Violations of the County Code

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Chad Henderson stood in the cab of the big John Deere, holding a stubby, hand-rolled joint between two fingers. He had the infrared system switched on, and it was guiding him and the eight-row cultivator through the field of foot-high corn. Iron Maiden was playing in the tape deck, loud enough to drown out the grating sound that the cultivator made, slicing the Johnsongrass and wild oats out of the sandy loam.

He leaned across the steering wheel and felt the vibrations of the drive train—the motor, transmission, and interlocking joints and rods and bearings that added up to something like 150 horsepower. Not that he cared a bit for drive trains or horsepower. He just couldn’t help but think in mechanical terms sometimes. They expected it of him. Everybody did, because he was Larry Henderson’s first-born son.

He was watching a cloud that had looked, when he first drove onto the field, like a Canada goose taking wing. “Art Duck-O,” he had chuckled to himself. He knew a little something about art. He had knocked down two blue ribbons at the Sac’n’Fox County all-school show, and he always read, or at least skimmed, the art sections in Newsweek and the Mankato Free Press.

He watched the cloud shifting, until it had changed into the upper half of a naked woman with one nosecone-shaped boob aimed at each side of the sky. “Cubist centerfold,” he giggled. He sucked his lungs full of marijuana smoke, and that’s when he felt it. His left front tire lifted up fast and slammed back down. He scrambled to get his legs under him so that he could push in the clutch, but before he could do it, he felt the big rear tire lift up and set back down, too. When he finally managed to stop the tractor, he crushed the joint out on the dashboard and climbed down the ladder, muttering, “What the—?”

He saw right away what he had run over, behind the rear tire and just ahead of the cultivator's curved teeth: a flattened-out, rolled-up rug with a set of black clay hatch marks—from his tire lugs—across its middle. He put his foot on the roll and jiggled. He didn’t like the way it felt: firm yet pliable, like a dead calf. He bent down and looked into the dark center of the rolled-up rug, and when he saw a round swatch of blond hair, the top of a head, he felt the breath rush out of him. “You okay?” he heard himself whispering hopefully, though he had smelled the sweetish scent of old spilled blood.

He was only a few hundred yards from the buildings, so he ran. His seed corn hat flew off, and he felt the long bristles of his Mohawk haircut start to bounce. From the field he had heard steel ringing against steel—hammerblows—from the machine shed. He ran toward them, through the wide open doors, shouting, “Dad! Dad!”
Chad had never felt time collapsing before, never felt it moving in such uneven jerks. He watched Larry's workboots and bluejeans shimmy from under the haybaler, —then thick fingers in a loose wrap around the handle of a ballpeen hammer, —forearms and rolled-up sleeves, —biceps and shoulders, filling and straining the faded blue fabric of the work shirt. Finally, he saw Larry sit up and say, “Now what's broke?”

Chad couldn't think of words. He waved his hands at his sides.

“You better come,” he said.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Can't you just come? I might of found a body!”

For what seemed like a very long time, his father looked puzzled, staring into Chad's eyes as if he thought it were all a joke, and then he dropped the hammer and sprang to his feet, saying, “We'll take the Allis.”

The old WD was sitting just inside the door. Larry climbed onto the seat and motioned Chad up, into the space between the seat and the orange wing of the fender. Larry steered carefully, keeping the wheels between the corn rows. When they got close to the place where the old rug lay behind the John Deere, he punched the stick into neutral and leaped from the WD, clearing the front tire. Chad watched him squat over the rug and wrestle it. He watched the rug pop open and saw a face, a white girl's face, he thought, turned swollen and dark. Over the roar of the WD, he heard his father yell, “Know her?”

“I don't think so,” he shouted. He stayed on the tractor and tried not to look, but something powerful kept drawing his eyes back.

His father jumped back on the Allis, threw it into fourth, and made a wide turn, knocking down several rows of corn. In the machine shed, he dialed 911. He told what he knew and gave his fire number, and then he said to Chad, “We better talk to your Mom.”

The kitchen smelled of something that stung Chad's eyes. His mother was bent into the oven, scraping. She backed out on her knees and turned to them, holding a spatula in her hand. Chad watched her look them up and down, watched her face fall. “What's the matter?” she asked.

“What's going on?”

Chad didn't plan to say much. He stood beside the refrigerator, concentrating on the Saturday morning cartoon sounds that came spilling in from the living room. He could picture Matt and Melissa, sprawled on the couch on the other side of the wall. He watched his dad step close to his mother and heard him say, in a soft voice, “We got problems.”

“I can see that,” his mother said. “What kind?”

“Chad found a dead body in the corn,” his father said.

“Chad did?”

“Yeah.”

“In our corn?”

“Yeah.”

Chad watched his mother drop her arms. The spatula made a dark
smear across her pink sweatpants, and then she put her free arm on the range top and pulled herself up. She said, “You’ve got to take me out there, Larry!”

“Why?” his father said. “You can’t do anything.”
“Did you forget I’m a nurse?” The pitch of her voice was rising.
“It’s too late,” his father said. The pitch of his voice was rising, too.
“Believe me, Susan, nobody can do anything.”
“We’ve got to call somebody, then,” she said.
“I already called the Sheriff’s office,” Larry said. “Al said he’d come himself.”

“Why’d you call the Sheriff, Daddy?” Melissa was standing in the living room doorway in her birthday pajamas, the kind that looked like a baseball uniform.

Matt scuffled into the kitchen, trailing untied shoelaces. He went right up to Chad and asked, “How’d you find it?”
“Ran over it,” Chad said, rolling his eyes toward the ceiling.
“With the tractor?” Matt said brightly.
“You ran over it?” Susan said.
“Her,” Larry said. “It’s a her, for Christ’s sake. A girl.”
“Awesome,” Matt said.
“That’s it!” Larry said, smacking the palm of his hand against the table. “Everybody’s gonna shut up about this right now!”

The noise from the T.V. kept on. Matt backed away from Chad and leaned against the kitchen wall. Melissa stared at Chad from the doorway. Chad opened the refrigerator and got himself a can of Mountain Dew. He sat down with his elbows on the table. His mother stood against the sink, leaning with her hands on it, staring out the window.

“You can’t see it from here,” Chad said. “It’s behind the machine shed.”

He chugged half the pop and waited for the rush he’d get from the sugar and caffeine. He watched his mother slide a chair across the floor, stand on it, and reach into the back of the cupboard. She fished around and pulled out a pack of those menthol cigarettes that women like, the kind she used to smoke. She tore the top open and tapped out one cigarette.

Larry was standing by the screen door, rubbing his temples and staring out toward the place where the driveway met the Ditch Bank Road. When he heard the rustling of the cigarette package, he turned and said, “What are you doing?”

“Getting a smoke,” she said.
“Why blow it now,” he said, “after all these months?”
“Leave off, Larry,” she said.

Chad watched his mother put a match to the cigarette and inhale. That’s when he remembered the marijuana. He got up and stepped, as nonchalantly as he could, toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Larry said.
“I was just gonna check on something,” Chad said.
“What?” Larry said, shifting himself to the side so that he stood full across the door.
Chad had to think fast. “I might’ve left the tape deck on in the tractor,” he said.
“I didn’t hear anything out there,” Larry said.
“I think I had the headphones plugged in,” Chad said. “You don’t want me to kill the battery, do you?”
“We can jump it later,” Larry said. “You sit right here ‘til Al comes.”
Susan exhaled a cloud of menthol smoke. She leaned the small of her back against the sink and said, “Start talking, you two, and don’t leave anything out.”
Chad didn’t figure he knew much, and he kept the story as short as he could. He and his dad had both finished talking, and everybody was staring at the walls when they heard the car come up the driveway. Looking out the screen door, Chad recognized Al Matalmaki’s Bronco, riding high on heavy-duty springs. Under the cottonwood, Sheriff Matalmaki stopped the Bronco and stepped down, easing a tan cowboy hat over his out-of-date, Elvis-style hair. Larry trotted out to meet him.
Chad watched the old football teammates huddle up in the shade of the cottonwood, climb into the Bronco, and drive out to the field. Then he felt Susan grab his hand. When he turned to face her, he found her staring into his eyes, her eyelids looking puffy and red. “Tell me you had nothing to do with this,” she said.
“With what?” he said.
“Tell me you’re not like that,” she said.
“Like what?” he said, looking down at the table. “A murderer?”
He kept his eyes on the formica, but still he could feel her eyes on him.
“A woman beater,” she said. “A bully.”
It made him mad to hear her ask these things. He could feel the blood pounding in his chest and up the sides of his face. He had to force himself to gentle down before he answered her. He told himself he knew how to do it, because it was not that different from the times he’d gentled down some crazy steer to ease him through the 4-H auction at the Sac’n’Fox County Fair. You couldn’t yell at a steer or hit him with the lead rope. That just made him crazier. Chad took a breath and looked straight at his mother. “I’m not like that,” he said. “Okay?”
She put her hands on the bare sides of his head, the shaved part of his Mohawk haircut. “Okay,” she said, kissing him on the forehead.
“Can I go outside now?” he said.
“No, I don’t think you’d better,” she said, drawing back at last, to his relief, to her own side of the table. “Stay right here until your father gets in.”
Chad watched the clock. In exactly twenty-two minutes, his father came walking briskly up the driveway from the field road. He jumped the porch steps in one bound, looked at Chad through the screen door, and hollered, “Get out here.”

He walked ahead of Chad, making a circular motion with his hand, and Chad followed. His father led him into the hay barn. It was almost empty, dusty, and dark as a cave, blinding when you came into it from the mid-day light. Before he could see anything, Chad felt something hit him, hard, on the side of his face. He fell backwards and landed, splayed-out but half-standing, against the pile of hay bales. “What was that for?” he asked, rubbing his cheek.

His father stood over him in a shallow crouch. He had his big hands clenched into fists. He shouted, “Get up!”

“Why?”

“How!” His father cuffed him on the ear.

“Ow! What’re you doing?”

His father opened his hand and held out what was left of the joint Chad had left on the dashboard of the John Deere: crumpled yellow paper and a few broken bits of green leaves.

“Okay, I been hand-rolling cigarettes,” Chad shrugged. “I know I’m not supposed to, but—. Ow!”

His father had kicked him, hard, on the thigh. He said, “Don’t lie to me!”

Chad felt his eyes get watery. He tried to will them to stay dry. “Sorry,” he said in a voice that broke, against his intentions.

“Sorry don’t cut it,” his father said. “What’s the story?”

“What do you mean?” Chad asked. He slid his hand down from his cheek to his thigh. He couldn’t believe how much both places stung.

“What’s this dope of yours got to do with the dead girl?”

“Nothing,” Chad said.

“What’s she doing in our field, then?”

“I don’t know.”

“I hope to Hell I don’t find out different.” Larry tossed the marijuana into the hay and turned his back on Chad, walking away in the off-balance shuffle of a worn-out lineman. “By the way,” he yelled over his shoulder, “the tape deck wasn’t on in the tractor.”

Chad sat in the hay, rubbing his sore spots and staring at the dust-filled sunbeams that streamed in through the doorway. He couldn’t believe his parents were treating him like some kind of criminal. “Hypocrites,” he said.

He heard the steel-on-steel banging start again in the machine shed, faster and louder than before. He pushed himself up from the hay and walked over to the cottonwood. He sat down there in its shade, his back against its trunk. The windows of the house were all open, and he could hear his mother talking on the phone.
“That’s just it,” he heard her say. “Well, I don’t know, but Al’s out there right now.”

“Gossipping hypocrites!” he shouted, loud enough so that she should have heard something without being able make out the meaning.

He pulled out his hunting knife, the five-inch, tempered-steel jackknife they had given him for his sixteenth birthday. He started picking up cottonwood twigs and peeling off their bark, smoothing them down to their creamy white insides.

In a few minutes, Matt came outside, his skinny pencil ankles sticking out below high-water jeans. He took out his own jackknife, a dollar one from the fleamarket outside Mankato. He fumbled for the thumbhold and said, “How do you s’pose she got killed?”

“Maybe I did it,” Chad said, trying to make his voice sound deep and sinister. “Maybe I’m the one who cut her.”

“Was she cut?” Matt asked, wide-eyed.

“I don’t know,” Chad said.

“See?” Matt said. “You didn’t! Because you didn’t even have the guts to cut that cat in science class.”

“That wasn’t about guts,” Chad said.

“What was it about then?”

“It was about stupid little brothers with big noses,” Chad said, swinging one leg out quickly and catching Matt across the back of the knees. Matt landed on his tailbone and started to wail. He ran toward the house. Chad yelled after him, “Baby can’t take his lumps!”

“Chad,” his mother called through the window a few minutes later, “come in here!”

He didn’t move, just stayed under the cottonwood, guessing that she wouldn’t call him again, and she didn’t. After awhile, a green sedan pulled into the driveway with two suited-up guys in the front seat. They honked, and Chad saw Larry run out from the machine shed and point them toward the field. Awhile later, Chad heard a droning sound—a helicopter from the direction of the Twin Cities. He’d figured they’d send one. It made a big, black dustcloud, landing, and before long, it roiled up another thick cloud of topsoil, lifted through it, and headed back toward the Cities again. Then the green sedan came back, snaking slowly up the field road, through the yard, and down the Ditch Bank Road. Sheriff Al brought up the rear. He parked his Bronco in front of the house and went to knock on the screen door. Susan let him in, and pretty soon Matt ran out to the machine shed—to fetch their father, Chad imagined.

Chad heard the bull bawling and decided to get up and see what was the matter. The heat of the day had settled in, and the big-bodied horse flies and quick-diving deer flies were thick in the barn, drawn by the smell and the warmth of Su-Lar Bonny Prince Charlie’s manure. The bull was rubbing his broad, white forehead back and forth across the two-by-twelve planks of his empty feeder.
Chad felt sorry for Charlie. They’d had to leave him penned up, even thought they’d run the cows out to pasture. Charlie’s instincts made him dangerous, so he got no mercy for having done his duty and bred all the cows. If he got any mercy at all, it was because he was a valuable and rare animal, a pure-blooded polled Hereford, probably the last pure-blooded polled Hereford bull in Sac’n’Fox County.

Chad climbed up the wooden ladder to the loft above Charlie’s pen. He tossed over a bale of timothy, climbed down, and popped it across his knee. It split open, into square chunks, and he tossed the chunks into Charlie’s feeder. The hay dust was thick when he spotted Sheriff Al waltzing through it, the yellow decorations on his shoulders as bright as the white on Charlie’s head. Larry came walking behind Al. His face showed no emotion.

Al said, “I’d like to ask you a few questions, Chad.”
Chad thought he should act casual, so he grinned and said, “Sure.”
“Down at the office,” the Sheriff said.
“You can’t just ask me here?” Chad said, looking at his father.
“We’ll be more comfortable in the office,” the Sheriff said.
“Can Dad come?” Chad asked. His father’s face still gave nothing away.

“It’s you I want to talk to,” Sheriff Matalmaki said, cupping his big hand completely around Chad’s shoulder.
Chad didn’t think it made sense to treat a witness this way. He said, “Do I need a lawyer, Dad?”
“Let’s hope not,” his father said in a flat, serious voice.

The Sheriff led Chad by the arm and steered him across the farmyard, into the back seat of the Bronco, behind the wire-and-plexiglass shield. Chad felt his stomach drop when the door locks clicked shut.

“Gentle down,” he told himself. Hadn’t he taken this trip before? He pictured the Sheriff’s Office: the brand new brick building, still smelling of paint and glue, the teal-colored carpet, the oak-veneer tables. “Art Buck-O,” he said to himself.

Al Matalmaki didn’t say anything until they had parked in the basement garage and got into the elevator. Then he said, “You’re getting to be kind of a regular around here, aren’t you?”

“Not really,” Chad said, reminding himself to keep his voice calm.
“Seems I’ve had you in here quite a bit.”
“A couple times,” Chad shrugged. He knew the Sheriff had the records.

“No for murder, though?” the Sheriff asked with raised eyebrows.
“No,” Chad said, feeling a little twist in his stomach.
“Refresh my memory,” the Sheriff said.
“Malicious mischief the first time,” Chad said.
“And then breaking and entering at the school, wasn’t it?” the Sheriff asked, steering him down a teal-carpeted hallway into a room with
an oak veneer table and four wooden chairs. “Didn’t you decorate the principal’s office with frozen cats or something?”

“Yeah, from the biology room freezer,” Chad said. “They call that performance art.”

Sheriff Matalmaki pushed Chad against a chair, and Chad sat down. The waves of his pompadour hairdo stayed in perfect order, even though he bent completely over. He pulled up a tape recorder, popped in one of those miniature tapes, and said in a flowery voice, “Testing, One, Two, Three.” He turned to Chad. “Now you know what a deposition is, right? You know that you’ve got certain rights—.”

Chad listened half-heartedly, fingering first his sore cheek and then his rhinestone earring. It occurred to him that he ought to slip the earring out and put it in his pocket, if he got a chance to do that without Al Matalmaki noticing.

“Name?” said the Sheriff. “Address?” He was making notes on a yellow pad. He asked, “Where’d you get that bruise on your cheek?”

“In the barn.”
“Who hit you?”
“I got butted by the bull.”

The Sheriff made another note. “How long you been using marijuana?”

“I don’t.”

The Sheriff reached for something in his pocket. He pulled out the baggie that Chad had left under the tractor seat. He held it in front of Chad and bounced it up and down so that the green-brown leaves made a rustling noise. He said, “So this must be your Dad’s, then.”

Chad kept telling himself, “Take it easy.” Hadn’t he figured Al would find the dope? He said, “That’s not mine. I’ve never seen it before.”

“And nobody hit you, either, right? Or did the girl hit you?”

Chad felt his blood pounding. It made a big noise inside his skull, like some kind of storm, circling. “Gentle down, gentle down,” he told himself, but he also told himself to think fast, think of something smart to say and think of it quick. He said, “Maybe you hit me.”

Al picked up the phone and punched two buttons. He said, “George, would you come in here and witness for me?”

Chad knew George Thompson, the fidgety deputy who liked to sniff out booze at the high school football games. The kids called him Barney Fife. When he came in, with his chest puffed out, Sheriff Matalmaki said, “Refresh my memory, George. What’s standard procedure on drug busts?”

“Strip search,” George said with a grin.

“That’s right,” Al Matalmaki said, snapping his fingers. “I guess you’re going to have to stand up and take your clothes off, kid.”

“You’re kidding,” Chad said.

“Am I kidding, George?”
“We never kid,” the Deputy said, tapping his thin fingers on the butt of his holstered pistol.

Chad told himself he could get through it. He felt okay taking off his T-shirt and socks and even his blue jeans, but when it came time to pull down his jockey shorts, somehow he managed to roll his waistband into a wad. He stumbled, stepping out of his shorts, and he felt his skin turn hot, all the way up his scalp, which he wished he hadn’t shaved.

“Nice earring,” George said. “Doesn’t it look divine on him, Sheriff?”

“Lovely,” Sheriff Matalmaki said, pulling on a rubber glove. “Let’s have a feel.”

Chad felt a thick, smooth finger slip into each of his ears.

“Open your mouth.”

He opened.

“Lift your scrotum,” the Sheriff said.

“What?”

“Your whole damn toolbox,” George said. “Take ahold and hoist it.”

They both watched Chad carefully lift his scrotum. Then Sheriff Matalmaki said, “Bend over and spread your buttocks.” Chad found himself staring at his long white toes on the teal carpet. He tried to make a joke of it, tried to think of his toes as art objects, to imagine the performance art piece he’d make out of this experience some day, but he couldn’t. He found that his awareness had a will of its own, and it focused on the smooth, thick thing, the plastic-covered finger, that moved inside him and then slid back out. The Sheriff said, “Get dressed. You’ll hear from us.”

“I’ll hear from you?” Chad said.

“You can hear, can’t you?” Al Matalmaki said, pulling off the glove.

“You’re not arresting me?”

“Not for murder, anyhow,” the Sheriff said. “The boyfriend confessed last night, only he couldn’t remember where he dumped the body. I guess to them Cities boys every cornfield out here looks the same.”

When Chad walked past the oak-veneer reception desk, George gave a little wave, and Chad knew how it would be from then on, whenever their paths crossed. George would wave that little wave, and they would both know.

Outside the Sheriff’s Office, the sun was going down. Chad stood on the sidewalk, waiting for his parents. His face and thigh ached, and every time he thought about what happened in the Sheriff’s Office, he felt a tingling sensation between his legs. It was strange, because he felt the same tingling sensation when he thought about the things that must have happened between the dead girl and her boyfriend.

The country was flat enough that he saw the pickup coming for more than a mile. He crossed the street to be on the passenger’s side when they pulled up beside him. When they did, Susan jumped right out, and he had no choice but to climb up and sit between them, wedged there, breath-
ing human sweat mixed with Hereford manure and stale menthol cigarette smoke.

His father said, “I hope you learned something.”
“They’re not charging me with murder, you know,” Chad said.
His father laughed. “Of course not, Chadwick.”
Chad felt tears welling up. He didn’t try to stop them.
“Mr. Tough Guy,” Larry said.
Susan ran her fingers through the hair on the top of Chad’s head.
She said, “Leave him alone, Larry. He’s been through enough. We all have.”

His father turned the pickup onto the Ditch Bank Road and stepped on the gas. Chad saw that a storm was building in the west. Thunderheads had piled like a mountain range across the blue horizon. As far as he could see, everybody’s corn was a foot high.