

A CHARACTER SKETCH

John McCrum

The fire ate away at the barn with ravenous ferocity. From time to time a rafter beam would fall heavily to the floor, spitting showers of embers and flame into the night sky. Amid the awful roar and crackle of the fire there could be heard the frightened cry of a child.

Firemen and farmers struggled to subdue the blaze, frantically shooting powerful streams of water onto the remains of the roof. There was no chance to save the barn. The men, resigned to this realization, fought with one sole purpose in mind: to save the livestock and prevent the fire from spreading to the fields.

Bright burning chunks of wood burst into a spray of sparks, illuminating the night like a great roman candle. The roof was now beginning to cave in. With an agonizing groan, it slid slowly to the floor, a mass of seared timber.

Danny stared at the blaze, rooted hypnotically to the ground by the sight of the fiery barn. Just that afternoon he had been up in the hay mow; it had been replaced by the emptiness of the night sky. He smelled the acrid odor of burnt hay, as well as the singed sleeve of his jacket. At least he could breathe now. The blanket of smoke which had choked the boy as he led the cattle out of the barn had now lifted. Danny wondered how his father, Shug, had managed to get all the equipment out of the barn. He had seen him repeatedly dash into the burning building, despite the anxious warnings of the firemen. The boy spotted his father now, perched atop the seat of the big green combine he had driven out of the inferno.

Shug Jordan slumped back into the charred seat of the combine and wiped the sweat from his brow with the sweep of his cap. It was the same cap he had worn twenty-one years ago, when he had helped his father build the barn. Now he clutched the tattered green feed cap in despair, as he watched the building he had sweated and toiled in for so many years crumble into smoke and ash. What more could a man do? He had gotten all the machinery out of the barn, and Danny had led all twenty-three head of Holstein cattle into the far end of the barn lot. But the hay crop was completely lost, as well as several bins of grain sorghum. The big farmer raised his blackened hands to his face, a weatherbeaten countenance creased with the furrows of his profession.

The fire had subsided; its dull roar now replaced by the slow whine of the dying embers. Danny ran to the combine and scrambled up to the seat. He clutched his father by the shoulder.

"Pa, it's Fuzzy. He got scared an' broke loose an' now he's in the corn field! What'll we do?"

Shug Jordan looked at the grim expression on his son's face and laughed, putting a big arm around the little boy's shoulder. He had lost a barn, but he could laugh. He had his tractor, his fields, and his son. They'd make out.

"We'll let ol' Fuzz chew on the corn fer tonight, Danny," he said, with a tired grin. "He's on the bony side, anyhow."

With that, he tossed the old green feed cap on his son's head and helped him off the combine. Wiping the grease from his charred hands, the big farmer trudged slowly back to the house.

A Tom Swifty

Sandra Long

"Hello, Mr. Vonnegut," he said curtly.

"We have to read *Moby Dick!*" he wailed.

"We will all die someday," the minister said gravely.