

Harold's barn has a slab of cement down the middle, cold, gray, wet hardness. On either side are rows of cows, their black and white splotched sides lined up like dominoes. Their slab necks are in stanchions that clank when they pull hay from the trough in front of them. Another trough cuts behind their back legs, a foot wide and about as deep, lined up exactly for when they raise their tails and splatter their undigested food. It's not really Harold's barn; we just call it that. Harold works for my dad; he's in charge of the milk cows. I visit him often because he likes me, but mostly to see the barn cats.

I love the barn smells of sweaty animals and cow poop and hay and the softer smell of fresh warm milk. A row of tiny windows high up covered in cobwebs and dust slant the late afternoon sun in a pattern of boxes across the floor.

I am seven years old and the barn is cool. Even after a hot day, a day that is still hot outside, even with fifty cows breathing and chewing, the barn feels cool.

Harold hums as he hauls the pail of disinfectant down the rows, stopping to give each cow a pat. He reminds them of their names, Bossy Bell, Sweet Pea, Girly, Lulu. He tells them what good milkers they are. He wears black jeans, baggy at the knees, held up by suspenders; his belly bulges over like a too-heavy pumpkin. He sponges off each cow's udder with the disinfectant he has warmed. Another pat and he attaches the suction tube to each swollen teat; the machine begins to churn as it tugs the milk out. I watch the milk, almost blue, running through the tubes into the separator.

I wait for when the barn cat comes. Will she be in time for Harold to squirt a stream of warm milk into her face? She has a new litter of kittens in the grain room. I

know if she doesn't come Harold will give me a saucer of milk to take to her before he goes home. He finishes one row of cows and begins on the other side. I love the way he's so tender with *his girls*. That's what he calls them.

The cool of wet cement creeps up through my shoes, all the way to my knees. I breathe in the barn smells and wait.

Harold finishes with the last cow. The barn cat hasn't come. He walks down the row unhooking stanchions. The cows bump each other, lowing, crowding together, in a hurry to get outside when Harold claps his hands.

"Git on, boss," he tells them, "Git on out there." He smacks the last straggler on her butt then turns to me and says, as he always does, "Come on, you can give that cat some milk. I bet you want to check on those kittens, am I right?"

I nod. Harold doesn't mind that I don't talk much. I can tell he likes me anyway.

He hands me a saucer of milk and opens the heavy grain room door for me.

"Don't stay long, you hear? They'll be looking for you up to the house."

I set the saucer down and sit very still. I listen to Harold hosing down the barn floor now that the cows are all outside. I know the cat won't come out until it's quiet. After a while I hear his truck start up and the crunch of gravel under his tires. It's warm in the grain room.

Something stirs in the hay and I see two eyes. Ever so slowly she creeps out. I've named her Molly, but I haven't told anyone. I don't move or even breathe so I don't scare her. Her pink tongue laps the milk: one two three, pause, one two three, pause, like a song. When she finishes, she lies down on her side, her belly all soft. Her own teats are pink and full, just like the cows. She's close, not close enough for me to touch, but not so far

away either.

Then one by one her babies stagger out on wobbly legs. Their eyes are just barely open. One kitten is black, two are gray and one is splotchy, just like Molly. They nose their way along until they find Molly's warm belly, where they attach their tiny mouths. I watch as they push their paws against her fur, sucking so hard I can hear the slurping.

I wish I could have one to take home with me. I'd take the splotchy one I call Lucy. Harold says they'll be old enough in a few weeks. But I know I can't have one. Daddy hates cats. He calls them "filthy, slinking things."