

Mr. Barth

Dan Evans, 1985

The newspaper described it as a tragic accident. It was. I seen it happen. I never did figure out how them newspaper folks got their information. It happened up on the hill, across our fence line. The paper was always a day late by the time we got it out on the farm, 'bout fifteen miles from town.

Maybe the deputy sheriff told the newspaper 'bout Jay Barth's dad. It mightta been the law or somethin' that he had to. There weren't many mistakes in the paper's story, except for the color of Mr. Barth's tractor. The paper said it was green. They don't make green Farmalls. Mr. Barth's tractor was a red Farmall model D. John Deeres and Olivers are green – most of'em.

The deputy sheriff was there after it happened. So was the feller who drove the feed truck. He come along and seen the tractor layin' on its side from the road. Come up to see if he could help. He couldn't. I knew him, sorta. He drove our school bus once when the regular driver was sick.

Someone had run and told Jay's ma. So she come up to the hill, too, just as they took Mr. Barth away to town, in a white station wagon car that almost got stuck at the orchard gate. It's always muddy there in the winter time. The car was from the funeral parlor. I 'spose the paper mightta got its story from there.

Of course, Jay and me, we was both on the hill – right up on top of the hill – when it happened. Mr. Barth always made us stay at the top when he was on the tractor on the steep orchard hill. Now I know why. When it rolled over that day it tore up a awful mess as it slammed through them old filbert trees. It made a powerful racket, too, before it crashed to a stop, half way over the fence. My dad told Jay's ma he'd see to it the fence got mended. When I left home four years later it still hadn't got done. Don't reckon it ever got fixed, but suppose it don't much matter anymore.

There's a fair amount of difference in readin' 'bout tragic accidents in the newspaper and seein'em with your own eyes; a fair amount. The story 'bout Mr. Barth's accident was missin' somethin' Jay and me could have told. Least, I guess we could have told it. We never tried, so I don't know for sure. Just mention the word fear to me today – and to Jay, too, I reckon – and there's a gut-wrenchin' feelin' that grabs my mind like none other I ever felt since.

Mr. Barth never said a thing. Jay said later he thought he heard'em yell out just before the Farmall went over, but I didn't. If he did, it was the last sound he made.

I was afraid to go down and see, but Jay was already on the run, through the tangle of blackberries and wild rose vines his dad had been trying to turn under with the disk he pulled behind the tractor. I followed him down, but I took more care and more time doin' it.

Mr. Barth was sprawled out next to one of the younger trees like he'd set there on purpose to take a nap. One of his boots was gone. The heel of his foot showed through a hole worn in his sock. The heels of my socks wear-through like that, too. A feller told me once it was 'cause of improper fittin' boots. Could be. Couldn't afford better. My socks never get holes in the toes.

Like I said, Mr. Barth never said nothin' after the tractor went over. Jay and me didn't get too close. We was fifteen at the time, both of us. The tractor weren't runnin' no more.

There weren't no blood to see. Mr. Barth's eyes was closed and his clay-colored hair was a little mussed, but otherwise he just looked like he was snoozin'. We didn't know nothin' 'bout checkin' for a heart beat or whether he was breathin'. It weren't needful. He was dead. Can't explain how we knowed, we just did.

Jay set hisself down on the ground, cross-legged. He stared off down the hill not cryin' or nothin'. Neither of us said a thing. I started in to walkin' down the hill. I stopped and glanced back to tell Jay I was goin' to fetch some help. As I spoke, my eyes fell on Mr. Barth again. The sun was shinin' on his face through the winter-bare branches of the orchard trees. He looked, well, he looked friendly. For years after that day on the hill, I wondered if that was the secret of death; the cure-all for a man's sins and disposition while livin'.

Jay Barth's dad was an angry man. I never seen him anything else. He was always sober, but he was never without a bottle by his side. Never heard of 'em hittin' a man, but I never heard 'em say a kind word 'bout one neither. He could cuss 'til he was pantin' and outta breath and never let an hour go by without practicin' on somebody. He cussed out Jay's ma, he cussed out the community church she took us boys to. I even seen 'em cuss out his hat once. Garrett Everett Barth was an angry man.

I started in to walkin' again and as I did, I heard Jay call out to me. "Do you think God's gonna let my pa into heaven? Do you think He will?"

I didn't stop. I didn't turn around. I never let on that I even heard his question.

I went back home to see my family awhile back. Saw some old friends. Dropped by the feed store, but didn't see anyone I knew. My younger brother provided my folks with some grand kids and I'd like to think they sortta make up for my livin' so far away. The kids, they call me Uncle Lester and that's kinda satisfyin'.

I went to church with 'em all while I was there. My dad and mom, my brother and his wife; the kids – we all went. A bunch of folks recognized me and seemed glad to say hello. Most of 'em I didn't know.

The state extended the highway farther out into the hills 'bout five years ago. The wildlife moved out and the city life moved in. Some of the farmers sold off land to pay their

steadily rising property taxes and the big city developers were right there to grab it up. It's depressin', but I guess people gotta have some place to live – I guess.

When we walked into church, late of course and amidst all the hand shakin', I spotted an old friend playin' the piano. I'd gone to school with Lisa...Lisa...well, I couldn't remember her last name, but I'd heard she and Jay had got married.

I looked around for Jay, but didn't see him. We all sat down. Had a pew all to ourselves, close to the front, naturally. That's whatcha get for comin' in late. Knew I couldn't look around for Jay without bein' conspicuous, so figured I'd have to wait 'til after the service. But, it weren't so. The choir come out and half filled the choir loft. Then the preacher come out and stood near a chair on the platform, next to some other feller who turned out to be a visitin' missionary. And, then, through the same door the others come through, stepped Jay.

Hadn't seen my friend in about fifteen years, but it was him and I knowed it right off. Jay stepped up to the pulpit, smiled real big and said straight out – nearly shoutin' – with the mastery of a politician but the sincerity of, well, God Himself “Isn't it good to be in the house of the Lord?”

The boy's enthusiasm and conviction was too convincing. There weren't nothin' left for one to do but to join in with that there little community church congregation and say “Amen.”

Jay started in to singin' some old hymn and everyone joined him. I don't even recall what one it was. I do remember, though, the look on Jay's face when he spotted me standin' between my ma and my niece, in that old oak pew at the beginnin' of the second verse. He was pleased to see me and ma almost caused me to drop the hymn book when she elbowed my ribs to make sure I took note of Jay's surprise.

We had us a good little reunion after church. Later that afternoon, I slipped away from a houseful of family and drove on out to where Jay and Lisa, their three kids and a mongrel dog named Fred, live. “Mom would like us to live out at the house with her,” Jay said. “But, we've moved twice this year already and this place is close to the church and a new shoppin' center they built out near the highway. You seen it yet? Lisa works in one of the big department stores they got in there. Anyways, we expect to be packin' up and heading off to them Phillippine Islands soon as our visas come through. Lisa took trainin' to be a nurse and I can drive nails or fix jeeps or mend roofs. Guess the Lord needs us kind as much as He does preachers and such. What you been up to? How come you ain't hitched yet?”

The visit was good. In the short time I felt I could spend away from the goins on at my folk's place, Jay and I talked and laughed and laughed some more. Then I had to leave.

Jay walked me to my rented car. I got in, closed the door and started the engine. Jay tapped his knuckles on the window and I lowered it while puttin' the car into gear.

“I’ll tell mom you said hello. She’ll be sorry you didn’t have time to see her,” Jay said. He bent down, eye level with me, one hand in his back pocket. “Do you think God in His mercy, let my dad into Heaven?”

As quickly as he asked, Jay kindly ignored his own question, smiled and said “I’ll see to it you get put on the mailing list for our newsletters from the mission field. It’s been awful good seein’ you. Write if you get the yearnin’ to.”

My friend stood upright, stepped back and I drove on down the country road that would take me back to a houseful of family and cold turkey sandwiches.