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IN THE BARROW BROTHERS' BARN

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LITERARY ARTS

Category: Short Story

Silver Arts

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In the Barrow Brothers' Barn

I was scared. Scared enough to push my little sister up the ladder into the hayloft. Scared enough to climb right behind her and hunker down in the loose hay. Scared that we'd been seen sneaking into the Barrow brothers' barn.

Of course we *had* been seen. A moment later the side door scraped open and a beam of light jabbed through, silhouetting one of the Barrows. With my eye fitted to a gap between the boards, I watched dust and bits of hay drift in the brilliant patch of sunlight. And only that patch. I wondered about this. Why wasn't there any dust floating in the rest of the barn?

"You girls come on down here," called Horse Barrow. "Y'all hear me?"

Not only caught but clearly identified, we had to surrender. Horse didn't look quite so big and scary from above. "OK," I answered. "Amanda's coming first."

Only four, my sister's short legs had a long stretch between the ladder rungs. Before she was half way down, Horse raised his gangly arms and clutched her to him. And then they waited, Amanda's face pressed tight into his flannel-shirted shoulder.

I threw one leg over the side and found the first rung. Grasping the wooden stubs left for handles above the floor boards, I lay on my stomach and flailed with my second foot for the next one.

My scratchy brown big-girl skirt that I had insisted on wearing that morning, since after all, *I* was in charge of Amanda, got wedged under my hips. The rough ladder scraped my bare legs. Worse, Horse could probably see my underpants. At six, I should have known better than to wear a skirt on an outdoor adventure like that.

All of a sudden, I stopped being scared and got angry. The day had been going *fine*. Amanda and I had been *safe* the whole time. But now, just because of Horse Barrow, who would believe me? I didn't want Horse to rescue me like he had my little sister, and I surely didn't want his hands on my legs.

As I jerked my skirt free, my foot slipped from the rung. Then to my surprise, my fingers let loose of the wooden handle. I didn't know why. All I knew was I wanted to get *down*. I *had* to get down. Maybe I thought I'd float like the dust.

My foot twisted under me. As it hit the packed dirt floor, my ankle snapped like a dried wishbone. Horse set Amanda down and scooped me up, bare legs and all, and bore me shrieking to the house. "Jewels!" he shouted to his brother. "Go git the little one. Still in the barn."

When Jewels carried Amanda in, I'm proud to say I hushed up. I *was* a big girl then. Letting go my ankle, I patted the sofa beside me to show Jewels where to put my sister, who was shocked ashen white and emitting muffled squeals through tightly clamped lips. Then awash with pain, I clutched my leg with one hand and Amanda with the other.

When Mama arrived, that's how she found us, together. Though we lived just a piece down the road, it seemed she'd taken *hours*. Mama drove me to the rural hospital this side of town, with Horse Barrow huddled beside me in the back seat to provide what assistance he could. Jewels kept Amanda at the brothers' house and telephoned Daddy at the lumber mill.

Home the next day, a plaster cast almost up to my knee and the pain numbed by pills, I tried to account for myself. "Mama, I'm sorry I took Amanda out of the yard. I was just giving her an adventure in the woods. We weren't lost."

The words I needed fled my mind. I hadn't known the direct path back, no, but I could get us home for sure. To amuse Amanda, I had played up the forest's spooky darkness, the snapping branches underfoot. It had been *fun* for Amanda to feel lost but safe with her big sister.

"What were you two doing in Mr. Barrow's barn?"

That was hard to explain, too, though each thing had made good sense at the time.

As we roamed deeper in the woods, Amanda got tired and thirsty. Rather than backtrack through the thickets, I headed for the gravel lane that would lead to our front yard. We broke from the woods into stinging sunlight behind the Barrows' fenced land. Was it safe to cross? All the kids in the neighborhood knew the whispered tales of the bachelor Barrow brothers, how they'd kidnap you and you'd never be seen again. Course I didn't hardly *believe* it; the adults had never warned us to stay away from the Barrows, no more than from any other folks.

"Sides," I reassured Amanda, "it's broad daylight and there's two of us. They'd never try to grab *two* kids."

So we climbed through the barbed wire, carefully lifting a loose strand for each other. Across the stubbly field

and almost out of sight round the far corner of the barn, I thought we'd made it. But movement in a window of the Barrow brothers' house froze my feet. Would we be *caught*?

There were only two ways out of the field: back under the barbed wire, which ran smack up to the weathered siding on the barn, or through the building itself.

I grabbed Amanda's hand and we darted into the barn's dark, wide mouth, filled with the musty smell of hay, packed earth, and cows. I knew that if we hadn't been seen already, it would be dumb to come right back out the smaller side entrance that faced the house. So we hid in the hayloft. In a little while, I hoped we'd get away free.

But Horse Barrow had ruined everything and now Mama thought I'd been acting foolish. Not true! I was Mama's *big girl*, especially since little Kerry was three and getting into everything and Mama was fixin' to have another baby soon. It was *my job* to take care of Amanda and Kerry. I'd been told that often enough.

No, I couldn't explain being in the Barrows' barn.

"Mama, I was keepin' an *eye* on Amanda," I began, then stopped, weighed down by all the words. I shifted and the dull ache in my ankle flared into searing pain. I groaned. I didn't mean to, I just couldn't help it.

To my surprise, Mama quit her questions and kissed me. "You poor baby, you're hurtin', aren't you?" She hugged me some and tucked me down in bed. "You sleep now, Katherine, honey. I'm not angry. Fact is, you were my big girl. Even with a broken ankle, you watched out for your sister until I got there."

While in bed the next few days, I studied the matter. Something nagged at my mind the way my skin itched under the cast.

Did I fall or did I jump? I couldn't quite satisfy myself either way. I was always watchful, and could hardly believe it was pure carelessness. But truth to tell, neither had I jumped. The best I could figure, I had *let* myself fall. Not quite held on, but not quite pushed off either.

Course, that just led to a harder question – *Why*?

Was I trying to make up for taking Amanda out of the yard? No, at the time I had hoped to get Amanda home with Mama none the wiser. Sides, I hadn't *known* I'd get hurt coming off that ladder. And I would never have guessed my parents'd pet me like they done. Even home in my cast, I thought if I complained about the pain, Daddy would say, "Don't whine," like usual, and Mama would tell me to find something useful to do. Never thought they'd fuss

over *me*. So I turned the problem around in my mind, holding tight to the feeling I'd had just before I slipped off the rung. That I wanted, *needed* to fall.

It wasn't until a week later when Horse and Jewels Barrow came visiting that I figured it out. The brothers brought me candy and offered to sign my cast. I thanked them in a serious way, so they could see that I wasn't a silly kid, and gave some of the candy to Amanda and Kerry.

Later the adult conversation drifted up the hall.

"Yes, sir," Daddy said in his polite Sunday voice. "It's been a tough summer hereabouts."

Hearing my father's respectful tone, I realized the Barrow brothers had to be many years his elder. To me, all adults just seemed *old*.

"Yep," Horse agreed. "First the Clive boy hurt in those darn-fool horse races they've been havin', and then the Jenkins lad kilt when his tractor rolled. And now little Katherine."

"Well, let's hope that's the end of it," added Daddy. "You know what they say, bad things come in threes ..."

"Amen," came Jewels' deep growl. "It tears up a community when kids are hurt."

Then I understood. I'd heard about the two boys, and I knew, like Daddy, like *everyone*, that it takes three bad things to end a string. We'd all felt the strain that summer, waiting for the final blow to fall. And with Amanda and Kerry to watch over, didn't it hound me more than most? I couldn't take a chance that the third thing would happen to one of *them*. So I figured that on the ladder in the Barrows' barn, the urge to fall, the need to get it over with, had finally become overwhelming.

I glanced fondly at my cast, the white banner proclaiming my courage and willingness to do what was needed. I had protected my family. I knew that for the third time charm to last, I had best not speak of it. Everybody knows charms and spells get weaker each time they're mentioned aloud.

Sure enough, the bad luck stopped. Over the years, no more children got hurt, leastwise not beyond the normal cuts and bruises kids get running wild in the Carolina backwoods. Maybe I had protected the whole community. You can bet I walked tall at church and in town, aware that all eyes were on me.

I hid the pieces of the plaster cast in a box in the closet. From time to time I took them out, stroked their rough edges, and held them over my heart. It wasn't until three years later, when I'd examined the cast heaven knows

pretty well, but Amanda would sass me. “You ain’t my mama. I don’t have to listen to *you*.”

But she did, and Daddy backed me up.

Church ladies maybe felt sorry for us, since they stopped by from time to time with food and helped me keep the place clean. When the women told me what a big girl I was, it didn’t please me one bit. I wasn’t some baby who needed a pat on the head, thank you anyway.

Daddy understood. “You’re young, Katherine.” He shook his head. “And I hate puttin’ such a burden on you. But you’re capable. I know you won’t let me down.”

I nearly burst with pride.

We saw more of the Barrow brothers after the accident in the barn. One or the other came by regular to lend a hand where they could. Gettin’ to the store, for example. Mama just couldn’t manage all those children and still do the shopping. One of the Barrows would drive me and him to town once a week in their rattly old truck, since I knew exactly what Mama liked, the sizes and brands and all. For a while she made a list, but finally I took that over too.

Horse and Jewels – I had called them that for too long to change – even helped me do the laundry. That was a relief; the washer and wringer demanded more muscle than all three of us Big Kids had together. Some nights, the brothers took all the walking kids over to their house and fed us, then started up a game of tag or baseball or something. Gave Daddy and Mama and little Lucette some quiet time at home.

The Barrows treated me courteously and I grew to like them. Truth to tell, I couldn’t remember why any of us used to be afraid of them. I felt a special bond with Horse. He, of all people, knew what I had done for everyone three