Barnburner

Justin Monahan

On an August night in the dying part of the North Country summer, there is no moon, only stars, and the dark sweeps fast over the sky and beds into the grass with the cattle. The night is still. A crowd encircles a barn with a sagging roof. The people murmur, clasp hands, shuffle in place. Men, women, and children place objects inside the barn—faded photographs, old dolls, clothing, letters. A young woman, crying, rests a pair of small boots inside the barn door. Across the road at the far end of the field stands a Ford dealership.

From inside the dealership's lot, my father and I watch people gather around the barn. My father has large bags under his eyes. His hands shake. The sun sets slow, but hard, and the temperature drops ten degrees within the hour. The wind pushes away from the west, then slows, then dies. The musk of decomposing leaves settles into cold dew, soaks into the ground, freezes into frost. Coyotes call. Small-arms fire retorts. When everyone's arrived, we cross the field towards the barn carrying two jerry cans. The stars and the illuminated Ford oval behind us are the only lights.

The crowd parts and we step through. My father enters the barn with the jerry cans. The barn is built of unpainted and untreated wood to burn fast and clean. He soaks the walls and objects with the first can and uses the second to pour a line out the barn doors. The smell of gasoline in the frosted grass.

He lights a match. It's the only light among us. He puts it to the ground.

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The day before my father was diagnosed, my parents had come down to the city under the pretense of a visit. They took me out to supper at a chain restaurant my father liked because it was quiet. I thought everything there tasted the same, but I didn't complain. The walls were decorated with signed pictures, jerseys, and pieces of art created specifically for that restaurant chain. When the waitress brought the complimentary bread, my father smelled smoke. My mother, a nurse, frowned and told him there was no smoke. I laughed a little.

That night, my parents slept in my room and I slept on the couch. The next morning, they left to run some errands, and arrived back at the apartment after I had returned from school. My mother said they needed to talk to me. They sat on the living-room chesterfield, and I on the futon opposite. My parents have aged gracefully, but there was no grace on the chesterfield. My father adjusted his body on the cushions, as if adjusting his bones. His eyes did not rest on any one place. My mother's eyes were on me, her hands on his.

"Your father has Parkinson's," she said.

Sunlight poured in through the patio window. The smell of car fumes blowing through the bedroom window down the hall. Car horns and revving engines and the endless sound of endless traffic.

My mother said a lot. I don't remember most of it. But I do remember she said there was no cure, but if my father worked less, he could slow it down. My father and I looked at each other. Dust hung in the sunlight between us.

He said, "Don't worry."

I said, "Yes."

They stood to go. I didn't know what to say or do, but wanted to hug my father, and did, hugged him tight. I did not reach all the way around. He hugged me back, and said, "Don't worry about me." His body was stiff.

He picked up their luggage, stooping and rising slowly. I asked if he needed any help.

"Got it," he said. "I'll go get the elevator." My mother held the door for him, and he stepped out into the hallway, bags knocking against his knees.

I said to my mother, "You know he won't work less." She put her hand on my cheek, kissed me, and told me that she'd call, not to worry, and not to forget the stew in the freezer. Then, she followed him into the hallway.

The first thought I'd had when my mother told me about the disease—the shaking, the freezing up, the mumbling, that it stopped for nothing—was whether or not it was hereditary. The next had been of my father hunched over his usual spill of papers, pen shaking in hand.

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As soon as I finished University, I packed all my things into my car, returned the apartment keys to the landlord, and set off on Highway 2 North and homebound, driving four hours through bush and budding fields into High Prairie, Alberta. Before I drove home, I stopped at the dealership.

The showroom was dark and clean, and the still after-hour silence, calming. The janitors had come and gone, but my father was still there, bent over his desk, running his hand through the remainder of his hair.

I stepped into the office, and he raised his head.

"How was traffic?"

"Traffic was traffic," I said. He was typing with his index fingers only. "Your typing is as slow as ever."

"What's that?"

"Your typing is slow."

"I just need to finish this email."

I sat and looked out his office window. The lot was more sand than gravel now. Dust raised by a slight wind rested on the used vehicles. In the automotive business, the proper term for "used" is "pre-owned"—or, in the case of a salesman who thinks you're stupid, "pre-loved." We only ever said used.

He finished his email. I could see several errors, but didn't say anything.

"What was that?" he said.

"Excuse me?"

He paused, fingers hovering above his keyboard. "What you said before."

"Your typing is slow."
He shrugged. "I took typing in high school. To meet the girls."
We said "to meet the girls" at the same time.
Looking at my father is like looking into an aged mirror—straight nose, long face, tufted eyebrows. His face is mine with grey, wrinkles, and nose-hair; mine is his without. When someone says we look alike, he tells me to thank them for the compliment. I usually respond that the compliment is his.
He was shuffling folders of ongoing deals into a large pile when he began to tremor. We locked eyes, and he looked away. "It comes right out of the hip," he said.
"Getting worse?"
"Comes and goes."
"Won't get any better. You know that."
He stood, steadying himself on the back of his chair, which shifted slightly on its wheels. "We can wait a while," I said. "Until it calms down." He nodded and sat, clutching his hip, trying to hold it in place. His hands shook, too.
"How were your exams?"
I stood and looked at the plaques on the wall. I pointed to a picture of my high school basketball team and said, "You know, I was pretty damn good back then."
"You only made the team," he said, "because your mom was sleeping with the coach."
He was the coach. I sat back down.
"I've finished with an English Honors degree. I have a piece of paper that says so."
"And what does that get you?"
"A piece of paper that says so."
"And where will you go from here?"
"I could be a teacher, or a lawyer, after another degree. I've earned the right to get another degree."
He looked down at his hip. "Where do you want to go?"
"I'm there: I'm here."
Still shaking, he looked up from his hip. "I want you to do what you want to do."
"I like it here."
He leaned over his desk, shoulders stiffly pulling together towards his clasping hands.
"You want to continue with school."
"I know what I want. Worked summers here for years. Know how it all works."
The Ford brand clock ticked on the wall. The vents shuddered to life and blew air. I looked out the window. Over two million dollars of automotive product and stress on the lot. I let my spine go and slumped back in my chair.
"What was your dream when you were my age?"
"I wanted to start a business, make money."

"We both know you've done more. You employ thirty people with good wages. You do more for charity than the churches. For God's sake, dad, you feed the homeless."

It sounded like a speech, but I hadn't meant it to.

"I just sell cars," he said. "That's not what you want. You want to study books."

"I want to be a good man, not read about them."

He pinched the bridge of his nose, swiveled his chair around.

"I have a sales position open," he said. And then, "And we need to build the barn."

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Barry Ferny owned the first Ford dealership in High Prairie, High Prairie Ford and Mercury, and had a wife and three kids. Barry pulled long hours. He missed his children's hockey games, forgot anniversaries, came home to cold suppers. His wife argued with him about it, but Barry couldn't understand. He was making money for the family, after all. He worked more.

One day, Barry's wife packed the kids into her Mercury Sable, dropped off an envelope for Barry at the dealership, and got out of town. Barry opened the envelope after hours. It was divorce papers.

The fire department's "post-conflagration analysis," as published in the South Peace News, concluded that Barry spread several cans of gasoline around the showroom and inside the show vehicles. He lit the gas with a match. Then, he waited inside his office.

Most of the building burned down, but some of the divorce papers were discovered in the parking lot. Funny what survives a fire.

Thirty years ago, a year after Barry burned down his dealership, Ford approached my grandfather, a gas-station owner, and my father, who was managing his first garage, The Muffler Shop. They started Monahan Ford that summer, and my father spent the rest of his adult life raising the business out of nothing. When I awoke for school, he'd be gone for work and didn't return until supper was cold. Working late became who he was. Work was his religion, cold pot-roast his vocational communion.

In August, for the first barnburning, my grandfather and father built a barn in the field across from the dealership. After donating to the food bank, people could place whatever items they wanted inside the barn. Then, on an August night, they burned the barn down—a prairie Viking funeral of sorts. We've had it every year since, for thirty years, though no one remembers Barry Ferny anymore, and Ford stopped selling Mercury in the North a long time ago.

As a child, I asked my mother why my father spent his summers building something only to burn it down. She told me Barry's story, and I asked her why he'd do something like that.

"His wife left him," she said.

"But why?"

"Because he worked too much."

"For his family," I said.

She said, "Sometimes families need more than money."

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My father and I spent the summer days working at the dealership. He taught me how to sell cars, and I learned how to get credit for customers with bad credit history (most), which customers liked to haggle (few), and which didn't want any bullshit (all). After closing, we'd work on the barn.

After my grandfather's retirement, my father built the barn alone. He'd spend the long summer evenings raising the structure frame by frame, wall by wall, until it was completed—a rags to riches businessman from 8-5, an exhausted pioneer anytime after.

Now, his hands were too shaky to screw or cut anything straight. So, I followed his instructions—bring that board, hold this level, cut this beam. I insisted on the heavy lifting, and he critiqued my abilities with power-saws, screw-drivers, and hammers. When I mistook my thumb for a nail, he said, "You okay? Ha Ha."

We worked twelve-hour days and the barn took shape—week after week the frame went up, the walls filled in, the roof came together. And I, like my father, came home night after night to cold pot roast.

We finished in early August, the time of late summer evening when the sun is almost set and faces the rising moon. We considered our handiwork from the truck tailgate.

"Doesn't look pretty," I said. It didn't—no front door, drafty walls, sagging roof.

"Shame to burn down something pretty," he said.

The dealership sign was already lit up. Cars went by, occasionally slowing to look at the barn. The fertile fields rolled on into the east, south, and north, terminating in lines of bush bordering the creeks.

He asked, "Do you really want to sell cars for the rest of your life?"

"And build barns."

"Damn barns," he said. His hands were shaking. "It's hard to care about good causes, anymore."

A pair of sparrows perched on the barn, and I was sure it would topple over. He heaved himself off the tailgate, dusting wood-shavings off his jeans.

"Still," he said. "Each man's got to be good in his own way."

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I've had the same dream every night since my father's diagnosis. I'm in the sales lot, and gravel crunches under my dress shoes. It's early morning, no breeze. We haven't opened yet. Low-horizon sun glints off windshields, shifting in the glass as I move down a row of new trucks. As if I was moving the sun. The day spills into my head: incoming stock, which customers need credit, the sales quota that must be made to earn corporate rebates—squeaky wheels get no grease.

My right hand begins to shake. I hold it by the wrist against my stomach and go inside to my office. I wait for customers, but no one comes. The shaking moves to my hip.

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I have friends in my hometown with roots as deep as the towering elms on Main Street. Their great-grandparents broke the ground there, tended the first cattle, planted the first crops. And it must be so comfortable, to always know where you are, to always know which way the wind blows, to know exactly who you are by who came before.

Yet, everyone will tell you to be your own man. If you want to own a business, own a business. If you want to be an artist, be an artist. Go West, young man—find yourself, and become who you always wanted to be.

But what if your father has become someone far better than you ever could? What if he'd made more of a difference than your art ever could? What if he had actually helped people?

And what if he couldn't do it for much longer—what if his disease would render him incapable, and you, who did nothing, culpable? What if all he ever built would be razed to the ground unless you stepped in? And what if the structure was completely beyond your ability, your knowledge, if you didn't know how he did it, only pretended you did? What would you do?

Because what if it's not just the sins of the father, but everything else as well? The business, the debts, the money, the employees, the product, the disease, his nose, his eyes. His wife as your mother. His love as your love. His responsibilities as your responsibilities. All the good he ever did, all the people he ever supported, all he ever built coming down on your head—and what would you do?

Would you take it up, carry it along, bear it all as best you could?

Or would you let something die so you could be your own man? Burn it down, build something else?

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The sun is set. The dark sky is lit with cold stars and not reflected in the field below. Swelling lines of bush and creek divide crops into quarter sections of canola and hay. The birds don't sing after the frost comes.

My father and I watch as cars drive down the back roads and park in the field. The passengers encircle the barn. We cross the field, and I carry the two jerry cans. Things hide in the dark, and are hidden.

Children bundled up against the cold, teenagers in small groups, elderly men in plaid and denim. They've filled the barn to the door with old memories: stacks of photo albums, a splintered crib, old photo albums people folded in the pages. Burdens waiting to be burned, people waiting for the burning.

My father pours one jerry can around the inside of the barn, soaking the sofa and splashing the walls. He uses the second to pour a line out the barn doors. He stands beside me and pulls an old matchbook emblazoned with Monahan

Ford out of his pocket. Our breath hangs visible and floats up into the wide dark and stars.

He asks if I care to do the honors.

"No," I tell him. "It should be you."

He nods and tries to remove a match. But his fingers are shaking, and he drops a few. Finally, he removes one, but it breaks when he tries to strike it. The crowd murmurs. The smell of gasoline in the frosted grass.

I take the matchbook from my father, gently, and he lets it go. I light the match and put it to the grass. The ground lights and the flame runs along the ground and into the barn. From the inside out, it burns up fast and clean. The crowd huddles closer, upturned faces clear and clean in the hot orange light.

My father puts his shaking hand on my shoulder. We stand there, watching, as the barn falls and rises in smoke, papal white, falling in on itself.