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Back to the Land

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I walked back from the outhouse at six o'clock in the morning, at twenty degrees below zero. My brain was sluggish from all that cold going by in the wind. I stepped up onto the pile of snow that had slipped off the porch roof, and I banged my head, for the fourth time this winter, into the beam that supports the edge of the roof. My head hurt clear down into my toes, which slipped backward off that ridge of packed snow. I fell forward, right onto the kindling pile on the porch, where the pup had curled up, trying to stay out of the wind.

He thought I was after him, going to get him good for he didn't know what. He went into all gears forward, scattered kindling every which way until he got some traction under him and went off the end of the porch at a full gallop, ki-yiing, and landed right on Mama Calico Cat, who'd been headed for the door. She blew up into a whirlwind of claws, teeth, and angry yowl.

Mama Wife opened the front door to see what all the noise was. Pup saw her as a refuge, reversed direction in full gallop, raised a cloud of snow until he found traction, galloped up my back, across my shoulders, and pushed off from my head with both hind feet and slammed right between Wife's legs, with Mama Calico riding his haunches and making full use of her claws.

They knocked Mama Wife back into the house as far as the stove. She kicked and yelled and tried to slow everybody down and get the rolling and boiling tangle separated into cat here, dog there, Wife standing up and independent.

I stood up and rubbed my head, trying to see if it was all still with me. It was marvelous how many cuss words I remembered, even though I'd long ago quit swearing.

I turned around and looked at that head-banger porch beam. Pup discovered there was more fuss and danger in the house than out. He left Mama Wife and Mama Cat trying to figure out who hit who first and why and came through the screen door at a double-pup gallop. He tore the screen out of the frame and knocked the frame off its hinges, screaming all the way. He hit me behind the knees and went on through as I fell backward into the falling screen door. The aluminum frame of that screen door folded around me as I fell and pinned my arms to my sides.

Old Dawg had been laying out the cold spell in his dog house. He looked out in time to see pup headed his way at a gallop, still screaming. Old Dawg figured, whatever he'd done, that noisy juvenile needed some discipline, and he shot out of his house in a low slink and nipped him some fast and good ones on the flank. Pup picked up even more speed and headed for the barn at full scream. Old Dawg went back into his house, looking real satisfied, with little wisps of pup

fur hanging from his teeth.

I got about halfway up, when Mama Wife and Mama Cat got themselves sorted out, and Mama Wife projected cat out through the open door, just about hip level, where she fetched up full against my head and shoulders, with every sharp point about her working full-time for something to grab onto. She got her feet under her on top of my head, managed to get traction with all claws extended and headed in a wild run for the sanctuary of the goat house.

Mama Wife came out the front door, steaming and stomping. She saw me and started in, "And you, Husband Daddy, you're not helping anything either. What are you doing with our fourteen dollar screen door? I wanted that left up to keep cats out when we need some fresh air inside. You're worse than that pup." She pulled the door off me and tried to push it back into place, but it was bent up every which way and wouldn't go. "Straighten this door out and put it back up." She went in and slammed the door behind her.

I got up on my feet, boiling mad. I walked to the barn and got my chain saw, started it, and carried it back running to warm it up. I cut the center out of that head-banging beam, cut it into pieces, and threw the pieces onto the wood pile. Mama Wife opened the door and yelled at me about what I was doing, but I just kept cutting, and I couldn't hear her over the scream of the saw.

The cold wind cut right through me. I shut the saw off and left it on the pile of kindling on the porch and went in and lay down and tried to get my head to quit hurting.

It snowed all that night. A while before daylight, a terrible cracking, crunching and moaning sound came from the front of the house. Pup lit off the front porch again, howling and running, and I could tell by the sound of it that Old Dawg intercepted him on the way by and bit his butt again. Wife sat up in bed. "What was that? What was that?"

"How do I know? Do I look smart?"

"No, you don't. Take the flashlight and go see what's going on."

I opened the front door. The porch roof bowed down and started to give under its load of snow.

"I told you not to cut on that porch," she yelled from the bedroom.

"I couldn't hear you for the saw running. You'll have to learn to speak up."

The boards spanning the porch broke, and snow poured onto the porch floor. The posts holding up the porch roof leaned outward, bent under the weight, and then broke, and the whole roof crashed down. Broken boards and snow squirted in the front door and knocked me backwards across the room into the heater, which jarred it enough that the pipes came apart and smoke poured into the room.

Wife came in, nightgown flapping in the wind that was blowing in through the front door

and blowing smoke all through the house. “What happened? I told you not to cut on that porch. You’re going to have to clear that snow enough to get the door shut, or we’ll all freeze. You’d better get that pipe fixed, or you’ll burn the house down. Where were you when they were handing out brains?”

“In the outhouse, at twenty below zero in a howling snowstorm. How was I supposed to know what time it was?”

I got the pipe stuck back together and only scorched my gloves. Snow from the porch roof had buried the shovel, so I used the dust pan. I scooped snow and threw snow out over the pile.

The wind died. I figured it was about 25 below zero. I had no way of knowing for sure. The thermometer was somewhere deep under the pile of snow and broken boards.

Wife built a fire in the kitchen stove and banged and clattered pots and pans around. Daughters got up, stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room and shivered in the cold wind. They asked, “What happened?” and Mama Wife said, “Husband Daddy’s been at work again. Get your sweaters and coats and gloves on.”

They scurried back into their room and rumbled through closets and drawers and talked and laughed together. They love the daily surprises of country living.

I could see I might get the door shut, after a few hours’ work. I looked east over the pile of snow, through holes in the broken-down porch, as the sun came up over Cottonwood Butte, into a clear, pale blue sky, so cold, moisture in the air froze, and delicate crystals drifted down from the blue sky. I could tell already it was going to be another beautiful day.