

Jerri Bell

MEMORIAL DAY

Early that morning Vern Caldwell sought refuge in the barn on the hill, where his silence would have neither cost nor consequences. Insulated in a soft blanket of timothy-scented, pre-dawn darkness, he could pretend for a little longer that the walls of the barn would hold back the outside world, that the familiar rhythm of the morning chores would determine the cadence of the day, that the strength of his back and hands would be enough. That today would demand no more from him than any other day.

Vern's great-grandfather had built the barn almost a hundred years earlier, just before the First World War. The barn had welcomed Vern's father home from Iwo Jima, and it had been waiting when Vern returned from Southeast Asia. With periodic maintenance, it would still be standing in a hundred years, when this war and even the next one were over. Although Vern had never been a coward—his wife Reba had pinned his Bronze Star and his Purple Heart to the dark suit waiting for him on his bed—he turned his thoughts away from the past, and away from the future.

He paused in the doorway and ran his hand over the jamb. The barn had weathered to gray, but the deeply etched grain of the wood under his hand revealed the strength in the boards: chestnut, cut during the blight. The heart of a chestnut tree remained stout when its outer layers could no longer carry the tree's lifeblood to its limbs. Chestnut wood endured the seasons, the elements, and gravity, even though the trees themselves had fallen before the onslaught of a foreign fungus.

Startled by Vern's presence, a barn swallow dipped from the rafters and cleaved the air inches from his head. His fingers followed an invisible eddy over the cold, naked scalp behind his ears. The high-and-tight haircut no longer felt natural, the way it had during the long days and longer nights in the jungle; but it created a comforting illusion of once-familiar discipline and tradition. They said that there were no ex-Marines, only former Marines. It was true. *Semper fidelis*. He could rely on the Corps and its traditions long after he'd put away the uniform.

The swallow twittered and flew past him again. In grade school science class, his son Jimmy had written a report about barn swallows. They kept down the population of insects that tormented the cattle. They flew farther and worked harder than any other species of bird to feed their nestlings. In naval tattoos, they symbolized good luck and

homecoming. Jimmy had worked hard on that report, earned an A. It went without saying that Vern had been proud of him. He resolved once again not to think, especially of homecomings. Much would be required of him later that day; for now, he could just do his morning chores.

The circle of lantern light stopped a few feet from Vern's boot. Darkness reduced tools and machinery to indistinct shapes in tones of charcoal and smoke. He recognized the outline of Jimmy's once-beloved red Schwinn. Jimmy had not asked Vern to save the bicycle, but he'd been keeping it oiled and free of rust for Jimmy's son Josh, who was five now and almost big enough to learn to ride it. Above the bicycle, sharpened and hung neatly between two six-inch nails, the blade of a long scythe gleamed. Vern turned away from it, hung the lantern on a nail, and forked two bales of hay through an opening to the floor below.

Ghostly rustles and murmurs drifted down to him from the empty hayloft: angry muddaubers, a small barn owl, the unnamed barn cats hunting mice and blacksnakes. Or perhaps just a soft sigh of wind curling under the corrugated tin roof. He would have to sweep dust and the last wisps of straw out of the loft soon, bring in bales of new hay and stack them. He felt his father's presence like a hand on his shoulder. They had spent hours working side-by-side in the barn. His father, a man of few words, had spoken only to give him directions, to answer his questions, or to correct his errors and oversights. He wondered: What would his father have said about this day?

Vern and Jimmy had also spent hours working quietly together in the barn. Jimmy had always worked dutifully and diligently, but he hadn't needed to tell Vern that he'd rather be anywhere else. He lit out to enlist in the Marines the day after his high school graduation, re-upped for four after 9/11, and then deployed for the invasion of Iraq.

They'd replaced the pine stairs to the barn's lower level together when Jimmy took leave between his second and third deployments. They'd worked mostly in silence then, too; they wouldn't have been able to hear each other over the pounding of the hammers anyway. Vern hadn't asked when Jimmy was going to get out, come home, and take over the farm so he could retire. He hadn't needed to be told; he'd known the answer. Jimmy had reenlisted a second time, which would put him over ten with the Corps. That meant he'd decided to be a career Marine. He would serve ten more years, maybe even twenty. Vern also had not asked about the deployments—the first to Fallujah, the second and third to Baghdad. Baghdad was a long way from Khe Sanh, but some things never changed.

The stairs were still clean and new, golden in the lantern light. At the bottom, Vern threw a switch and extinguished the lantern. The stone walls and cramped ceiling of the barn's lower level absorbed most of the bare bulbs' dim glow. The pens, occupied by eight cows and a tired old hog, cast shadows over aisles where ancient manure had been ground to dust in the crevices of the sandstone floor. Desperate to relieve the hot, swollen ache in her teat, one cow lowed and stamped. Her calf had been sold for veal

and rennet. Her tail swished at flies—a futile gesture.

In Vietnam, Vern and his fellow Marines had talked about lots of things. Booze, cars, girls back home and in Saigon. R and R. Thirty and a wake-up. Jobs, plans, dreams, whatever else might await them when they got home. They never discussed whether the death of a single soldier had any significance or value to the country. Vern had not discussed it with Jimmy, either. He would have, maybe, if there had been time. Could have, certainly. Should have, definitely. Woulda, coulda, shoulda: the gunnery sergeant's eternal, derisive sneer that covered a Marine's sins of both commission and omission. Woulda, coulda, shoulda—but when you didn't, and when some things couldn't be changed, there was nothing left to do but shoulder the responsibility and soldier on.

In the barn, one day was the same as another. As long as the chores lasted, he could tell himself that today was no different than the day before the government car had pulled up to the house carrying a captain and a chaplain in dress uniforms. They had come to see Brittany, Jimmy's wife; it went without saying that they hadn't come bearing good news. They had come to see Brittany, Jimmy's wife; it went without saying that they hadn't come bearing good news. When Vern saw the car, he had known immediately: Sadr City, patrol, Humvee, IED, we regret to inform you. Nobody had to inform him that Jimmy would come home through Dover Air Force Base in a flag-draped casket.

His chores were nearly done. Soon he would have to leave the barn, dress in the black suit, attend the memorial ceremony, and stand at attention while local National Guardsmen rendered the gun salute. He would have to comfort his wife, his daughter-in-law, his grandson. He would have to do and say what was traditional and expected and necessary. He might be able to shoo away his thoughts while he did those chores, too, but he knew that afterwards they would return to plague him like flies. He would have to think about the folded flag, another Purple Heart, the salute, his grandson's future. Then he would finally have to say the words to himself. He would have to come to terms with the significance of the day.

Puzzled by a spot on the floor of the cow's pen, he leaned over for a closer look. A barn swallow nestling had been trampled heedlessly under the cow's rear hoof. He scooped it up in his shovel. The nestling's natal down had been flattened, its delicate skull smashed, its miniature forked tail unnaturally bent. Its blood had run into the straw and congealed; the cats had not bothered to eat the entrails.

He stood and peered into the fluff-lined mud pocket on the joist above the pen. The barn swallow nest was empty. Nothing remained. ☸