

The Firstborn Barn

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One day out of the blue, Trish and I conceived the idea we were going to have a barn. It was going to be just like the one John McGregor had, one we had often admired as we drove past his farm, standing on the hill above the apple orchards and looking back at us: tall, strong, and built to last a lifetime. We didn't think about the money, or care about the time it would take to raise it, nor did we ever consider the cost to us in terms of mind and spirit, when the end finally came.

Nothing shy of a miracle, the barn came together as if some intervening hand with a design of its own knew exactly where each part belonged, how handsome and comfortable it would become, and how much love and dedication we would be investing in it throughout the years. Trish and I were amateurs when we started, as are all hopeful builders, but by the time we finished some eighteen years later, we knew every joint of that barn was perfect, every beam solidly connected. From memory, we could point out its every scar or flaw, knowing when and how they came to be, and finding some characteristic in our own makeup that matched in an inherently satisfying and familiar way.

Not without its billet of regimented seasoning, the barn was drafted to stand guard through freezing winds and swirling snows; sheeting rains and flooding took their tolls. Then came the buckling and boiling heat, and the marshaling rigors of harvest time. The barn stood always at attention, proud and without complaint, ready to serve.

In our minds, the barn was and still is a work of perfection. Call it what you may, fate or fortune, something had other plans for our creation though, plans with no rhyme or reason, and having no countenance among peaceful folk like us.

The firestorms came to our part of the land unexpectedly. Not of the predictable kind, racing across the land, where trenches can be dug in the dirt, or fronts cleared and embattlements placed to halt the advancing echelons. This rifling, unwanted kind of death was from the sky. A force coming like a wind-driven blaze, fast, and hot, and filled with fiery projectiles. Striking all around at random, leaving nowhere to run, no siren wail of warning, and in open fields, no bunker strong enough to

withstand the crashing, aerial assaults.

Trish read the headlines to me one day last June, how hundreds of families around the country had experienced terrible losses to these firestorms. Maybe we were in denial, that those families were too far away for it to matter, that our luck was better, our god more attentive. We just never expected it to happen to us, and could not believe it when it did.

While we were too far away to protect it, our barn took three hits in the line of duty before it collapsed under its own weight. One sliced in near a support beam, setting it to quivering, ready to fall. The second plunged through the front wall and broke the center spine in half. The most deadly of all caved the roof in, then went straight to the core and set the whole structure ablaze, with nothing to stanch the burning.

Many of our friends and neighbors suffered terribly as well during the holocausts, and we grieved their losses beside them, as deeply as we mourned our own. Not a one of us ever received a reasoned explanation from the authorities, nor were the costs of mounting the defenses ever justified.

Conceived by the unknown, sustained by the unseen, destroyed by the unthinkable; all that was left of our young barn was a shell. Even now, in its lifeless form, it held nothing more and nothing less than a lifetime of hopes, dreams, and loving memories.

Trish and I would build again, but it could never be the same. After all, there could be only one firstborn.