BACK TO THE BARN

Brook ate for fuel, not fun. Supper that evening was chili and creamed corn from cans with wheat toast on the side. I washed mine down with bourbon from one of the few dusty bottles mixed in among the cleaning supplies beneath the kitchen sink. Brook drank cranberry juice and briefed me on how Verity would help her educate people about living with mountain lions. She was especially keen to get to kids before they started gobbling up the misinformation fed to them by the news shows and papers. She was annoyed with the Bee’s coverage of the goat kill in Olives, which she found inflammatory.

While I was drying the dishes she called me out to the living room to show me the sleeping bag, pillow, and towel she’d set out for me on the couch. I asked if she minded my sleeping in the barn.

She looked at me funny. “Something wrong with my couch?”
“Not at all. I’d just prefer the barn if you don’t mind.”
“Kind of stinks out there.”
“I know.”
“Might see a rat.”
“I understand.”
“Suit yourself,” she said, raising her arms in a sleepy stretch. “I’m hitting the sack.”
“At seven thirty?”
“I’ll be up at midnight. Then three, then six or so.” She yawned. “These orphans need a lot of attention.”

I thanked her for putting me up and asked what I could do to repay her. She said we could deal with that later. For now I should
make myself at home, bathe when I wanted, eat whatever I could find, and not worry about asking permission.

The barn really wasn’t that smelly because it was open at one end. None of the animals slept inside. They could stand under the overhanging roof when it rained, but mostly the barn was a place to store things and keep the feed dry. I found a stack of empty feedsacks and laid a few of them out end-to-end next to one wall. I unrolled the sleeping bag on top of the feedsacks, took off my shoes, and crawled inside.

You’d think I might have taken this opportunity to look back over all that had happened the last twenty-four hours, that I might have entertained thoughts of Jean, hatched some plan for getting word to her that I was still among the living. But I didn’t. Instead I lay there working on a problem of subtraction, trying to figure out how many years had passed since I’d last slept in a barn. Forty-six was my best guess. That made me sixteen, took me to the end of a decade when I spent far more nights in my grandparents’ barn than I did in my bedroom at their house. The room they gave me had been my father’s room and I could never get comfortable there, largely because of Norman, the hypochondriac uncle who had never left the nest. I don’t know what Norman did for entertainment before I arrived on the farm, but after I showed up his main form of recreation was to scare his seven-year-old nephew. My father had been a violent man, and Norman quickly figured out that death had not diminished the shadow he cast over me. Sickly Norman was no help at all around the farm. But he was diligent when it came to sowing seeds of uncertainty in my mind. Could we be sure my father was really dead? When they pulled the truck out of the river they found my mother’s body in the cab while my father’s body was never recovered. Who could tell where my father was? Shoot, maybe he was still out there and fixing to come back. When he got back and found me sleeping in his bedroom, he wasn’t going to like it. No sir, Norman would tell me, my daddy never did like people fooling around his room. There was no telling what he might do.
Thus I slept in the barn. My grandpa didn’t mind too much since I kept an eye on all the animals for him. I acted as an advance warning system, I sounded the alarm when one of the stock was ailing or when a labor had begun. Grandma didn’t bother much about where I slept. When she wasn’t fussing over Norman and his ailments, she stayed busy eavesdropping on the party line. The milk of human kindness didn’t flow too freely on the Sayers farm. My elders made a place for me at the table, they supplied me with boots and overalls and flour sack shirts. No one had to tell me that what I got came not from love but in return for the work I did. The nearest kids my age lived several miles away. And so my closest companions were Red and Gray, the two wily farm dogs who shared my bed in the hay. I was also on intimate terms with Irene the cow. Sometimes of an early morning I would all but fall asleep tugging on her familiar teats, my head nestled against her warm side. Austin the plow horse was another of my pals. His nickering smile never failed to charm the apple from my hand. The pigs knew me as their slopgiver and were careful to stay on my good side. I was a regular in the chicken yard. The younger roosters revered me but old Gus, fierce prince of the pecking order, greeted me with slashing spurs whenever I came to rob his brooding hens. A nickel for every kick I planted on his warlike breast would have made me the richest boy in the county.

But tonight I recalled the stillness even more vividly than those bursts of fowl commotion. To me there was something strongly reassuring in the company of sleeping animals. The cow and horses drowsing heavily in their stalls. Red and Gray sacked out beside me, consumed by dreams that made them whimper and flinch, but alive in the canine manner to every outdoor sound, ready to guard me if an intruder approached. The active creatures made those nights seem even stiller. Only in true stillness, the stillness of heavy mammalian slumber, could you hear a mouse skittering along a rafter, sense a farm cat making his sly rounds. Once in while a sleeping horse would stamp, a strong quick sound, a deep *thump*. A nervous, forlorn boy, I took great comfort in that sound. It proved the ground was solid.