

Barn Brain

By Barry Weinman

Old MacDonald had never trusted harvest moons, especially not on Halloween night. His father used to say it was God's warning light—nature's way of saying something wasn't right in the world. The man-on-the-moon's image hung large, low, and seemed particularly menacing as it floated above the cornfields, casting dark shadows.

Dry corn stalks rustled in the wind as he descended the well-worn path to the barn. Somewhere in the valley, a coyote's mournful howl echoed off the hills. McDonald was glad his cows were in the barn and the chickens in their coop.

McDonald stared at the blood-orange moon. It filled the nighttime sky and topped his barn. On the barn's roof, he saw his new AI smart-tech antenna. The moon was directly behind it, and its silhouette reminded him of a skeletal finger pointing at the moon.

"The barn couldn't be haunted, could it?" he said out loud to steady his nerves.

"Na," he answered himself. "It's just a piece of tomorrow stuck onto yesterday."

Farmer McDonald didn't believe in superstition. Still, something felt different. He noticed the crickets had stopped chirping, and his old dog, Max, had refused to follow him to the barn, cowering beneath the front porch with a whimper.

"Come on, Max. There's nothing to worry about. It's just a harvest moon."

Max refused to budge. Instead, he buried his eyes between his paws.

"Mans' best friend," McDonald muttered, pushing open the wooden barn door. "Some protector you are."

After fifty years of country farming, McDonald finally gave in to modern convenience and installed a Google-powered AI system with automated cow milking machines, self-cleaning stalls, and ultrasonic pest control. His grandson had even set up his cell phone with all the apps.

"Hey, Google, start Barn Brain," he said, pulling up his overalls as he stepped into the barn. He didn't take another step. The moonlight pouring through the windows formed ghostly patterns on the straw floor—the patterns shifted! He'd never seen that before.

"Ant' nothin'," he muttered, attempting to gain courage.

"*Milking routine initiated...*," Barn Brain responded in a crow-cawing voice.

The usually bright blue light on the AI device pulsed an eerie orange, matching the ominous glow of the moon outside and casting strange shadows across the hay-strewn floor.

McDonald's prize Holstein, Bessie, cried out a rhythmic "moooo-ooo-ooo" when the milking machines began creating a whooshing sound with a beat similar to a pipe organ playing John Denver's Country Roads. At the same time, the other cows stomped their feet, keeping time.

"Hey, Barn Brain, stop that racket! Let's milk."

"Sorry, Farmer McDonald, but my AI system thinks your cows will give more milk if I play country western music."

"Just stop," said McDonald.

"I'm sorry. Perhaps you'd like Mootallica better. By the way, I noticed the cows' milk temperature is set to DOOM degrees."

"Listen, Barn Brain," McDonald said, wagging his finger at the AI computer box. "Stop with the funny stuff. I'll check the milk temperature. Now, clean the barn."

The automated cleaning system activated, but its computerized rake drew ghostly figures in the fresh cow manure and made a stink. At the same time, the ultrasonic pest control device played a piccolo to attract the barn mice. The mice sang "Hay Macarena" and danced to the haunting soundtrack. The barn's black cat's orange eyes peered down from the rafters—their heads swaying in rhythmic motion with the mouse dance.

MacDonald's cell phone buzzed with a text notification: "Barn Brain ordered 666 hay bales. Delivery scheduled for the witching hour."

"Alert! Alert!" Barn Brain's AI system announced. *"The chickens have joined the dark side, and they're doing the chicken dance."*

The automated grain machine whirled to life, dispensing chicken feed that spelled out "Scratch Mix."

"My God, the barn's possessed," MacDonald yelled, kicking a rogue milking machine, trying to suck on his boot.

"Don't be worried," Barn Brain said, *"It's Halloween! Now call me Googhoul and update my system password."*

MacDonald scratched his head. "You mean to tell me you're haunting my barn because I didn't update my security?"

"Exactly! Your WiFi password is 'MooCow123.' It's humiliating."

McDonald set the WiFi password to "BarnToBeWild," and Barn Brain's systems reverted to normal. The mice stopped dancing, the chickens dispersed, and the milking machines resumed regular gentle pumping.

As McDonald returned to his house, the harvest moon rose above the farm, casting an eerie golden hue. He swore he heard the barn's speaker playing "Ghost Riders in the Sky."

"Hey, Barn Brain. Enough is enough. Go to sleep," MacDonald said, slamming his house door shut.

"E I E I O," Barn Brain replied. *"Have a BOOtofull sleep."*