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My Barn

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Abigail Swanson

As soon as the sun has brightened the sky enough to pick my way across the field, I find myself pausing at the unpainted side of my small barn. Three sides have been repainted in classic barn red, dull and utilitarian. The back is still painted the dusty straw yellow of my husband’s mistress’ hair. The wild grasses that butt against the barn are cut low and clean, the goats my daughter is raising for 4-H have been more useful that I could have imagined. The large front door slides open easily on the freshly sanded and greased track. The barn is brimming with life, the chickens cluck around my ankles as I feed them too much scratch, but who ever heard of spoiled chickens? One of the hinges on Daisy’s stall is loose; it wiggles as she brushes past it and lumbers out the door to the pasture. She’s walking slower these days, udder heavy and swinging, the calf will be here any day.

The barn cats, Smoke and Fire, call me over to admire their six kittens. Their eyes are just open, still milky and sticky, but they totter over to the edge of their straw nest to lick my fingertips. Five of the young ones are dark grey like their mother, but one female is orange like her father, and together they light up the dark corner of the barn. She’ll be a wild one too, but a great mouser. I fluff the escaping straw into the corner and fluff their nest a bit. While Smoke was giving birth Fire never left her side, licking her ears, nuzzling her head after each birth. He only left to kill a mouse which he presented to her after the sixth, the little wet bundle of orange fur who I think I’ll call Ember.

Climbing up the ladder to the hay loft I can hear the birds cooing in the rafters. The soft rustle is calming. The hay loft is nearly bare, only half a bale in the corner, but I sweep it again anyway in anticipation of my first harvest. The emptiness is no longer frightening, I know I will fill it, in a few days at the most, and we’ll make it through another winter.

Camp Kitchens

Jake Herold

If you have ever been in a camp kitchen, you know exactly what I’m talking about. If not, don’t miss out before you croak.

The outside always looks downright sketchy. A beat-up screen door seems almost ominous. The thin metal screen on all of them is bent in at least six inches, the stain is flaking off, and doorknobs are optional. They are all held back by springs, but the doors themselves are light, surprising you with a loud and fast explosion of noise when they close. You wince a little the first time you walk in every season, forgetting to put your foot back and catch the door. By the end of the season, you have it down by rote. They all squeak a little...

Once through the door, you notice that your feet aren’t quite even. Don’t sweat it, that’s just the missing tile and a half from the linoleum floor. As you cast your eyes upward, you notice the cook glance at you, and then busily return to what she was doing. It’s not because she’s mean, it’s because she’s busy. If you stop in and help though, she’ll be more than happy to chat with you. More than likely she’s chopping veggies. No one is quite sure where all the veggies come from, or where they go, but they are always being chopped.

To one side there will be a set of 8 burners for boiling water and the like. If there is someone in the kitchen, there is something on the stove. There is also a 2x6 flat top griddle: a little greasy, but otherwise well taken care of. There’s a small army of spices keeping lookout from the stove’s overhang. General Garlic commands his legion of aromatic companions. He’s the king, going in everything that isn’t a dessert. His foot soldiers of season salt and rosemary valiantly throw themselves into danger at the cook’s whim.

Right across from the stove is THE ISLAND. The Island is always the heart of the kitchen. It is where foot marks are worn in from the hours standing there dicing veggies. An iPod speaker with quirky music, turned down just low enough so that the diners don’t hear, is consistently nearby.

Hobart is always skulking about. A big steel block of a machine, constantly steaming... a friend and a nemesis. It’s great that he helps get the dishes done, but the frequent burns make you grum-