow storms.”

“Well, that’s enough palavering,” Carl broke into the conversation. “You boys have to get your chores. Harold, you help Mike with mucking the stable. Then you get the . . .”

“Stable?” Harold said with near hysterical surprise. “You have a stable? Are there horses?”

“Well, yes there are horses.,” Carl answered almost without displaying his displeasure at being interrupted. “Two Shetland ponies named Joy and Cheer. Your aunt, my sister Mary Josephine, brought the pregnant mare out here last year and dumped her on us without asking.” He cleared his throat and spit this time as if in contempt of what his sibling had done.

Shawen said surprised, “Aunt Mary Jo? You know our Aunt Mary Jo?”

Mary was just reaching to clear a near empty bowl of mashed potatoes next to Shawen and said, “Of course we do, silly. She’s our aunt too. I was named after her. Only we call her Aunt Mary Josephine because that’s her whole real name.”

“Yah, your father always had a way of making fun of her by shortening her name to Jo,” Carl said between another throat clearing and spit into a tissue.

Riding a horse was part of the cowboy ethos Harold developed as an alter persona, a second self that took him completely away from reality when conjured. The fact he did not know how, but might actually now be able to get on a horse and ride one, overtook any animosity he may have felt for being foisted on the farm and family.

“Can I ride ’em?”

Mike said, “No,” firmly.

Carl said, “Joy will only let Mike on her. She bites anyone else who tries to ride her.”

“Me,” Peggy said. “Cheer bit me last time I tried to get on him.”

This did not sit well with Harold who had the fondest idea of horses any child could have. They bit people?

“Reason Mike can ride Joy is the first time she bit him, he bit her back,” Peggy explained.

“Never mind that,” Idell said. “It’s getting towards dark. Mike. You and Harold go fetch two gallons from the dairy and tell Frank we’ll be needing two a day from now on.”

Mike said, “But Ma. This kid doesn’t even have boots or a jacket for walking to the dairy.”

“Well, you loan him the jacket you got from Sears and Roebuck two years ago. The one you outgrew it oughta fit him. And as for boots, he can wear your extra pair until we can order new ones from the catalog.”

“Another goddam expense I’m bringing up with their father,” Carl said to Idell loud enough for all to hear.

Mike directed Harold to the mud room where boots were lined up on the floor and coats hung on pegs in descending order much the way the children themselves filed into the dining room. A metal boot scraper was imbedded in the top outside stair step. The room had windows without glass, merely screens separating it from the weather.

“Here, see if these fit.”

When they were dressed, Mike returned to the kitchen for two empty metal pails with tight fitting lids.

The trek was along the highway toward the direction the station wagon had come. On either side were fields of grain, some ready for harvest, some already cut and tilled. Recent rains had not obliterated the turned rows and there were dirt clods galore for the boys to pick up and throw as they walked.

Mike said, “I got a rabbit in the head with a rock last spring. We had it for dinner.”

Harold was impressed with the tale of projectile prowess. He kicked at stones in the road and said, “What’s the leather thing your dad had hanging next to him at dinner?”

“We got a Gravely. It’s a earth tiller machine called a Gravely. That’s the strap, to start the gas motor. You don’t want to piss him off cuz he will hit you with that strap.”

The dairy was down a side road between two fields. As it came into sight Harold could smell the aroma of fresh cow dung.

The dairy farm milked its cows twice a day and two rows of brown cow rear ends, heads facing inward through grates, greeted the boys upon arrival. Milking machines were in place or being attached to udders by farm hands sitting on stools beside the animals when the boys arrived. The stench was not so bad and Harold was fascinated by the animals standing placidly as the sucking devices were attached, chewing their cud, licking at the slab of salt in front of them, turning their heads with puzzled expressions as the boys walked past.

Regularly, a tail lifted and greenish brown liquid spewed out.

The farmer looked up from his place on a three legged stool under an udder, smiled at them and continued attaching cylinders to each teat.

Harold noticed an aquamarine square under the nose of each cow. “What’s that?”

Farmer said, “Salt lick.”

“Ever taste a lick?” Mike asked Harold.

Harold had never seen one, let alone tasted.

Mike said, “Try it. Tastes like salt.”

“You go first.”

Mike looked with disdain at his cousin. Then he knelt at the head of the nearest cow and touched his tongue to the corner of the blue-green square.

“Now you.”

Harold did and was surprised at the pleasantly salty flavor. The fact a series of pink cow tongues preceded his own to taste the lick was not an issue.

The farmer complained about daylight savings time ending soon, saying his cows never get used to the time change, and six months later they have to change back. “Plays hell with the milkin’,” he said as he poured the collected liquid from a large container into the smaller ones the boys brought with them.

They made their way back to the farm where Idell immediately emptied the first gallon of milk into a much more hygienic bright, clean stainless steel bucket which fit inside the pasteurizing machine.

“One hour at 156 degrees. That oughta do it,” she said.

Again, Harold was fascinated. Until that moment he had never known milk to come in anything but quart bottles.

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They arrived on a Friday and were settled in by Sunday and that afternoon Idell drove Misses Swift to the airport to fly back to California.

Monday morning and the farm children followed their early morning routine. They were picked up next door by bus and taken to their respective schools. After noon, Idell took the three new boys to sign up for their schools.

Harold was in sixth grade which was not located in the same place his brothers were enrolled, an elementary school in downtown Centre Hall.

Instead, he and Mike, Patty and Mary were enrolled in the new Penns Valley High which taught grades seven through twelve, but for that one year only in its history also housed the sixth grade elementary class.

Carl drove to State College every week day where he taught engineering at Penn State University. He thought of himself as a gentleman farmer who produced food for his own table, not for profit.

Tuesday was the first day any of the three boys rode a bus to school. In Southern California they had taken day trips to Mission Capistrano and drove along the California coast line in buses, otherwise they rode bicycles or walked to Lowell Elementary.

They waited in the early morning darkness, before the sun had properly risen. The younger children were the first to be picked up in front of the Chamberlain's next door.

It was an October cold and Harold could see his breath.

Patty reassured Harold telling him about the school and what they were studying. Farm work loomed large and many were Future Farmers of America, she told him. He had never heard of FFA.

While waiting for the next bus, they were joined by the neighbor kids and all stood holding their books, wearing mittens, heavy coats, wool scarves, but shivering nonetheless. There was curiosity on some of their faces, but no one asked who Harold was. Mike volunteered nothing as the second big yellow vehicle bristling with commuting young people came to a squeaking halt and waited, diesel engine rumbling, doors sprung open, for them to board.

The interior of the bus was bubbling with voices that went silent as Harold stepped forward and began walking down the aisle. No one was rude, unless staring was

considered impolite, and most looked brightly up at him as he walked past with his lunch pail and oversize jacket.

Half way, a smiling girl in pigtails patted the seat next to her and moved toward the window to give him room. He slid in beside her. The bus lurched to a start and he said, “Hi. I’m Harold. What’s your name?”

Marion Anderson said she lived on the other side of the Fetteroff dairy and asked where he came from. When he said California, she said, “Hollywood! Do you know any movie stars? My favorites are Jimmie Stewart and Marlon Brando. Who’s yours?”

He confessed he did not have any Hollywood favorites. He told her he read Science Fiction and said he liked Arthur C. Clarke and Isaac Asimov. She never heard of them.

A child’s head with a bad haircut popped up on the back of their seat.

“Which you want fer field work, John Deere or a Cat?” Before Harold could respond let alone comprehend the question, the head said, “And silage or barn dry? Which is better for fattening yer bullocks?”

Marion squirmed in her seat and seemed uncomfortable with the questions as well as the person. “Kelly Thomas you just leave me and my friend here alone, ya hear?”

The head disappeared.

She turned back to Harold. “He’s a bit tetchd my ma says. All he can talk about is his family’s farm. No idea about what life’s like in the real world of Hollywood or the movies.”

The bus pulled into a parking lot and stopped in front of a modern structure. The front doors opened and Mike exited with his friends without saying a word to Harold.

Patty caught up with Harold and Marion. They were assigned the same room and teacher which, unlike the other classes, did not change or rotate during the day.

Until now Harold had not noticed that although Marion wore a wide pleated skirt, underneath she wore a pair of tan corduroy pants.

Noticing his glance, Marion explained, “At recess I like to play baseball with the boys. Tomboy is what my mother calls me.”

This was Harold’s second sixth grade in one year and it was housed in a contemporary single level self-contained structure, unlike Lowell Elementary which was made up of separate bungalows and even a converted clapboard single family 1930’s residence that was given over to kindergarten classes.

Marion became Harold’s first friend and, after he was introduced to the class, he was assigned a seat next to her. Patty sat on the other side of the room amid a set of her own friends.

A sixth grade class half way through the year is no longer made up of children. It is comprised of boys and young women.

Their class did not mingle with the higher levels in the school, except at noon time. The cafeteria was a wide open space lined with tables, a fully staffed lunch counter where the menu changed daily and punch cards were presented as payment. Alternatively, anyone was allowed to bring their own lunch which Harold did as an economy, although he did not know that.

Cafeteria food fascinated Harold who had never seen assembly line cooking. The first day, he quietly ate his peanut butter and jelly sandwich on white bread with an apple plucked off the ground of the grove next to the farm house. When a boy sat down beside

him and pushed his plate of spaghetti to the side, Harold said, “If you don’t want it, I’ll eat it.”

In that moment, a trend was set. During the weeks to come Harold would exchange his bologna or egg salad or peanut butter sandwich for various ground beef dishes, loaf cheese and lunch meat sandwiches, a quaky Jell-o, macaroni or coleslaw salad all of which can only be described as institutional food, but which he enjoyed immensely.

At one meal Harold took a bite of meat gravy and crunched something hard. He spit out a lead pellet which he held in the palm of his hand to demonstrate to everyone within ear shot.

“At’s what they kilt the cow with, buckshot to the brain,” Kelly Thomas opined.

The classroom environment was not especially crowed or rowdy. After the initial excitement of a new kid in class died down, there was the onset of routine. To energize her students, Miss Moffett suggested they create debate teams and one of the topics to debate, she said, was California versus Pennsylvania.

“Which side would you like to take Harold?” Miss Moffett said straight faced, but with a tinge of irony Harold missed completely.

There was really no choice and with Marion as captain of the other team, the debate was set to be held in three weeks which should give everyone time to prepare, Miss Moffett said and began describing Robert’s Rules of Order.

Mid-afternoon, the bus dropped them off in front of the Chamberlain’s and Mary ran through the front door as Harold and Patty followed. Mike was with friends who had a car and would not be home until later.

As they entered the living room, Harold saw why Mary was in such a hurry. The television was on and kids Mary's age were on a dance floor doing a type of jitterbug that was known as the fast dance. It was a Philadelphia show called American Bandstand which recently went nationwide and with which Harold was familiar.

Mary grabbed Harold's books and threw them on the sofa. She took his hand and began moving to the beat forcing Harold to follow her lead.

Harold recognized Buddy Holly as the musician on stage. There was no backup band, just a guitar which Holly appeared to be strumming as he sang "Heartbeat" and "It's So Easy."

Patty stood aside watching the performance closely on the black and white tube. She and Mary were old hands at this. "He's lip synching," Patty complained. "They're just playing a record."

Mary pulled Harold into a one arm around the waist hug and held steady for a beat. "No he's not. That's real. You just can't see his band behind the stage is all."

Harold finally broke free and took his books upstairs leaving the girls to dance with each other.

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The chores quickly became routine, but the farm continued revealing secrets.

Mike called Laddie over and the golden retriever crossed with border collie colored dark red and white with long hair sat beside him to be petted nonchalantly.

"He's half purebred," Mike said wryly.

Laddie had a propensity to chase cars passing on Manor Road which had a 45 mile per hour speed limit no one respected. Twice Laddie got his left front leg broken and the

second time, although the veterinarian set it, it did not mend well. From then on Laddie ran on three legs although when chasing rabbits in his sleep, he used that bad leg.

“My first dog was Rinny for Rin Tin Tin. Killed by a milk truck in front of the house.”

The house sat near the road high on a two acre parcel. The back yard was wide and deep with a pond fed by a small stream at the base that demarked where the neighbor’s pasture and property line began. Although the yard sloped away from the house, the odor of chicken shit wafted up wind from a coop built on a flat area near a row of apple trees. Dozens of hens pecked the filthy straw floor behind their chicken wire cage.

On the other side of the yard paralleling a white picket fence and running from the top of the hill at the barn doors down to the pond was a horse run. Two Shetland ponies were boarded at the top in the small barn. There was no end of wet straw smelling strongly of horse urine to rake out daily. It was a big job which Mike performed alone until Harold arrived.

Straw was mounded in a corner near the front doors to be picked up later by a farmer who did this for free and spread it on his fields before turning it under.

In the middle of the yard was a vegetable garden planted with tomatoes and carrots, cucumbers, potatoes, green beans, lettuce and cabbage. The largest if not primary crop sectioned off from the rest in a ten by ten square foot area was several rows of popcorn. The stalks looked exactly like any other type of corn except they did not grow anywhere near as tall, the cob was smaller and the kernels hard as pebbles.

Harold was introduced to the backyard and taken down to the stream where Mike said, “That’s the Decker’s property over there past that whaar fence.”

Mike explained he trapped muskrats in the stream that was the lower boundary for the property. Metal fence posts with thin strands of wire separated their land from the neighboring pasture.

“Say, you gotta go? Why don’t chew piss on that air whaar.”

Harold did not fall for the trick.

Mike set his traps after school and investigated them every morning. Any wretched animal unlucky enough to spring the trap was not always killed outright although that was the intention. It was not unusual for the mammal to have its leg smashed in the vice and struggle in agonizing pain for hours to escape until Mike arrived and struck the creature’s head with a small club putting it out of its misery.

“How much you get for a skin?” Harold inquired as he followed Mike around one morning. Even then he had a Scotsman’s respect for money.

“Fifty cents a piece. Guy in Centre Hall buys them once a month.”

“What are they used for?”

“Mounties.”

The answer did not make sense to Harold who said, “You mean like Sergeant Preston of the Yukon?”

“Yep. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police winter hat is made from muskrat.”

Mike carried the supposedly dead animal to the screened in back porch where it hung until he found time to skin the pelt which he stretched on a rack in the sun to dry. He discarded the body of the beast usually by burning it along with the household trash in an area devoted to this task near where he chopped chicken heads off.

Mike selected the number of victims from the henhouse as dictated by Idell. He slung these upside down by their feet and carried them to a stump that formed a wood gallows with two ten-penny nails pounded into it. The nails were bent in such a way Mike could slip the chicken's neck between them and with a light squeeze tighten the nails to hold the creature's head in place. Then he pulled the body taut by the feet and with one blow of the axe severed head from fowl.

Steve and Shawen laughed and applauded when the first chicken lost its head. As the bird flapped around dying, Steve picked up the feathered skull holding the beak in two fingers. He named the first one Henrietta Hen, the second Charlie Chicken despite the fact neither was a rooster. Steve and Shawen each danced the cranium of a bird on its neck along the ground like a puppet without strings the way they played with toy soldiers and soft cuddly stuffed animals back home. They made up stories to go with this activity.

"I'm moving to California," Steve said in a high sing song voice as he bobbed the head up and down and around in a circle on the ground.

Shawen said, "I'm going shopping first. I want tacos for dinner."

"Mmmmm. That sounds good," Steve's chicken head said. "I want tacos too."

A shadow fell over the two boys playing with the dead chicken heads. It was Carl who stood with hands on hips and who had somehow sneaked up on them without their noticing, especially since he held a lit cigarette in one hand.

"I'm gonna give you each a Yul Brynner if you don't behave yourselves!"

The boys were properly cowed by this threat. As if to reinforce it, Carl cleared his throat and hocked a huge loogie in the dirt beside them.

“Mike! Get those chickens into the basement and plucked and cleaned chop-chop. We’re running late for dinner. I gotta get to the Grange by seven tonight.”

“Yessir.”

This time at the table as the plate of chicken passed him, Steve took a piece and his face displayed surprise. It was the first time he ever connected the meat he ate with the creature that had been alive only a few hours earlier.

After dinner, Mike and Harold were upstairs in their room. “Scout meeting tonight at the Grange Hall. Mom wants to know if you want to go.”

“I was in Webelos back in . . .”

“Yah, I know. Riverside. You were everything back in Riverside. Well, I’m working on my Eagle and you could maybe get into our Boy Scout troop as a Tenderfoot. Wanna come? But you can’t hang around with me. Okay?”

Since he had not thought to pack his uniform, Idell suggested Mike let Harold wear his old outgrown blue Cub shirt which Mike dutifully dug out of the next to bottom drawer of the dresser they shared. It fit Harold nicely.

They were picked up after dinner by a father and his son who was also in Mike’s troop. Larry Leach was a smart kid who had scars over his chest and arms, red lesions that rose up from his open collar but stopped just short of his chin and face. It was a chemical experiment gone awry, an accident he was proud to say nearly cost him his life. He had no qualms about describing the incident or in taking his shirt off to show admiring inquisitive females.

The Grange Hall in downtown Centre Hall was a central place of meeting for the rural community. At three stories, it was the tallest structure in town at the time and

surrounded by playing fields and stables where 4H and FFA meetings were held out doors and the Centre County Fair opened in late summer.

Harold met Scoutmaster Benjamin who introduced him to the troop as being from California so don't be too tough on him.

"How far'd you get in Cubs?" Benjamin asked.

"I was working on my Webelos patches when my mother died."

Benjamin was surprised by the boy's candor.

"Good. That patch is the next step to becoming a Boy Scout. That's good. Means you can be in our troop if you want. Mike says you're old enough. Here, I'll tell you what. I'll give you a test right now and if you pass I'll put you down as a member of our troop. What do ya say to that?"

"Um, okay, I guess."

"Repeat the Boy Scout oath."

Harold knew this by heart and said the six lines beginning with, "On my honor I will do my best. . ."

"Good. Now the Scout Law."

"A Scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly . . ."

"Good. Now close your eyes." Harold did as instructed. Benjamin put his hand on the left side of the boy's chest and said, "Now then, on which side of your uniform does it say Cub Scout BSA? Left or right?"

Harold had an instant pang of doubt. He knew the answer was the right side, but because he felt the man's hand over his left shirt pocket, his thinking was influenced even though it seemed absurd the scoutmaster would do such a thing, tell him it was the left

side by holding his hand there while it was equally absurd to do that at all since his eyes were closed and he couldn't see anyway, but still, at the same time, it could be that Harold forgot and got the side of the shirt it was on wrong and Benjamin was being helpful which is when this nearly instantaneous interior monologue was cut short and burst to the surface in the one word: "Left."

"Hmmm. Open your eyes. Look."

The gold lettering was on the right just as he had initially suspected. He had been duped, he had been cheated, he had been . . .

"That ain't bad," said Scoutmaster Benjamin. "Two out of three. You're a Boy Scout now. Congratulations." He slapped Harold on the back and said, "Okay, we meet twice a month and you earn merit badges by meeting requirements on your application. I sign off on the things you do and you get a badge."

Harold accepted a well worn copy of the "Boy Scout Handbook" 5th edition with a cover showing scouts in khaki uniforms wearing wide brim hats and red kerchiefs with a full page back cover advertisement for U. S. Bike Tires. This was the first edition to include the motto, "Do a good turn daily."

That night Harold unceremoniously took his cap gun and holster downstairs to the play room off the living room and put them in the toy bin. Then he went into Carl's study where he opened the dictionary to find the word really was there. It had been completely scratched out, the page torn through in that one spot, obliterated by an angry ball point.

* * *

The straw in the barn was supposed to be cleared out regularly, but the farmer failed to come by that week and the pile kept growing, the barn becoming more foul with

an ammonia stench that forced Mike and Harold to cover their faces and work until they could no longer breathe and finally took a break from raking.

They were sipping from a fresh made pitcher of Kool-Aid in the kitchen when Katy came rushing in from the back yard.

“Ma. You gotta come quick. I smelt smoke in the barn.”

Idell looked squarely at Mike who said, “We were just out there Katy. No fires. We didn’t light matches.”

Katy was not mollified. “You gotta save Joy and Cheer from getting burned up!”

She was so insistent both Mike and Harold set down their glasses and returned to the barn. At first the only odor was the choking urine, but over that somewhere in the dark interior they caught the whiff of smoke.

The front of the barn was uphill and opened on Manor Road. As the boys ran around the building, Mike shouted to Harold, “You open the doors. I’ll get the hose.”

Working almost with practiced precision, they had the fire extinguished and the still steaming debris raked outside where it cooled. Later, the gentleman farmer was told about the incident by his wife. Carl ordered the two boys into his office behind the playroom where he often held forth.

“I hear you almost let the barn burn down,” Carl said peremptorily.

Harold was certain this would lead to the Gravely strap.

However, Carl’s demeanor abruptly changed from the stern threat of retribution to one of apparently genuine sanguinity as he added, “But you didn’t. Thank you. You put out a spontaneous combustion fire. Good work.”

“But sir, do you think Katy deserves some credit?” Mike asked.

“For what?”

“Well, she’s the one that warned us. Was afraid for the ponies.”

“Yah, well maybe.”

As they left the room, Mike said softly to Harold, “That’s the first time he’s ever said that.”

“What?”

“Thank you.”

“Do you think he’ll tell that to Katy?”

“Not on your life.”

* * *

All the kids joined in collecting fallen apples off the ground the locals called “drops.” Mike picked them directly from the trees while standing on a tall ladder. Few were discarded and none were washed or de-wormed. Yellow jacket wasps sought sugar in the late fall and inhabited the overly ripe drops. They were constantly flying around the children’s heads as they filled burlap sacks to the brim.

When the bags were full to nearly bursting, Mike took a piece of bailing wire and sealed them. Then they were loaded into the flat bed of an old Ford Carl borrowed from one of the neighbors.

Carl drove and there was room in the cab for Mike and Harold. Mary was indifferent to the crush adventure since she had attended many times in years past, so she stayed home. All the others piled in the back of the pick up and rode on top of the burlap bags to a press near Potters Mills on an unpaved turn off Route 322 called Cider Press Road.

The cold press was surrounded by a stand of trees which had the feel of dense forest even though they were no more than a few hundred yards off the highway. The actual press was protected from the weather by a tin roof supported by rough cut tree trunks at the four corners. There were no walls.

Apples were dumped into the maw of the machine which was connected to a wide belt twisted so it did not fly off. At one end the belt was wrapped around the rim of a truck wheel. The truck rested on blocks; it had no tires. When the engine was started, the belt operated a gear that was in neutral until engaged to torque a center screw down or up.

The belt twirled, the large pads wrapped in dense layers of burlap squeezed together and out the bottom flowed a brown liquid that was collected in buckets and poured through funnels into gallon glass jugs.

Strewn all over the ground were cast off crushed apples and the place smelled like rotten fruit. Carl filled specially marked bottles the kids were not allowed to touch containing fermented apple cider he called Black Jack.

The results of the press were divided between the family and the press operator who made a hard cider from his own old family recipe.

Jugs of murky brown cider were capped and placed in the coolest part of the basement to calm down. However, some went immediately down the throats of the thirsty children.

Carl sat in the kitchen reading the paper when the first of the three boys came running into the room and yanked open the door to the toilet.

“Hah!” Carl laughed as the door slammed shut. “Got the skips, don’tcha?”

Before he finished reading the front page, all three boys had run to the toilet.

* * *

Harold was up early on Saturday morning, dressed and downstairs to wash his face and brush his teeth in the back porch sink and tap. Mary said she would not serve him breakfast until he went back upstairs and talked with Idell about something extremely important.

“‘Bout what?”

“How should I know, silly. Just hurry up and I’ll have drippy ecks and bacon ready when you get back.”

Harold walked down the hall at the top of the stairs towards Carl and Idell’s bedroom and the communal bath tub. He stopped and stood just short of entering and said, “Hi Aunt Idell. You wanted to see to me?”

“Yes, dear. Come in and talk with your Uncle Carl. He has something to tell you. He’s in the bathroom getting dressed.”

Carl was seated on the toilet with the lid down and Harold was taken completely by surprise by what he saw, or rather, did not see. His mind could not reconcile the image of the man who was in the midst of strapping on his prosthesis just as Harold entered.

Harold took one look and froze.

Carl was missing his left leg.

“What you staring at boy?” Carl said with a typical hard edge in his voice.

Harold’s mouth opened, but no words came out. Instead, he screamed and ran out the bedroom, down the hall to his shared room where he slammed the door behind him, his back against the barrier.

Idell knocked on the door. “Harold? Honey, open the door. OK? Harold, this is your Aunt Idell. Now open the door.”

The handle turned and Harold stood back to allow her to enter. She put an arm around his shoulders and ushered the two of them to sit on Mike’s bed. It creaked with familiarity.

“Didn’t you know your Uncle Carl only has one leg? He lost his leg in a car accident a long time ago. You honestly didn’t know that?”

Harold whimpered and buried his face in Idell’s apron.

She patted his head to soothe and said, “There, there. It’s all right. Don’t you fret about it none.” She continued in a soft voice to explain how the accident occurred. “It was night time and there was no lights and no moon and a train was stopped on the tracks right at the crossing and he just slammed into it.”

Harold asked, “Is that what happened to his fingers?”

Yes, Idell explained, the hand was damaged right away and the fingers lost, but the doctors thought they could save the leg, but couldn’t. It was amputated in the hospital when gangrene set in.

“It pains him a great deal, y’know, the leg. I mean, he has to wear a strap to hold it in place and it hurts a great deal to walk on. Plus he says he has what he calls phantom limb pain. Like he knows it’s not there, but it still feels like it’s a broken bone. I don’t know. I can’t explain it.”

That night at dinner, Harold was fascinated when Carl made light of the missing limb.

“Knock on wood,” Carl said and hit the table with his left hand made into a fist so the knuckles cracked sharply as he put his other balled fist to his head and tapped. This produced an amusing effect, the seeming sound of his head being struck, but more interesting if somewhat disconcerting, was the continued thumping as he bent at the waist and leaned down toward the floor where he lightly struck his left shin on the pant cuff just above the shoe, again producing the amusing sound effect as if his leg were made of wood. “Knock wood.”

* * *

The bowl full of rich yellow corn cobs came his way. Harold grabbed one. When the bread was passed to him, he took a slice and tore a hunk off and slapped a pat of butter on it. Using the bread as a pad, he began spreading butter on the corn.

“What the hell you think you’re doing?” Carl asked with an insinuating tone that had come to be reserved for Harold alone.

The butter melted and Harold distributed it using the piece of bread until it coated the corn. He salted the cob and took a bite.

Idell said, “That’s a good idea.”

Harold popped the buttered bread in his mouth.

Idell asked, “How’d you come up with that?”

Harold said, “Dad showed us. That’s what we always do with corn on the cob.”

Carl said, “No it’s not. From now on use your knife like everybody else.”

Later that night as he sat on the edge of the bed removing his prosthesis, Idell said, “You do realize, Carl, you’re not being very nice to the boy.”

“Spittin’ image of his father when the little brat used to follow me around as a kid. Reminds me so much of him I can’t help myself. Feels good.”

* * *

On Hallowe’en the boys did not put on costumes like they did in Riverside and walk around paved streets with paper bags demanding “trick or treat” at the neighbors’ front doors. Instead, they got to ride a hay wagon.

The nearby Amish farm still used a horse drawn hay rick. It was pulled by two horses in obedient blinkers and it stopped casually in front of the farm and waited patiently as all eight, including Mary who was not too jaded to enjoy a hayride, and the Chamberlain children jumped aboard and nestled into the sweet smelling yellow straw.

The annual event was new to Harold and the first time he met some of the neighbor kids who were home schooled and dressed in other world clothing, plain and simple handmade apparel in keeping with their parents’ philosophy.

Big eyes under wide brim white hats and dark bonnets stared at him with as much curiosity as they evinced in him. Soon they were all laughing together at the horses’ loud farting and outpouring of prodigious amounts of pee and great quantity of road apples casually dropped while draying.

The cart stopped at the Decker farm and one of the Decker girls found a spot next to Harold where she seemed quite content to smile and say nothing.

It was not long before Harold realized the girl had eyes for him. And it was entirely possible Mary was not on the hay ride because it was Hallowe’en. She was nestled up forward in the straw beside a lanky young man whom she must already have known quite well: her arm was hooked into his and they held hands for the duration of the ride.

* * *

“Puttin’ up vegetables today,” Idell explained as she directed the boys to pick up boxes and move them from one place to the other in the basement. The boxes contained lidded jars.

The tomato plants were preposterously prolific. Green beans were not far behind and when clouds and the Farmer’s Almanac predicted the first drenching rain, Idell sent all the kids into the vegetable patch to collect what was left on the vines or in the earth and bring the baskets into the basement.

The canning corner had a sink, a rough cut wood table, a stove and a work space set in a corner of the basement on the opposite side from the coal burning furnace.

First, Idell dropped whole washed tomatoes in boiling water long enough to raise the skin, but not cook them. The girls assisted by peeling and cutting these into halves or quarters which were boiled for ten minutes. A line of Mason quart jars was set up and a teaspoon of salt dropped into each, tomatoes ladled in until almost full leaving one inch of headroom.

Wiped clean of spillage, the lids centered and adjusted, the bands tightened just finger tight, these jars went into a canning pressure cooker rack, were lowered into the cooker and covered in water which was brought to boil for half an hour.

A row of shelves against the back basement wall held full jars from prior years which Idell was careful to examine before opening. If she spotted a depressurized lid which bulged outward, that meant it was probably not safe to eat. The contents were tossed.

The popcorn field was denuded. Shucking popcorn introduced Harold to Corn Husker's Oil. His hands became blistered from running them down the sides of the cob, turning and twisting in a usually successful bid to free the kernels.

* * *

The debate was planned for the last day of school in December before the Christmas break. Marion Anderson picked three team mates and Harold was allowed to choose his team. In an oversight he would later regret, he did not pick Patty.

Mike Egan was built like a fire plug with arms. He was no taller than Harold, but he was a bully who picked on anyone who could not or did not fight back.

Most of the smaller boys steered clear of him. Others formed a pack around him, a sort of tough guy network. Kelly Thomas was a particular object of their scorn and Egan often pushed him in the chest saying, "Scairdy cat, scairdy cat. Dummy scaridy cat."

Harold wanted nothing to do with Egan and avoided running into him at recess. Lunch was another matter because all the sixth graders were supposed to sit together and the first time Harold was confronted by Egan was when he took a seat and the bully came over with his tray and said, "You're in my chair."

Harold did not make a fuss. He simply picked up his tray and moved a few seats away.

Egan said, "That chair belongs to my buddy Billy. So don't sit there either."

Harold moved again, this time to the end of the table where the situation seemed to be laid to rest. He must have appeared to be a push-over because two days later Egan approached Harold on the playground and taunted him saying, "Hollywood got

something to say? Hunh? Hollywood ain't talking,'" and with both palms of his hands hit Harold's chest the way Egan pushed Kelly Thomas.

"Hey, watch out!" Harold said in angry response.

"Watch out what? Whatchewgonna do California boy?" Egan baited and shoved again.

Harold crossed his arms over Egan's hands while they were stopped flat against him and lowered himself down and forward. This was a trick his father taught him, but he never had need to use it until now. The movement had the effect of bending his opponent to his knees and into an uncompromising position. It also hurt Egan's wrists.

Egan was not one to take this maneuver without replying in greater force. He stood and broke away, took a swing which Harold ducked, but when Egan's body came around in a half circle following his fist, Harold grabbed the sleeve and, as Egan tried to break Harold's grip, the both of them fell to the ground. They were in the cold wet dirt and starting to rise when Egan, now raised to his knees, began a head butt. Harold put an arm around the boy's neck under the chin with the head straight into his belly and held Egan bent at the waist where he refused to let go.

Egan was unable to land a punch or wriggle free and became more frustrated and even more angry.

Harold held the head locked tight. Until now he had not noticed the crowd gathered to watch.

Egan started screaming, "Lemme go! Lemme go!"

Harold held tight. Egan began spitting and screaming, but there was not a thing he could do to break free.

Harold said, "Give. Say 'I give.'"

There was another round of spitting and clawing and screaming.

"Give. Say you give."

Finally, Egan stopped struggling. He lay his arms at his sides and said, "I give."

Harold let go with a tremendous sigh of relief. He was stunned, quite unable to catch his breath as Egan walked sullenly away.

Marion Anderson was at Harold's side. "Gee. That was great. You sure put that meanie in his place."

That Friday, teams were picked for the debate. One of those Harold chose for his team was Mike Egan.

* * *

The household was gathered around the dinner table for Thanksgiving turkey dinner. There was excitement and anticipation in the holiday which was reflected in the children by their burgeoning bounciness.

"Quiet down! You're all acting like you got Saint Vitus' Dance!"

Carl carved and waved the knife menacingly to point the tip at one of the antsy. The tip of the blade selected Harold. Carl asked if the boy liked white meat or dark. Although quite indifferent, Harold said white. Carl moved the knife and fork to the end of the bird and began to carve. He pulled the tail off with his thumb and forefinger covered in grease as if he was lifting something that disgusted him, and put it on a plate which he shoved in front of Harold.

"Here's the Pope's nose. Eat that. It's white meat."

Harold scrunched his face into a grimace and tears began to fall down his cheeks. He thought of his mother and all the family seated around the dining room table on a Sunday night and realized it was not the loss he felt: It was what he did not know he had lost that hurt.

There was then a world, and now he was in a new world.

* * *

Carl displayed his anger by frequently using the phrase, “Don’t make me get the Gravelly strap!” which sent shivers of terror up each child’s spine.

Sometimes Carl shouted, “Careful or I’ll put you in the back seat of the Hupmobile!”

“What’s that? What’s a Hupmobile?” Steve had absolutely no idea what the word meant.

“Aw, it’s a old type car they had when Dad was a kid nobody knows what it is today.”

Most of the family’s needs came from their own and the neighboring farms, but on occasion Idell asked Carl to pick up something on the way home. One day she stood in the kitchen aghast after seeing the A & P checkout receipt Carl brought from State College.

“Hamburger’s up to nineteen cents a pound can you believe that!? T-bones are nearly a dollar a pound for crying out loud.”

Idell shopped at the IGA in Centre Hall, but they did not need many groceries because the farm was almost self-sustaining. Coffee, flour and Kool-Aid mix were just about everything that could not be grown.

Mary could drive the station wagon, but was not yet old enough to be licensed.

Shortly after Thanksgiving weekend it began to snow. Winter white was new to the California boys. They made snowballs they threw at one another, lay down and waved their arms to make snow angels. They got cold and came inside and had hot chocolate and that first part of December all the lakes and ponds froze solid.

Mike never displayed a desire to smoke cigarettes, but Harold was tempted to steal one and light it. Mike told him George and Marco Gross, the neighbor kids on the next farm over, were allowed to smoke because their parents thought it kept them warm in winter.

The Gross family lived in a two story Victorian style house. Mike took Harold to visit. The house sat at an angle on the property and as they approached they could see the front and the side of the building and beneath a red maple that had lost its leaves the ground was spotted with black dots like vanilla ice cream lain over with sprinkles of chocolate chips.

Georgie Gross met them on the porch. Harold knew him from school enough to say hay. Mike said hay.

Goergie saw what Harold was looking at and said, "Marco took his four-ten out the upstairs window of his bedroom and boom!"

The shotgun blast into the tree full of starlings sprinkled curled claws in the snow.

They walked along the fence at the property line, slapping gloves together to warm their hands, tightening scarves around their necks. Geogie lit a cigarette, took a hit and began coughing. When he caught his breath again he said, "S'all right. "It's only a smoker's cough."

Mike said, “Y’oughta change brands to one says Not a Cough in a Carload.”

At the metal fence, Georgie said to Harold, “Give ya a dolla ta pee on that air waar.”

This was the second time Harold had been challenged to do this and, once again, did not accept the offer. “I had two parents who understood electricity,” he said smugly. “Unlike you.”

“Well, I bet you can’t put your tongue on it like this.” Mike stuck his tongue out and leaned over and licked a wire. He only jumped an inch or two. “See, it ain’t so bad.”

Harold decided he did not need to meet that dare either.

Harold had never ice skated, but he rode a set of metal roller skates on the sidewalks back home. When the pond froze over, he asked and was given a pair of ice skates that belonged to Patty. He sat on the edge of the pond watching Mike and Mary swing each other around on the ice and strapped his borrowed pair on, then stood and fell over. He stood again, managed to get one foot in front of the other and fell over.

Undaunted, Harold pushed himself up from the frozen ground and stood and took another step and fell over. He got up and fell over. He did this enough times until he figured out how to lunge forward into a glide instead of falling and strode out onto the ice where his legs spread and he dropped on his butt.

It took approximately an hour before Harold was able to glide around one full turn on the ice. Carl and Idell appeared pond side at the same time Harold was coming toward them having traversed the frozen water a second time.

Idell said, “Isn’t that amazing? The kid’s a natural.”

Carl merely harrumphed a muffled reply and cleared his sinuses loudly and spat in a nearby snow bank.

* * *

“We want tah-kos. We want tah-kos,” Steve and Shawen intoned. The boys began the chant and Steve held up a drawing he made of a savory meat filled taco. Shredded yellow cheese dribbled down the side. “We want tah-kos. We want tah-kos.”

Idell acceded to their request and had Carl search out a can at the A & P. When the meal was put in front of them, the boys were astonished.

“What’s that?” The contempt in Shawen’s voice was clear. A brown roll filled with finely ground meat and spices confronted him on the plate. “Tacos don’t come in a can.”

“That’s the way your uncle had them when he was in South America, that’s how we’re having them,” Aunt Idell said with the certainty that meant don’t argue.

“Uncle Carl doesn’t know what a taco is. It’s not soft, it’s crispy. Least, that’s the way Mom made them.”

“Well, yer mom isn’t here, now is she?” Carl said with a self-satisfied smug as he spit into a Kleenex and began to eat.

The next afternoon Katy came running into the house excited. She found Mike and whispered in his ear. He ran upstairs and grabbed his BB gun shouting to Harold, “They’s rats in the chicken feed barrel!”

Mike had a Daisy lever action air gun and a BB pistol with a snap mechanism that was manually pulled back in order to fire. The air rifle had a certain amount of power, but the pistol was nearly worthless. Mike probably wore out the spring long before Harold arrived at the farm. However, that was the only other weapon available for Harold. Quite

apart from the fact Mike would not allow him to touch his .22, it would have been overkill and destroyed the bottom of the barrel first shot.

Together they stood over the empty feed barrel in which two good size rats were trapped. Having gotten in, they could not leap out. Mike and Harold began shooting with dull accuracy, hitting the squealing creatures time and time again with little to show for it except another angry cry. At last after perhaps one hundred shots, a BB finally fatally entered one of the rat's skulls and he turned over onto his back and began kicking the air in his death throws. The other rat was not long behind.

The weather continued cold.

Next morning at breakfast Harold and Mike were expecting some comment from Carl who said nothing about the incident in the chicken coop. Instead, he complained, "Biscuits taste funny."

"Well, I don't know why. I made them with whole milk about to go stale, maybe that's why," Idell replied.

"What! You didn't make them with buttermilk?"

Harold realized this was Carl's way of saying thank you. Harold ladled homemade catsup in vast amounts onto his plate and took a bite of fried potato which was crunchy and covered in catsup tasted great.

Carl took a bite and said, "Potatoes taste funny."

"Well, I don't know why. I fried them in olive oil, maybe that's why."

"What! You didn't fry them in bacon fat? What kind of American fried potatoes are made with olive oil?!"

Several sleds and a toboggan lined the walls of the mud room, but for most of the year they went unused and were usually covered by coats.

That afternoon the ground was frozen and after a light snow fell, Harold was extremely anxious to ride a sled. He selected a Flexible Flyer with rails and a wooden cross piece for steering. It was light enough for him to carry on his back down the stairs where he laid it on the white ground and pulled it along behind him by its steering rope.

No plan formulated in his mind, merely the nearly overpowering sense of doing something so fast and so fun. He had ridden down the canyon walls in back of the house in Riverside on metal siding torn from an old building, but that was nowhere near as frictionless as snow and it was dusty and rough and sometimes dangerous, especially if a finger got caught on the sharp metal edges.

He jumped on the sled above the chicken coop and rode to the bottom, but stalled before he got to the frozen pond and trickling stream. He sweated in his jacket and boots climbing back up with the sled in tow and considered the horse run to his left. At the top just below the barn, the hill was a pristine ski slope.

Harold was determined to make this ride, but had to get himself and the sled on the other side of the fence that kept Joy and Cheer confined. The barn door was open but neither animal was visible. He assumed they were inside where it was warmer than out where he was.

Having negotiated the fence, Harold was almost prepared to jump on the sled when he heard Katy say, "I wanna come too."

Without thinking about the ramifications, Harold said, “Sure. Hop on my back.” She slithered through the wood fence rails and lay on Harold with her hands around his neck.

He pushed off by plowing his hands in the snow on either side and paddling. Within seconds they were moving at a good clip and it was exhilarating. Harold steered a middle path which would take them smack out onto the pond.

How they might stop never entered Harold’s mind, and besides, there was a clomping noise, a horse hoof sound and that’s when lying there on his belly he looked right to see Cheer running to keep up with them as they slid down the hill.

There was no good reason why Cheer would have come out of the barn unless he was having as much fun and there he was charging down the trail beside them, his hooves pounding the snow like small pistons making explosive noises in Harold’s ears.

Katy laughed equally loud as they ran down the slope with Cheer’s galloping stride right beside.

Harold maintained enough presence of mind to keep an eye on the pond coming up quick. He held the steering bar in both hands and leaned to change course, the horse galloping in his ear. As the frozen pond approached, he attempted a slight correction, but clipped a boulder which knocked the metal runner on that side of the sled into the air and both he and Katy found themselves stopped dead in the snow upside down as Cheer continued until his hooves hit ice and he bowed his legs in front like a fork, back legs dragging together bringing him to undignified rest.

Harold rolled over and threw the sled away off to his side. He rose to his feet, dusted snow from his pant legs only then realizing Katy was not moving.

“Katy? Hey, Katy. You all right?”

But there was no response from the snow encrusted child who lay on her side as if peacefully asleep in her bed.

Harold realized how slight the five-year-olds’ frame was as he picked her up in his arms, head lolling, arms and hands falling outside his care.

They were at the bottom of the hill where the fence ended. He skirted the end of the barrier and began trudging up as fast as he could, hindered as he was by the depth his feet sank. His burden became greater the closer he came to the house. He approached the rear steps outside the mud room with a wailing shout.

“Aunt Idell. Help. Help me. Katy hit her head.” He had no idea how far his voice carried, but in seconds Idell threw the screen door open and raced down the few steps to pull Katy from her nephew’s arms.

Harold collapsed when his charge was released. Only then did he wipe his brow and his mitten covered hand came away red.

He followed Idell and Katy into the kitchen. The girl was laid out on the table as Idell removed jacket and boots. She called for Mary to get a bowl of hot water, a wash cloth and towel and then turned toward Harold who stood holding a chair tightly as if for support in standing.

He still had his mittens on.

“What happened? Tell me, Harold.” It was a stern question, one which brooked no evasive answer.

“I dunno. She hit her head. We were riding the sled together. She was on my back and we were coming down the horse run with Cheer running along beside us and we tipped over.”

Idell cooed and whispered the girl’s name as she wiped her daughter’s face, found no facial wound or bruising. She removed the girl’s long sleeve shirt and Harold saw she wore a sleeveless white tee shirt underneath.

Idell never raised her voice as she smoothed the child’s skin with the warm wash cloth. Then she picked Katy up in her arms like Harold had done except the child’s head was held gently against her mother’s breast as she was taken up stairs

“Mary. Call Doctor Trent and get him out here right away. I don’t know what she’s got, but tell him she was hit in the head by a horse’s hoof.”

Harold did not have the sense at the time to contradict this description of the accident.

The doctor was on the front porch within minutes banging to be allowed in. He was ushered into the upstairs room where Katy lay, the master bedroom on her parent’s bed.

An hour later Carl arrived.

Carl’s shout of absolutely incensed rage and anger could be heard throughout the house including the downstairs play room where Harold receded after the incident.

He had washed his face and placed a bandage on the broken skin of his forehead. Now he wore his cap-gun belt with the pistol in its holster hanging at an angle on his hip. He pulled the gun out quick draw style and aimed, spun it on one finger through the trigger guard before dropping it back in the holster. He did this several times in an attempt to stave off all memory of what happened to Katy and his part in the tragedy.

Then he heard the loping, hurried march of staggered steps that meant Carl was running toward him. Just before the man appeared in the doorway from the living room, Harold heard him shout.

“Where are you, you little bastard! I’m gonna whip you within an inch of your life. Where the hell are you?”

Harold was immobilized by fear. He stood trembling, eyes wide, facing the door into the frame of which Carl lurched.

The Gravelly strap dangled like a bull whip in his hand.

“You hurt my Katydid. You little idiot! You let the horse kick her in the head. Why, I’m going to . . .”

Harold had no time to consider his options. He turned and ran. The next room was Carl’s study which usually had its door closed, but now hung half open. Harold was almost through the frame when the lash stung his leg near the ankle. He did not fall, but lurched into the study and ran toward the side door which led to the porch and if he could make it that far, he might be temporarily safe from the whip.

Another stinging tip of the leather strap caught him mid stride higher up and again he almost fell, but was fueled by the need to escape. Harold twisted and pulled the handle and ran out before the next thrash could land on him.

Harold was so scared he failed to see Idell catch up with Carl and stay his strap hand.

“Stop it Carl. It wasn’t the boy’s fault.”

By now Harold had leaped from the porch to the snow covered ground and was fleeing the angry parent as fast as he could. Without boots or a jacket, he was much faster than his handicapped uncle.

“Doctor said she’ll be all right, Carl.” Idell said. “She hit her head on a rock, but it’s nothing serious. Slight concussion. Leave the boy alone, Carl. It was an accident.”

The air emptied from the man’s chest. He reached into a breast pocket to find the pack of cigarettes. He lit one, coughed, cleared his throat and reached into his pants pocket for a handkerchief into which he spat twice.

Harold circled around through the snow covered apple orchard onto Manor Road which was cleared of snow by cars. He crossed in front of the house over to the barn where he made giant steps to leave few tracks and pried the doors partly open so as not to indicate a disturbance in the snow.

Harold sneaked inside. The muffled sounds of disturbed horse was all that might have given him away. He took the wood hand rungs nailed to the wall which led to the loft and scrambled over to a corner where he shrunk his body into as small a space as possible and only then realized with arms wrapped around knees how cold it was.

Mike found him within an hour. It was not too difficult for a scout to see where the trail led. There were no tracks leading out, therefore inside the barn was the place to look and there were not a lot of places in which to hide. He shined a flashlight around the loft which almost immediately reflected two scared eyes.

“C’mon out. Dad’s not on the warpath any more. You can come in the house now.”

Mike was not about to hang on the loft edge and wait. He turned off the flashlight, backed down the handholds until he met the ground.

It was not long before Harold followed.

Mike said, “Heard what happened from Katy. She’s got a lump on her head but that’s about all. Says she jumped on your back and the last thing she remembers was waking up in bed.”

Harold was silent. He dreaded the moment when he would confront the girl, but more he dreaded the inevitable confrontation with her father.

Surprisingly, there was none.

Carl sat placidly reading the paper in the living room chair reserved for him, smoke curling into the air from a finger held cigarette. Idell was upstairs with Katy, but she did come down a few hours later where, at dinner, Katy’s absence went unremarked.

Apparently everyone knew the story from one source, Katy, which was corroborated to some extent by the doctor’s examination and prognosis which was good.

Harold quietly ate his meal which was tasteless to him. He went upstairs and took to bed early and feared the future with every breath.

* * *

One telephone was in the living room, an extension on the nightstand in Carl and Idell’s bedroom. Harold could hear the ringing from the play room where he was, once again, wearing his holster and pistol.

“Harold,” Idell called his name from upstairs as she leaned over the hall rail.
“Harold pick up the phone. It’s your father.”

Dutifully but warily, Harold answered in the living room. “Dad?” He waited a continental second as the connection to California was made.

“Hi Harold. Yes, it’s me. How are you son?”

The first thought Harold had was to tell the truth: He was frightened and hurt. He remembered the stinging strap on his leg and wanted to shout his anger and pain and yell how he had been unfairly accused, but instead he held his tongue.

Had Idell put the phone in her room back in the cradle or was she listening?

Harold made a tentative, “All right, I guess.”

If there was recognition of the hesitant response, it did not come through the line as such. His father said, “Good. And how is school? You doing well? Getting good grades?”

Harold was abandoned of all thoughts. He could only reply in short sentences or one word responses. “Yes.” Have you made many new friends? “Yes.”

“Did you go ice skating? I understand you have cold weather.”

“Un-hunh.”

There came concern in his father’s voice. “You okay, son? I mean, you’re not sick or something? You sound kind of down.”

What was up? Had he ever been up, Harold wondered to himself, but he said, “No.”

Suddenly Steve and Shawen were at his side reaching for the phone saying, “Let me talk to Dad. I want to talk to Dad. Gimme the phone.”

Harold relinquished his grip and Shawen was the first to put his head against the earpiece. “Dad!” he said excited. “We made apple cider and killed chickens and ate Bavarian cream pie and we ride school buses to school and I miss you!”

Harold receded from the lamp and chair and phone stand and backed away to allow his brothers to monopolize the father who could save him but did not.

Two months later, on February 3, Buddy Holly died in a plane crash and a month after that the three boys again boarded a train, this time to California, where Harold enrolled in the sixth grade for a third time that same school year.

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