

The Substitute

by Doreen Tamminga

A stern look crossed the farmer's smile-lined face. "It ain't right," he said shaking his head. "A man spends his life in honest, hard work, and some young upstart comes along and ruins it. Thanks to him, I've lost a week doing repairs, and I've got no place to let my cattle out to pasture. If it hadn't been for the rainstorm that came up, I could've lost the whole farm...and who knows how far the fire would have spread! It's been a dry summer and some of you could have lost your farms too."

Several of the neighbouring farmers were gathered in front of the hardware store to discuss the recent excitement. Having finished his long speech, Farmer McKinlay stood and slapped his hat against his pant leg. "When I catch that young hooligan, he's going to pay for this," he added.

"You gonna teach him a lesson?" one of the men urged Farmer McKinlay. "Give him a lickin' that he'll never forget."

"Nope," McKinlay said firmly. "He's going to clear me a new pasture. He ruined my back field and cost me and my son a week's labour. I figure he's going to clear me a new field out behind the south pasture; it'll cost him a good week's labour."

The farmers looked at each other. *Didn't seem so bad. A few honest day's work in clearing out the underbrush, but then there were a couple of trees to take down too. Hard enough work for even a man, but then, those teenagers always seemed to have energy enough for trouble, so let them burn off some energy by swinging an axe for once.* But suddenly Farmer Dowsett spoke up. "Say, ain't that all one great big wild berry patch growing back there?" he asked the older man.

McKinlay pressed his lips together and nodded his head soberly. "That's right. A nasty berry patch. But the troublemaker should've thought of that before he went and set my field on fire. Now that new pasture's got to be cleared. I have no place to set my cattle out to graze until it's done, so I'll give him a week to clear it."

The neighbouring farmers looked at each other. Some raised their eyebrows, but most grunted their agreement. *That would teach the young ruffian. Crime had to be paid for, and it was well that the severity of the punishment matched the seriousness of the crime.*

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Micah pedaled hard, hurrying past the McKinlay place on his worn bicycle. Farmer McKinlay's son was outside, repairing one of the fences that had been burned in the fire. He spotted Micah and straightened up to wave. Micah nodded his head in return, wishing there were another road that led home. It wasn't that

he didn't like the older boy. No, quite the opposite was true. Although he was old enough to have finished school, Jason was a boy who still had a smile and friendly word for the younger children. Not one mean word about anyone, had Micah ever heard from Jason's lips. How could Micah not admire the older boy who worked so hard, missing out on the amusements of the other young folk as he spent his evenings helping his ageing father on the farm? And he still managed to find time for others, for wasn't Jason the one who had taught Micah to shoot a slingshot, pegging off crabapples clear across the field?

Micah tried to shake these thoughts from his mind. They only made things worse. *Why, oh why, had he joined the motley group of boys in town?* he asked himself. *They were bigger than him, older than him, tougher than him, and, oh, he had wanted so badly to fit in. To have a group of friends. To be one of the crowd that walked down Main Street Friday night, laughing and elbowing each other. To not be the skinny, short kid hurrying along by himself... Yes, that was why he had done it.*

"Well, go ahead," the older boy had said as the others looked on. "You wanted to become a Viper, well, take the dare." And with a deft motion he lit the torch and held it out to Micah.

Pale and freckled, Micah's white face stood out in the growing darkness, his dark hair disappearing against the bushes they were crouched behind. Initiation into the group? He

had wanted it, and he had got it with a vengeance. He stared aghast at the torch flaming brightly before the older boy's mocking face. Somehow...in some way...he had hoped it was all a joke, a test to see if he would show up at the field. Even now, he was still half-expecting the boy to stamp out the torch, slap him on the back, and welcome him into the band of Vipers. But no such thing happened. The torch continued to flicker against the darkness, burning with deadly intent. It was now or never.

Still pedaling feverishly, as if to distance himself from the deed, Micah closed his eyes tightly against the memory. He could still feel the roughness of the homemade torch as he had suddenly seized it from the boy's hand and, closing his eyes, hurled it into the farmer's pasture. "There! You see? I did it," he said boldly, but the other boy had already gone. Grasping his bike by the handlebars, Micah too, had yanked his bike to the road and took off, the eager flames lighting the field behind him.

*Why, oh why had he done it?* Micah asked himself. *How could he have been so foolish? So wicked? And now Farmer McKinlay had announced his punishment. The news had spread through the farming community like wildfire. And, somehow, the group of boys that he had been so eager to join, seemed rather too eager to tell him every bit of news and hints, real or imagined, that McKinlay was on his trail. The Vipers certainly weren't standing*

*behind him the way he had expected they would.*

Threats and hints and suggestions ate away at Micah and he couldn't sleep the night following the deed, or even the next. His throat carried a lump so big that it wouldn't allow any food past, and he grew thinner and paler. Even his mother who usually paid him no mind, frowned at him. "What's the matter, boy? You going to get sick on me, or something?" she demanded. "Eat your supper."

Micah could only shrug.

When five days had passed since the night of initiation, he knew that he could carry the weight of guilt no longer.

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The farmer's son opened the door. A small form stood black against the darkening sky, and a reedy voice faltered, "Is...Mr. McKinlay...home?"

"Sure," Jason said and stepped back opening the door wide. "Come in," he welcomed, gesturing to the pool of warm light that spilled from the kitchen. The farmer was seated at the table with a newspaper, and the clatter from the sink told of dinner dishes being washed by his wife.

Fumbling with his laces, Micah pulled off his shoes. He steadied himself against the doorjamb before walking on shaking legs to the kitchen.

"Yes, my boy! What can we do for you?" Farmer McKinlay was all friendliness as he

lowered his newspaper.

Micah opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He swallowed hard, and tried again. Still nothing. Unwanted tears rose in his eyes, and Jason reached out to give him a friendly pat on the shoulder.

"Hey there, Micah; it's alright. What did you want to talk to my dad about?"

Micah shrank away from the friendly hand and began edging back to the door as he tried again. "I'm the one . . . who . . . set the fire," he choked out at last and braced himself for the angry outburst.

The crinkle of the newspaper was the only sound as slowly, carefully, Farmer McKinlay closed the paper and folded it neatly on the table. His eyebrows drew together as he looked at the boy standing before him, young and thin, nearly white with fear. He was, perhaps, twelve years old, but so delicate-looking that the farmer didn't suppose he could wield an axe for more than an hour before giving way. This was certainly not the brash, swaggering ruffian he had expected to ferret out. What could have possessed such a meek youngster to commit such a rash, unprovoked, and dangerous act? Slowly, McKinlay pushed back his chair. *It was pure folly, it was, a damaging wickedness that would have to be paid for.*

When the silence grew long, and the farmer did not immediately get up, the boy opened his mouth as though to speak, but once again, nothing came out. Jason watched

as he passed a trembling hand across his mouth in a nervous gesture. It was a thin, pale hand, one that was not accustomed to physical labour.

At last the farmer rose from his seat and walked around the table. Folding his arms, he leaned against its edge. *Some things, at least, were clear: the cattle needed new pasture land, and the underbrush had to be cleared. He had made it known that this crime would not go unpunished, and the culprit was standing before him.* Justice was held dear by the old farmer, and he would have the whole town see that sin would reap its reward...and, yet...mercy was also dear to the old man's heart, and it was clear that this boy was not able to bear the punishment.

A heavy sigh finally broke the silence as Farmer McNaughton turned to his son. A silent conversation seemed to pass between them. The son at last looked away from his father and walked to the window that opened south on the burnt pasture and the uncleared brush beyond. Turning back to the other two, his eyes rested briefly on Micah's small form before meeting his father's steady gaze. "I'll do it," he said firmly.

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A miserable rain was falling, the kind that soaked your hair and ran in rivulets down your neck. Still some of the town kids had come out and gathered along the fence to jeer at Jason. "Just look at you now, so high

and mighty! The farmer's own son! How does it feel to do a real's man work for once?"

Jason seemed to turn a deaf ear to the taunting as with bleeding hands he hacked and tore at the thorny underbrush and piled it into a wagon. For three days now he had been at work, and with much of the field yet to be cleared, Jason was rising with the sun and working late into each night. Yesterday had burned hot with sunshine and today was soggy with rain.

Standing off to one side, Micah clenched an angry fist at the other boys' mocking. *Oh, they saw the humiliation in the farmer's own son bearing his father's public punishment,* Micah thought, *but didn't they at least see the honour in Jason himself? In his willing sacrifice?*

How dare they! Micah stormed inwardly as a boy shouted an especially cruel taunt. But as Jason raised his head and looked passed the boys to where Micah stood alone, he nodded his head in his old, friendly greeting. Shame and remorse filled Micah at the brotherly love the older boy still had for him, and he paused in his angry thoughts. *How dared the other boys? No, he was the one at fault here, for how had he dared to commit such a crime against such love?*

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust. 1 Peter 3:18a