

The Trophy by K.J. Boyd

Martin Becker hadn't been to St. Luke's since the day he graduated eighth grade in the early 1970s. Those days he'd boasted a full head of rust-colored hair, dozens of freckles, and a frame so skinny you could count his ribs. Far cry from the pudgy, balding guy he'd become. Martin wouldn't be headed to St. Luke's now except he and his son-in-law were in Cleveland on business and Jeffrey wanted to see the place. Said it didn't matter the school had long since closed. Martin glanced at his watch. Maybe Jeffrey would be on time for a change.

He was surprised to see several cars in the parking lot at the rear of the school. Martin assumed the building would be locked. If he and Jeffrey could get inside, they wouldn't have to settle for peering in windows.

Smiling, hand extended, Martin crossed the parking lot toward a gray-haired black man straightening his cardigan sweater and hiking up his khaki pants.

"Hello. My name's Martin Becker." He got nothing but a scowl in return. Refusing to be cowed, he launched into his pitch. "I'm a St. Luke's graduate. When my son-in-law arrives, could we come inside so I could give him a tour of the school? It would mean so much to me."

The man broke into a grin and shook Martin's hand with his rough calloused one. "Robinson. Stanley Robinson. Your suit threw me off. Figured you for a county building inspector." Stanley cocked his thumb toward the church. "My Bible study meets here every Tuesday. When your son-in-law gets here, come on in. You'll have the whole place to yourselves. We only use the school on Sundays."

Martin signed thumbs up. "That's awesome. Thanks so much."

Stanley raised his worn Bible. “Thanks be to *God*, Mr. Becker. Thanks be to God.” He gave his pants another tug and ambled toward the church.

Martin turned his attention to the school; a clean-lined facade hunkering low to the ground. It had once been the lifeblood of a handful of blue collar families, most of German descent, who believed a Christian education would inoculate their children against the evils of the world.

Jeffrey beeped his arrival. He often bragged his slender build was the reason he looked good no matter what he wore. Martin seldom agreed. Like today. *What a get-up*, he thought. *Fleece vest, check shirt, cargo pants, hiking boots.*

Mr. GQ scratched his unshaven face then stuffed his hands in his pockets. “Old. Really old.” He eyed the school from one end to the other. “We’re talking ancient.”

Martin bristled. “Yeah, the school and the Taj Mahal were dedicated the same year. I’d just celebrated my eighth birthday.”

“Didn’t mean anything personal. Guess the building looks older than it is because it’s in terrible shape.”

Martin imagined building inspectors saying the same thing. He caught himself scowling like Stanley Robinson. “There’s a good reason. After declining enrollment forced the Synod to close the school they couldn’t afford to properly maintain the building.”

Jeffrey nodded. “That explains the sagging roof, crumbled mortar, cracked sidewalks.”

Enumerating flaws only heightened Martin’s rancor but he managed to brush aside his annoyance in his eagerness to enter the school. “We can get inside but it might not be in any better condition than the outside.”

“No problem. Besides, I got time to kill before my flight leaves.”

Martin wanted to suggest he spend some of that time shopping for clothes. Instead, he settled for, “Let’s get hiking.”

They pushed between maple double doors leading from the church to the school. Directly ahead stood a trophy case.

Martin opened the dust-caked glass door to reveal a jumble of plaques and faded ribbons awarded for choir competitions, Bible story orations, creative arts, and sports.

He snaked his arm through the clutter on an upper shelf and pulled out a tarnished trophy not more than a foot tall. The engraved plate read *Lincoln County Parochial Basketball League, “A” Division, Varsity Boys, 1969-1970 CHAMPIONS.*

“Big deal?” Jeffrey asked.

“We thought so.” Martin polished the plate with his handkerchief. “I still remember the final game. We were down one point with three seconds left on the clock. From the far end of the court, Charlie Scott heaved the ball underhanded toward the basket. The shot was way off. I streaked down the court, jumped, and tipped the ball toward the goal. The horn sounded just as the ball dropped through the basket. Couple teammates lifted me on their shoulders or I’d have been crushed by the fans swarming the court. My jersey number was thirty-four. It’s still my lucky number.”

Martin returned the trophy to the case and closed the door. “Ready to see the rest of the school?”

“Lead on.”

Now in high spirits, nothing disheartened Martin. Not the yellowed vinyl floor tiles, warped bookshelves, or moth-eaten window draperies. He wasn’t even bothered when Jeffrey

claimed he sensed cold spots. Martin was reliving his past, breathing the mingled scents of leather bound encyclopedias, acrid chalk, rubber cement, pencil shavings.

The men ended their tour back at the trophy case. Jeffrey slowed his pace and pat his pockets. "I've lost my phone. Probably fell out in one of the classrooms. Wait for me in the parking lot while I check."

"Want my help?"

"I've got this."

Martin glanced at the trophy case then hurried toward the doors thinking himself an old fool for getting choked up.

A few minutes later, Jeffrey opened the passenger door to Martin's car and scooted in. The expression on his face mimicked the one he couldn't suppress when holding a winning poker hand.

"You look happy. Guess you found your phone."

Jeffrey laughed. "Never lost it." He unzipped his vest and pulled out the trophy.

Martin's jaw dropped. "What are you doing with that?"

Jeffrey shoved the trophy in his father-in-law's face. "Got it for you."

Martin recoiled as though nose-to-nose with a dead rat. "You stole the trophy?" He repeated himself. This time it was an accusation not a question. "You stole the trophy!"

Jeffrey's smile faded. "I thought you'd be stoked."

Martin buried his face in his hands. "I don't believe this."

"Hell, Martin, the trophy shouldn't be stuck behind a bunch of junk no one cares about. I thought we'd clean it up and set it on a shelf in your office. A memento of your play that won the tournament."

“How could I look at this every day knowing you stole it? It doesn’t belong to me. It’s a team trophy awarded to the school.”

“You said the school closed years ago.”

“Doesn’t matter. We gotta return the trophy.”

Jeffrey rolled his eyes. “You’re making a big deal out of this.”

“It is a big deal. Zip it inside your vest and let’s get going.”

Jeffrey didn’t move. “If we run into the guy you told me you met this morning, he’s gonna wonder why we’re back. Let’s just keep the trophy and get out of here.”

“No. We’re taking it back. I’ll be your lookout. If anyone questions me I’ll tell them the story you told me about dropping your phone when we toured the school and coming back to find it.”

And that’s how it happened Jeffrey was alone when he grudgingly replaced the trophy. He stepped back to close the glass door but hesitated when he noticed a picture frame face down on a lower shelf. He turned it over and squinted at a faded school newsletter clipping mounted on black paper. The headline read *ST. LUKE’S WINS!* A basketball team photo accompanied the story. One of the players hoisted a trophy similar to the one he’d just returned to the case. The lead paragraph read *St. Luke’s Boys Varsity Basketball Team won first place “A” division, Lincoln County Parochial Basketball League Finals, 1969-1970 season. Team captain Marty Becker was sidelined with a broken arm but suited up for every game.*

“What the hell?” Jeffrey scanned the photo. Right side, second row, third from the end stood an unsmiling skinny kid with his left arm in a cast, jersey number 34. “Him and his

superstar bullshit,” he muttered. “And that asshole treated *me* like a sleazeball. I’m never gonna let him live this down.”

He returned the picture to the trophy case and pushed between the doors to join his father-in-law.

Martin exhaled like he’d been holding his breath the past five minutes.

“So, number thirty-four, tell me again—”

Martin cut him off and whispered conspiratorially, “Glad that’s over. Now everything’s back as it should be. Just as I remember. Everything’s *exactly* as I remember.”

Jeffrey looked hard at Martin. The lined face, downturned mouth, tired eyes, rounded shoulders. The younger man faltered but there was no malice in his voice when he said, “Guess that’s all that matters.”