The Burning of Hide

by Michelle Rose

He could see his breath as he headed up the lane toward the house. It was less effort to walk in the tire tracks where the snow was packed solid. The rubber soles of his boots squeaked on the hardened snow with his every step. The kitchen light was still on and he knew there was a plate in the oven for him. Marie would be over the sink finishing the dishes.

He pulled his watch from the pocket of his overalls. The stainless steel watchband had been mangled by an auger and was lost in the corn bin somewhere. All that remained was the face of his watch. He could barely see through the scratches on the crystal. The upstairs lights were off at the house. The children were in bed so it had to be past 9:00.

The smell of burning wood escaped the chimney, but the smoke was invisible in the darkness. Marie kept the woodstove full as a fire burned constantly. He knew she would need more wood brought in.

He stepped out of the tire tracks to walk across the yard. It had been a long day and he was tired. His steps were heavy and almost forced as he moved across the crusted snow-topped yard. The sore on his ankle was rubbed raw through his worn sock. Marie had given him the boots for Christmas. She learned early that need always outweighed want.

He loaded himself down with wood and struggled to open the screen door. Once inside the cluttered porch, he dropped the wood in the old tin box Marie had found at a garage sale. He heard her drying the silverware in the kitchen. He heard every fork, knife, and spoon drop in its proper place in the drawer. They still used the same silverware her parents bought them as a wedding present.

Since the beginning they were forced to skimp and save, but they always got by. In his heart, he knew he would have married Marie someday. She was the only woman he had ever been with. They wouldn't have made it without his parents. Those first few years with three little kids were the hardest for them. He knew he owed a lot to his dad.

The yellow-tiger cat scratched its way through the hole in the bottom of the screen door and ran to its familiar bowl of catfood. He let the cat eat even though he knew Marie had already fed it. He even reached down to pet it, but the cat scowled at the sight of his vast gloved-hands.

The door opened and slammed shut three times as he carried enough wood in to last through the night. He figured Marie would want to go to bed early and without saying anything to her, he walked back down to the barn.

The glow from the outside security light reflected off the barn's tin roof and made it look blue to him. Once inside the barn, he turned the barn light on out of habit and not necessity. He could walk through
the barn blindfolded if he had to. It was his presence and not the light that startled the cows. All of them hadn’t been shut up in the barn since that summer, during the Blackleg epidemic. Every head of cattle in the county had to be tested and vaccinated. Hobsons lost their entire herd. He only lost two old cows and a yearling bull. It was the first time since his childhood that he smelled hide burn.

It was as if the cows sensed his betrayal. Their black eyes watched his every move with unusual caution. He felt like he was feeding someone else’s herd. The barn was misty from the steam of their breath. In the light of the barn, their breath was yellow. It was better to use the yellow light bulbs to keep insects away, especially in the summer.

The cows jumped as he dropped two bales of straw from the loft. All the bales of straw and hay were neatly stacked and counted in preparation for the next day. The fact that two bales of bedding meant two less that would be sold hadn’t even occurred to him.

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I guess I oughta be getting back up to the house. Marie is probly thinkin I had heartattack by now. A heart attack. If I haven’t had one by now I’ll never have one. She is still drying the dishes and acting like always. Just like nothing is goin on with us. This wasn’t ever really her farm. Not the way it is mine. A man gets close to the land and breathes with it. She never felt the dirt or prayed for rain the way I did. She never even smelled that hide burn. She sewed and cooked and cleaned. All but that porch. She said the porch was mine. The rest of the house is so damn clean. I just want to be alone. She is always alone and probly doesn’t even want to be. To be a kid again — or once. Think we grew up too fast. God, we were young. Expected to be parents before we were ready. Guess we get what we deserve. But, Jesus, why? For cryin out loud, I worked damn hard all my life. Did what was right and for what? For Christ’s sake what has it all got me. What did I do that was so wrong? I don’t even know when it started happening. Answer me, god damn it, answer me. Guess I saw it comin and just didn’t want to give up. I held out for awhile. Just hate to let it all go. Don’t think she knows how I tried. She keeps right on goin. And maybe that isn’t her fault. But she acts like it don’t make a difference. Maybe it doesn’t. People say she’s strong and God knows she’s good with children. She’d take in a stray rat if she thought it was hungry. People always take to her. Guess they wonder what she saw in me. We were young, but I don’t think we were ever kids.

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Leaving the barn light on, he walked across the lane to the tool shed. He pushed the sliding door open and turned the light on. He wanted to make sure everything was ready for the next day. He had worked two days cleaning out the shed. All his tools were arranged upon three flatbed wagons. The accumulation of 15 years tinkering
with clogged combine heads, changing flat tires, and patching busted hoses was all laid out before him. It was always easier to fix things himself rather than calling someone to come out and do it for him. It took awhile, but he had become a pretty decent mechanic over the years. In the corner lay the red tool box his father gave him. It rusted with years of no use and in it were his father's tools that hadn't been touched in almost 20 years. He had convinced himself they wouldn't sell and decided to keep them out of the auction.

He went back to the barn to give the cows some hay. It was cold and the extra ruffage would be good for them. He climbed to the loft and threw down a bale of hay.

He remembered the day they put up hay — 100 degrees and humid. But it rained the next day, just like he thought it would. He had to pay $4 an hour, but he got good help and filled the barn. Roy Rigdon got stuck with hay down for a week before it got dry enough to bale again.

Still up in the loft, he grabbed the rope he had tied up for the kids to play on and swung it across the barn. A $2 rope was worth more to them than their $40 bicycles. But it made sense to him.

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At least the kids got to be on the farm for awhile. Was good for them, but I can see them growing up fast too. Tried to keep them from it. Just so they don't have it like Marie and me. They're getting to that age. Might be good for them to know something besides farming. But it's all I know and all I could give them. Someone ought to tell them I did all I could. What I thought was best. I did do everything I could. I tried. They have to know I tried.

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He looked through the door toward the house and saw that the kitchen light was off. Marie had gone to bed early. His head dropped into his worn leather gloves and he wept. The cows had forgotten he was even in the barn. Most of them had bedded down for the night, huddled together for warmth.

After awhile he climbed to the rafters to untie the rope. There was no need to keep it up and have it in the way tomorrow. But his hands were clumsy from the cold and his gloves were too thick to grasp. Frustrated, he slid down the rope to the knot at the bottom and pushed himself back and forth across the barn for what seemed a very long time.

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Easy to see why kids would rather play in an old barn. Guess it could be just about anything for them — the way kids think. They say kids bounce back from things better than us cause they can just pick
up anywhere and go on. I remember when Dad died. He was gone a long time before that. I watched him. I should have sensed it. Maybe I did. Mom just went on with everything. Don’t think they ever talked about anything but the farm and the needs of us kids. Never forget the look in his eyes — blank, open, staring, but not seeing. There he was right inside the shed hunched over the wheel of the old dump truck. Had the shed locked up tighter than a tick. Still can’t stand the smell of exhaust. Was the best dump truck we had and still runs like a gem. Ought to get a good price for it tomorrow. I remember him saying he never could use a gun — taught me not to use one either. Don’t even own one. Didn’t have to. Farmers never go to war.

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He jumped off the rope and climbed back up to the loft and onto the rafter where the rope was tied. His heart pounded against his chest and he could feel his head throbbing with his pulse. He threw off his gloves and watched them fall to the ground. Silently, they landed in the straw without affecting the sleeping cows. He pulled the rope up to him and was able to untie the knot at the bottom. Leaving one end tied to the rafter he knotted the other end.

The cows were startled by the sudden jerk and watched the heavy swing of the rope until it hung still.