

THE BARN

Erin Wilcox

Inside the barn, it was quiet. I breathed the smell of wet hay and barley. There was no rustling of birds in the rafters—Mark had shooed off the pigeons early fall. Up near the loft, a moth flew in and out of the slatted light. In my younger days I would have cupped it in my hands, carried it outside, but I stood and watched, knowing its wings would give out sooner than its will.

A restless nicker broke the stillness. Derby and Baxter hoped I'd brought them a carrot. The barn creaked and groaned with the wind, and I heard Clara's step outside. She pulled the double doors open.

"Pa," she said, "what are you doing in here all alone?" My eyes went squint, but I could make out her silhouette, skirt hanging like a bell just past her knees.

"Thinking," I said. "Won't be having much peace for a while."

Clara beckoned from the doorway. "They just pulled up."

I put my hands in my bib pockets. Behind my eyes I saw her brother, Mark, his skin cold and course, eyelids pressed shut like his body was in pain. Most times I tried to remember my boy alive, I saw this.

Then Clara was beside me, her arm around my middle. She guided me out. I breathed in the scent of her strawberry curls.

Outside it smelled like a storm. The sky was gray off south beyond the pasture, and thunderheads blocked out the hills. The fence posts lining the road tilted every which way, in need of fresh paint. Grass grew thick and patchy in the field. Every few feet a mound of dirt burped up where the gophers tunneled through. Clara had been on me to hire a man since my wife, Margaret, passed away, but her mother and I always kept up the farm our own selves. Margaret didn't take kindly to outsiders.

Clara closed up the barn behind us. I felt the steady wind down my collar, flapping my work shirt and biting at my skin.

She draped her coat around my shoulders. "Come up to the house now, okay? Try to be polite."

Her nostrils flared. Margaret used to give me that look when she was nervous. Clara kissed me on the cheek and started up the path.

The girl was smug as ever, standing alongside her lawyer on the front porch, hand on her hip like waiting three minutes might kill her. She wore a yellow blouse covered in sunflowers. Her breasts had grown even larger since the funeral, same as what happened to Margaret when she was pregnant with Mark and with Clara, only Margaret's were small to begin with, so they never got to be grotesque.

"You dress colorfully for a widow," I said, taking a seat in the reading chair.

"It's been three months." She flushed underneath her black cheeks.

"Mr. Gilbert," said the lawyer, "with respect, your daughter-in-law has been through at least as much as you."

I leaned back in my chair. Clara clattered around in the kitchen. The rain started, like a herd of cattle stomping across the roof.

Clara came in carrying Margaret's favorite tea service. I don't drink tea, but I bought that set for Margaret because she liked the oriental style, puny cups without handles that burnt your fingers. I always thought the set would be better locked away in our hutch with the china plates. When I told Margaret so, she slapped me on the knee and called me a sorry old coot.

"Pa, where are your manners?" Clara said, setting the tray on the coffee table. "Please, Kanita, sit down." Clara cupped the girl's elbow and led her toward the couch.

The long-haired lawyer, dressed for business though he evidently had a distaste for the barbershop, sat down and got straight to it while Clara poured tea.

"As you know, Mr. Gilbert, Mrs. Gilbert has been well provided for by your son, and would like to carry on the family's ranching tradition."

"Girl," I said, "how do you expect to run a farm?"

She stared at me with her big brown eyes. She had an earring in one nose. Her hair was kinked tight against her scalp.

The lawyer kept on. "We know your financial situation leaves something to be desired. Mrs. Gilbert would like to make an offer to alleviate your responsibilities."

"Speak plain English, damn it!"

Clara's arm jerked. The spout clinked against the lawyer's cup.

"We know why you're here," I said. "That girl wants my land. She wants the farm I sweated blood to own. Over there"—I pointed to the handwoven rug by the hearth—"Mark took his first steps. The couch where you're sitting is where my wife and I spent our evenings with the television. You want to buy that from me? Well you can forget it!"

My heart pumped fast and my breath came up short, but I'd said my piece.

"They'll foreclose," the girl said. "Don't you understand? I want to keep this home in the family."

"Kanita," I said, "you are *not* the family."

I got up and headed for the door without my coat.

Clara didn't need me there anyway. If I didn't cooperate, she would take the girl's loan and use it to pay the mortgage. As soon as I dropped dead, she would sell. They had it all worked out.

Rain was coming down now. It was well past dusk. Mud splashed my bibs, and my bones ached in the cold. I kept seeing Mark's face in the casket.

Until I got to the barn I didn't see anything but puddles and muck and those pressed-down eyelids.

I don't know why, but a few yards from the door I stopped. The air sizzled. A white streak cut through the sky, and light flashed through the body of the barn. It was quiet, like the air was holding its breath. Then the thunderclap rang out. The horses screamed. I stumbled back with my hands over my ears. When I looked up, the barn was burning.

Hooves pounded on the door. I opened it and jumped back. Derby's coat gleamed as he galloped past. Fire lit up the sky. It seemed like every inch of wood had caught. A screeching neigh came from inside.

I covered my nose and mouth with one hand and went in.

Smoke clogged my eyes and throat, so I got down and crawled. Flames roiled all around and shot out of the loft. Pieces of roof rained down. I had no time at all, but God be damned, Baxter was Clara's favorite horse.

I was pretty near the stall when a crossbeam glanced off my right leg. I didn't feel anything at first, but soon the pain shot up. I raised myself by the arms while I got on one knee. Then I crawled, dragging the bad leg behind. I thought of poor Clara finding me there, and I prayed to Margaret to guide me out. I prayed also about what I might find in the stables. Baxter had stopped making noise.

My hands came up against the hot stall door. I pulled with my arms and pushed with my good foot. I got lightheaded and leaned over the door. There was Baxter, laid out in the burning straw. His hide hadn't caught yet, but a twelve-by-twelve lay across his hips.

His body shivered. He turned one eye on me, wide and terrified.

Smoke and pain got the better of me then. I fell back. It felt like I was soaring.

The dull throb in my leg got sharper. I woke up enough to notice the cast running up my thigh. A white hospital bracelet circled my wrist, but I was in my own room. It was late morning, judging by the angle of the sun through the window. A cane leaned against my nightstand, and a wheelchair sat in the corner.

"Pa?" The door opened. Clara stuck her head in. She hurried to my bedside and kissed my cheek. She smelled of rawhide and lemon shampoo.

"I thought you were yelling out in your sleep again."

"What did I say?"

Her face grew still. "Mark."

"Oh."

"You had a close one. You should've seen Mr. Benson pull you out of the barn."

"The lawyer?"

"Yep. Here, have some water."

She sat on the bed in her mother's posture, one hand over my legs. "Today I took Derby out for the first time since the storm," she said. "He got quite a run that night. It's been two days, you know." She looked hard at me. "Did you see Baxter?"

I nodded and lowered my eyes. I'd had Baxter for fifteen years, and that was a good horse.

She started crying. "Poor old nag . . ."

I sighed. This was just the scene I tried to avoid by jumping into a burning barn. Clara got the hint and dried her eyes with the back of her hand.

"Sorry," she said. "I'll get you something to eat."

But I had to go to the bathroom. Clara helped me to the toilet. She helped me back in bed and went to make breakfast. I heard voices in the kitchen. When she brought the tray, she closed the door behind her with her heel.

She placed the tray across my legs and unrolled the napkin.

"Got a friend over?"

Clara pushed the ringlets back from her face. She rested the fork and knife next to my plate. The eggs smelled delicious. I grabbed the fork and took a bite.

"Kanita is staying with us for a few days. She wants to see you, Pa, when you're feeling better."

I chewed harder and reached for my orange juice. "Now why would I want to see her?"

Clara stood up. "Because she's gonna bear you a grandbaby."

The look on her face dared me to say something.

"What would your mother say? Did you consider that?"

Clara's freckled cheeks turned rosy. "While we're talking," she said, "you ought to know about our other guest. I hired a man. He's a good worker, and I need the help, so please don't fuss."

I stopped chewing. She took the tray and closed the door behind her.

That night my leg hurt to the marrow, and lying still didn't help any. I thought about all the things I could be doing, like pruning the orchard or cleaning up that barley patch.

Of course, the hired man could take care of that now. Who did Clara call first, I wondered, the ambulance or our new man? Disrespectful is what it was. I smelled a rat. A black rat. My Clara was holding court with the Queen of Sheba.

Then it hit me. How long did the girl plan on staying? What if she never left?

That thought crawled through me like a worm in an apple. Pretty soon the bedsheets were damp. Then the itch started in, from my knee clear down to my ankle.

I sat up and put the good leg on the floor. Then I heaved the cast over. I stood and hopped to the corner. It hurt like hell and I almost tumbled, but I managed to plant my bony behind in the wheelchair.

The only sound in the hallway was the folk music Clara listened to while she slept. Mark's room was quiet. I tried not to think about the girl sleeping greedily in a bed I'd built myself. I rounded the corner toward the kitchen and caught a light snoring from the guest room. Had to be the hired man. So, here we all were. I half expected to find the lawyer sleeping on the living room couch.

I wheeled around the corner, grabbed a wooden spoon out of a drawer, and stuck it under my cast. Never felt anything so wonderful in my life. After a while, I could have fallen asleep right there.

Maybe I ought to sprawl out and play possum, I thought, give somebody a good scare in the morning. It would be like those protests Clara was so fond of. I always figured they were the last resort of the powerless, and by God, it was about time I held one. Besides, Clara had no problem surprising me with a hired man. And Kanita, well, when Mark first brought her to dinner she was the biggest surprise of all. He introduced her. I shook the girl's hand. Margaret cooked supper and went to bed with a delicate stomach. I found her there, face to the wall. She said, *That's the last time I ever serve someone who should be serving me.*

I lowered myself to the floor. I was fixing to lie on my chest with the spoon in front of me, but the leg went itchy again, so I picked up the spoon and scratched.

"What on earth?"

I never heard Mark's door open. The girl must have been on the couch the whole time.

I kept scratching, trying to look dignified from down on the linoleum. "Well I should ask you the same thing," I said. "This ain't a maternity ward."

She rested a hand on her belly. "It's not a convalescent home, either."

"It's whatever I say it is."

She came over, pulled the spoon out of my hand, and placed it on the counter above. "It chafes worse if you do that."

"Listen here, missy. This is my leg and my house and my spoon. You are a guest of Clara's, which is the only reason you're here."

"I never have been a guest of yours." She patted her stomach. "But your grandson likes it here. He senses his daddy in the place."

"My son left home sixteen years ago, and you saw to it that he stayed away. Give me that spoon."

She turned to the window. Her white gown hung tight across her body. The moonlight accented her now substantial curves. She took a breath. "Mark always said he would come home the day you let me come with him, if only for a visit. It was you who never let me stay here."

"That was Margaret's rule," I said.

She wiped her eyes with a sleeve and handed me the spoon. "Does it make a difference?"

I set the spoon on the floor. "I suppose it does."

"Because you would have accepted our money sooner?"

"I didn't want his charity then, and I don't want yours now."

The girl pursed her lips, and that damn nose ring glinted at me. "You may not want help, George, but you do need it."

"You're the one who needs help," I said. "Running a casino and . . . dancing? Tell me, Kanita, what will you do with the farm once it's yours? Put up a race track? Make Derby your prize-winning stud?"

"I want this farm to stay the way it is. I told you, you don't have to worry."

"I've heard that before. When I asked you to bury my son at home, where he belongs. Don't worry, you said. Then you laid him to rest in the city that ruined him. So excuse me if I don't take you at your word."

She took a step toward me. "Mark said there *was* a time he was ruined, and he had to claw his way out of trouble with no help from you. Maybe you shouldn't have turned him away when he came to you on his knees."

I got a flash of my boy standing at the doorstep, covered in rain. "You ruined my son!" I said.

The girl grabbed the spoon off the floor and held it over me. "I saved him. Who do you think organized our business? Does that sound like Mark to you? He needed help, always did, and I gave it to him. You wouldn't. That's you and Margaret both."

"How dare you say her name. It's your precious casino that killed him, and you know it. Get out of my house!"

"You see?" she said. "Listen to yourself! Do you think I'd bury my husband where a bitter old man gets to decide if I can visit?"

"I'll burn this place before I let it go to a meddlesome whore like you!"

A door swung open. The hall light came on. I kept hollering, and pretty soon Clara and the hired man were hovering over me. They lifted me back in the chair. Clara wheeled me to bed and shut me in.

The girl and Clara spoke in hushed tones in the hallway. Then the girl started crying. It reminded me of the night my son died. Kanita called us in a fit. I answered the phone. She said, "Daddy, Mark's gone."

Daddy, she said. *Daddy*. I almost liked the way it sounded. She made me feel tenderness in the worst moment of my life.

The next morning, Clara set a teacup on the bedside table. She didn't meet my eyes. She had on a loose-fitting house dress she liked to wear. The red print went with her curls. "You're pretty as a picture," I said.

She put down the teapot and folded her arms across her chest. "Drink your tea."

"Don't you know I hate tea? What's got into you?"

"What do you think, Pa? You know how rude you were last night. And all Kanita's doing is saving the farm so it doesn't go to the bank?"

"She's saving it for herself."

Clara sighed and sat next to me. She stroked my head like I was a dog. It felt good, but I tried not to show it.

"Mark loved Kanita. Isn't that enough?"

"She is a dancer, Clara. A dirty whore."

"Pa, she's a *ballet* dancer! Please, this needs to stop."

"It'll stop when I'm dead."

"Keep this up and that won't be too long, because I'll kill you."

I chuckled. "Now you sound like your mother."

A breeze caught the lace window curtain.

"No," she said, "I don't. If I sounded like Ma, I would be egging you on each time you insulted Kanita."

"Clara," I warned.

She stood up. "If I sounded like Ma, I would be calling her a sight more dreadful things than what you called her last night."

"Quiet," I said. "Don't you dare talk ill of your mother."

Clara stomped her foot. "If I was Ma, I would have slammed the door in her face and said, maybe this'll teach Mark to gamble and round up sluts. I would've said better my son was *dead* than marry a coon! See, Pa? Now I sound like my mother. Or don't you remember what she was really like?"

I turned my head away and stared at the green-patterned wallpaper.

The bed springs shifted as she sat back down. "Did you mean what you said last night, about burning the place?"

"Course not," I said. "Besides, nature's taking care of that without my help." I turned toward her. My girl looked older. The worry lines around her eyes were the same shape as mine.

"That's not what I mean." She put a hand on my forearm. "I've worked side by side with you on this farm for thirty years. My whole life. It's my home too. Please don't forget."

I saw what she was driving at. There were things I could do, involving lawyers and papers. She was afraid I might betray her. My eyes welled up at the thought.

Clara kissed me on the forehead and got up. The door shut, and I was left alone with a kettle full of cooling tea.

Steadying my left hand with my right, I poured some. Spilt a good amount into the tray. It tasted bitter, but warm, not so bad as all that.

I hadn't drunk tea since I did it to please Margaret. On lazy Saturday mornings my wife would sip at one of these cups and read in bed. I held the newspaper and watched her from the corner of my eye. When she was deep into a book she got this look of concentration. She leaned in, eyes wide, long curly hair falling around her shoulders. I watched her hands turn the page. Her hands were delicate, long like a piano player's, calloused from hours spent knitting and tending the animals, warm and coarse. When they touched me I knew I had a home.

Those first weeks, I stayed in bed except when Clara wheeled me outside. I did a lot of resting, which was fine as long as I was tired. But I spent long nights not sleeping, looking out the window at what was left of the barn, the way the moonlight hit the foundation. It was all char and rubble except for that layer of rock dug into the ground.

Nights it rained, I thought of Mark drenched on our doorstep. He was seventeen. He left home the year before and we were mad about it. Hadn't seen him in eleven months. Margaret opened the door, and there he was. My son. He looked sallow. He'd gambled his money away and needed help, whatever we could give. A place to stay.

Margaret said he'd be welcome once he put his own life back together. She closed the door on him. I watched through the window as he walked away.

When Mark bought his casino five years later, I congratulated my wife on taking a stand I wouldn't have.

Our son had no tolerance for debtors. He sent some associates, rough types, to collect from a man who owed him. The next week, the man followed Mark home and shot him down on his front porch. Kanita had his dinner waiting inside.

Four months later I was on my feet. No wheelchair, no walker, no cane. One morning in April, I was having coffee in the living room. The scent of fresh apple pie drifted through the house. I heard a sharp moan from Kanita's room. Clara's skirts rustled in the kitchen. A door opened and closed.

The clock above the television ticked off a few minutes. There was a loud cry, then Clara's low, soothing voice.

The door opened. They limped into the living room. The girl's arm hung over Clara's shoulder. Clara bowed under the weight. I lowered my cup and met my daughter's eyes.

"Pa, the door!" she said.

I snapped to it and let them out, followed to the sedan, opened the passenger door. I grabbed hold of the girl's arm to help Clara lower her in. Kanita doubled over and screamed.

Clara kissed me on the cheek. "I'll call when there's news."

She split to the driver's side and started the engine.

I stayed near the phone all day, took the receiver with me when I went outside. I was jarring in the pantry when it rang.

"Pa, it's a boy," Clara said. "Mark Junior!"

I screwed the cap onto a jar of preserves and placed it on the shelf.

"Just wait till you see him," she said. "How soon can you get here?"

I remembered holding Mark when he was born. He was only six pounds, the length of my forearm. He grabbed my finger, crying. Then he looked at me and stopped.

"Pa?"

I stuck a label on a jar—*strawberry*. Kanita would be laid out, exhausted, a proud spark in her eye. Even with Clara holding her hand through the contractions, she had to be missing her husband. I imagined taking the mulatto baby from her arms, and smiling at her, which I'd never actually done, and it seemed almost possible.

"Daddy?"

But to Clara, I'd always been Pa. Only Mark ever called me Daddy, which is why the girl said it when she told me he was dead.

"I won't be meeting you there," I said, gentle as I could.

Clara's line was quiet.

I put the strawberry jar on the shelf.

There were muffled sounds, like she was covering the receiver. Then something like a sob. Finally, her line clicked.

I decided to get some air.

I walked to the north pasture. My limp was pretty bad, so I took it slow. March rains had been lush, and spring was everywhere in evidence. The hills that blocked out Chavez City were bright green. Clara and the hired man had painted the fence posts and got rid of the gophers. The barley grew in dense orange spikes. All the weeds in the field were gone.

I passed the footings where the barn door used to be and stood for a while at Baxter's stall. A warm breeze was blowing. To the east, the orchard trees swayed. I could hear the cattle going on in the pasture, acres away. It surprised me how open it all felt.

A charred piece of metal stuck up from under the rubble. The weather vane. I bent over, carefully, and picked it up. I sat down on a ledge and ran my hands over the twisted metal. You could still make out the shape of the rooster and the nub of the pointer sticking out.

The Barn

Mark and I built the barn over months and months. When we were done, I climbed up on the roof and attached this vane. Clara, Mark, and Margaret all clapped when I finished nailing it down and spun it.

The ground was mostly ash, but once I cleared that away, I was able to dig a hole and drop the base of the vane inside. The nub pointed at the hills, toward the city. That didn't seem right, so I shifted it around and pointed it at the house. I imagined Clara, Kanita, the baby, and the hired man snug around the hearth. I recalled the give of Margaret's finger beneath her white gold wedding band, the tears in her eyes as I slid it over her knuckle.

I filled in the hole and steadied the vane with a hunk of concrete.