

The Thirsty Cow

...I slipped cautiously through the barbed wire, and, still a few feet from my patient, opened the collapsible bowl and let the remaining water fill it to the brim. Slowly, tentatively, I bent my knees and knelt by the creature. As I drew closer, her face contorted, creases of fear marking her soft black snout. I placed the bowl gently beside her furry cheek. "Shh," I quietly intoned. "You'll be okay, little lady."...

It felt good to get out of the house and move my body, man's best friend swooping under the breeze alongside my pumping legs. The convenience of the excuse that Jessie needed her exercise rescued me from having to reveal my own need for the freedom of anywhere-but-here for a couple of precious hours each day since retirement. Aside from the fact that I couldn't view getting cut loose to make room for fresh blood as retirement, I felt bitterly the irony of the word: nearly five decades working could make a person tired, to be sure, but the emptiness that followed simply re-tired a man, the house he had worked so hard to finally own now his prison.

But the time with Jessie was the one reward, and Lord knows she deserved it after nine years cooped up in her kennel all day, impatiently but loyally awaiting her master's return. I never could see the necessity of the kennel, nay cage, but Joanie insisted on it, even though she was at the house most of the time. It was the price I had to pay, thinking of her imprisoned while I was at work, if I wanted to keep her safe—Joanie wouldn't allow me to blight her yard with a simple chain link pen, and the coyotes had gotten to Sadie when we had let her just wander.

Now that Joanie's routine was intruded upon by my presence, and now that I found myself somewhat trapped, however, Jessie had her freedom, and I could feed off of that to an extent when we got out for our walk each day. She was an indomitable companion, this lovable sheltie-cross, still leaping and bounding and woofing at magpies even as old age began to settle into her graying limbs. She was living testament to my childhood conviction that animals can have a place in our hearts and in our homes, the same conviction that had led me to secretly adopt the tiny limp body of the pup the farm's bitch had rolled over on and suffocated. I had taken literally my father's proscription of no live animals in the house, not realizing until my teens that the permitted dead animals to which he alluded were probably the slices of ham and dark meat on our plates.

My fantasy of a pet was short-lived, however. I spent one night with the little soul tucked against my chest before little sister Ginny flung the covers off of me to startle me awake, and Dino, as I had dreamily dubbed him, flew through the air and tumbled across the floor. He rolled right to the formidable slipped feet of my mother, planted stonily in the doorway.

Ginny was screaming, "What *is* that thing? What *is* it?" as Mother unflinching plucked him by the tail and barrelled down the hall on her heavy heels. Ginny nipped along behind her, still screeching for attention, while I scrambled after the both of them in silent desperation to learn the fate of my beloved friend. We followed Mother the short distance to the door, which she creaked open slowly and deliberately, drawing out the suspense, before aiming unblinkingly at the nearest compost heap as Ginny and I shielded our eyes from the dawn's sun.

When she let go Dino's bony tail, my stomach tumbled in horror. Now as it turned out, she had poor aim, and he thumped into the gravel several feet from the heap. But it didn't make a difference. Dino

had been disowned.

After a brief moment of breathless silence from Ginny, which seemed just ridiculous considering her previous charade, she erupted into an open sluice of tattle-tales and self-righteousness. “It wasn't me, Mama! *Will* did it! It was *Will*! That thing was in his *bed*!” Mother said nothing and returned to her work in the kitchen.

When Father came in for dinner, I could hear them discussing me from the bedroom where I'd been hiding out all morning, grieving. “Always thought there was something off about that boy. Maybe a little hard work will rid him of his fancies.” And after the otherwise quiet meal was through, Father tossed a pitchfork into my 5-year-old hands and smirked as I stumbled. “You've got a lot to learn, boy.”

I glanced all around for any nearby sign of Dino as I poked at the compost heap, struggling with the oversized tool to turn it. But his tiny body was gone.

It was forty years before I'd have my first dog. After we buried Billy, Joanie no longer had a leg to stand on to keep the comfort of a pet out of my life. For six beautiful years, Sadie warmed my feet while I sat watching the Brier in the winter and chased after me while I mowed the lawn with the rotary in the summer. I missed her terribly when she was gone, but I could no longer live without such innocent, painless companionship. I had to accept that Sadie had moved on, and the next weekend I drove into the city and picked Jessie up from the SPCA.

We turned from pavement on to gravel and continued along our usual route. At that moment, the wind shifted, assailing my nostrils with the familiar farm reek of the prairies. Settling within a few kilometers of a processing plant might not be everyone's idea of an adequate retirement home, Joanie's included, but the fact was I'd lived in the area almost all my life, and it had given me my livelihood. My father may have viewed me as an oddball, but what he hadn't realized was that his way of life, which revolved around long daily shifts of brute labour, was about to give way to an international industry governed by brains. I may not have developed his seeming ardour for working his muscles and working the land, but I did develop an intellect that I could apply with ease to research in crop diversification and agricultural productivity.

A pick-up rumbling by startled me from my thoughts, and I unglazed my eyes just in time to catch sight of Frank's two-fingered wave pressing up off the steering wheel. I gave a quick nod in return, then stopped short, realizing Jessie was no longer at my side. Nor was she running up ahead of me, as she usually was. I always walked her unleashed, and she was smart about it. Though it amounted to the occasional thumping of my heart when she got out of sight, I felt it only right that she be able to run like the wind as she was meant to.

“Jess?” I called. A little whine in response. I twisted my head back to see her lying on the edge of the road, paws under her chin.

“What is it, girl?” I asked, pacing the several metres back to where she lay. As I reached her, she lifted her face and looked at me questioningly, then snapped to attention as she hopped to her feet.

I watched in curiosity as she circled back slightly and slunk into the ditch across the road. Her circular movement reminded me of a wild dog, like a wolf or a coyote, and I wondered briefly what wild scent

she had caught that had keyed into the more primitive centers of her brain. But now she was moving forward again, so I resumed my walking with a shrug.

After a moment I noticed Jessie was panting, and I whistled for her to return to me. She trotted back obediently, but didn't even glance at me as I poured a drink of water into her collapsible bowl and set it on the road before her. Eyes glued forward, she sniffed the bowl half-heartedly, but didn't drink.

“C'mon, girl,” I coaxed her, nudging the bowl with my toe. “It's hot out.” In response, Jessie gave one little lap to please me, then pricked up her ears and returned to a trot. I shook my head quizzically, dumped the water, and began striding quickly after her.

That's when I finally noticed who she was after. About twenty metres ahead, to the right and behind the perfectly taut barbed wire, was sprawled a spent Holstein dairy cow, her black-and-white mottled midriff inflating and deflating at the tempo of my heart. Jessie stopped short of her by a metre or two, not breaching the boundary of the fence, and finally sought my eyes for guidance on how to proceed.

“Jessie, stay,” I commanded as I hurried toward them. Jessie parked herself on her haunches, eyes totally focused on me, and returned to a steady pant.

As I neared the belaboured beast, the wounds on her backside became clear to me. Several bald patches inked with dried blood and blackened skin marred her thighs and buttocks. Her torso was bloated and lumpy with inflamed or cancerous organs. Her half-shut eyes were weepy. She was clearly a very sick old soul.

I held my breath and proceeded with caution. While the beast had paid no heed to Jessie's approach, she rolled her slick eyes toward me in utter fear. Her hooves slowly scraped four jagged ruts into the dirt. She was trying to right herself, but couldn't.

My heart thumped as I wondered what to do, and Jessie gave a little whine at my side. Eyes never leaving the giant ethical dilemma before me, I felt for Jessie's silky head with my hand and stroked her absent-mindedly. In my own head, my father's voice gruffly commanded she be put out of her misery. And much as I agreed cerebrally that that was the right thing to do, my heart's inclination was to respond with a helping hand.

I wasn't sure yet what I could do for her in the long run if I couldn't put her down—I'd probably have to humble myself by calling on someone more of a man than I—but in prideful defiance of my father's stoicism, I felt my hand reaching for the bottle of water as mechanically as it had when I had noticed Jessie's panting.

Lifting my palm from Jessie's forehead, I slipped cautiously through the barbed wire, and, still a few feet from my patient, opened the collapsible bowl and let the remaining water fill it to the brim. Slowly, tentatively, I bent my knees and knelt by the creature. As I drew closer, her face contorted, creases of fear marking her soft black snout. I placed the bowl gently beside her furry cheek. “Shh,” I quietly intoned. “You'll be okay, little lady.”

At the scent of the water, her nostrils opened slightly, pulling on the cracked dry skin of the pink nose. “You like that, old girl?” I murmured. “Maybe a nice long drink will make you feel better.”

But she responded only with a disgruntled moan, then flailed her head away from my offering.

At such a close proximity I now noticed the scratches and scrapes along her powerful muzzle and jaw, where her tremendous pulsing body had first stolen my attention. In my periphery now appeared the bits of fur and flesh ensnared by the barbs where she had tried to ram through the fence.

“You sure were desperate to be free, weren't you, sweetheart?” I spoke nearly breathlessly now, not wanting to disturb her further, but still she replied with a flare of the nostrils and an accompanying throaty grunt.

“It's okay, it's okay,” I breathed. “We're here to help.” And I cast my eyes briefly over at an attentive Jessie, moved to a welling of daddy's pride at her courage and her compassion. I overwhelmingly wished to portray the same characteristics as my brave familiar. So I vowed to myself silently that no matter how she fought it, I *would* help this cow.

I sensed that if only I could touch the cow, she would feel the warmth of my intention and accept my gift of the liquid of life. Or maybe I felt connected to her on a primitive level and just wanted an excuse to be closer to her. But either way, I found myself gingerly dipping my fingers in the water and reaching toward her gently. The warmth of her strong breath moistened my palm as my fingertips neared her nose, and with a tenderness mustered from the same center in me that had led me as a child to care for a lifeless puppy, I smoothed the wetness across her cracked and pitted nostrils. That's when her eyes met mine. Gently, she held my gaze.

Tears stung at the corners of my eyes as I inhaled sharply, shocked by the power of the intimacy. In turn, my startled body teetered backwards, suddenly losing the balance of its crouch. In her gaze there really had been a flicker of trust. But the moment was broken almost immediately by my jolting back to right myself and landing a clumsy heel square on the water bowl, splashing out all the remaining contents.

“Shit,” I muttered, rising to my feet. The cow didn't seem disturbed by the ruckus. Instead, she just snuffled out a long sigh, as if aware of my foible. I chuckled.

A whine from Jessie drew my attention, and I furrowed my brow at her in response. “Yes, you're a good girl, too, and you'll get your turn soon.” Sighing myself now, I reached for my belt to retrieve my phone. I had given what I could, and now it was time to call in the big guns.

As I flipped through my contacts for Frank, Jessie let out a low growl. “Quiet, Jess,” I scolded. “You'll scare our new friend.”

It was only when our new friend chimed in, sounding lows of distress, that I noticed the dust on the horizon. A beat-up white pick-up was sailing into view across the field, and I realized that help was already on the way. But just as she had been with me, Bernice—her name, or the name I had unconsciously given her and which was suddenly clear to me—was less than eager to accept the help of strangers.

And why would she? The white truck was the toll of her death, and diseased and immobilized as she

might be, surely Bernice valued her own life—her own wildness, her own freedom. She had run from death even in her fragile state—and had almost made it, I realized, impressed, being a good ten kilometres from the plant as we were.

“The pain will end soon,” I cooed, backing from Bernice's bucking head, more trying to convince myself than her. True, she would be put out of her misery, but I wasn't sure the misery would end for me. That look she had given me, so direct and so vulnerable, was seared onto the backs of my eyelids, and a brief image of the greenery of our spacious backyard flitted through my mind as the spot of just a couple days' respite home. She could rest in a safe space surrounded by people who cared—me; Jessie, as the first witness to her suffering; even Joanie, who, though on an average day not a big fan of animals and what she claimed to be their filth, could never resist the ill, injured, or underprivileged underdog.

I thought now proudly of my wife, and yearned for the two of us to care for such a soul together. It was why she spent most of her time at the church, running programs for the immigrant workers, teaching them the nuances of the English language, holding afternoon teas and Craft Club for the ladies, even getting some of them out on the curling rink and beaming endlessly at her teammates' delight and newfound talent. I smiled into the distance, appreciating deeply for the first time in years, perhaps decades, Joanie's selfless commitment to others. And, strangely, the words that now played in my mind were the ones Joanie had repeated desperately that weekend years ago after that temporary foreign worker lost his hand: “*Why is nobody protecting them?*”

I glanced tearfully down at Bernice, grimacing to see her in such throes of fear and desperation, but as the pick-up pulled to a dusty stop just a few metres away, I thanked my new friend silently for reminding me of the common ground I still shared with my life partner.

Two men leaped from the truck bed as another two emerged from the cab, engine still running. Joanie would have been able to differentiate whether each was Sudanese, Ethiopian, or Somalian, and to greet them in their respective mother tongues. I called, “Hello, there!” but they paid me no heed as they shouted at each other in a language I couldn't understand. After a few tense moments of discussion, one of the men from the truck bed ran at Bernice from behind and kicked her, yelling something she obviously wouldn't understand, either.

“Hey!” I yelled. “What are you doing?”

Two of the men shared a laugh at my response, while the kicker stomped a few metres off, hollering and throwing his hands in the air. The last man, the driver, called to the group of them and offered some stern instruction. He then turned to me as they all jogged toward the truck bed in response to the driver's firm command.

“Sir?” he asked. “Is there a problem?”

I looked from him to Bernice in dismay. She appeared to be sobbing as she again tried to right herself by digging her hooves determinedly into the dirt. “I don't know where that young man gets off, physically assaulting her, but I grew up around here, and we don't treat our cows that way!”

The man regarded me with amazement. “Sir, these men have jobs to do and families to feed, and I'm

frankly more concerned about them getting back to work before they're missed.”

The others had retrieved from the truck a bundle of heavy chain, and two had begun affixing it around Bernice's neck while the third attached the other end to the hitch receiver.

“No!” I cried. “What are they doing? They can't—she's sick! She needs to be put down!”

“She'll be put down back at the plant.” The driver kept his steady eyes on the work his men were doing.

“You mean you'd put a downed cow on the line?” I asked incredulously.

“We do what we're told so we can survive.” He spoke his words to the air, not to me, and returned to the driver's side as the others finished up and hurried to their respective spots in the truck. But before the driver climbed in, he turned to me and looked stonily into my eyes. “Don't you think for a moment to blame the place we came from for whatever injustice you're so superior to think you're witnessing. There's a reason we're here: so that you can go home and have your steak.

“Take a trip to the plant sometime, friend. Fifteen years I've been there, and the things I've seen, even since fighting to get the union in—your pretty stomach couldn't handle them. Now if it makes you feel better, feel free to turn away.”

The man in the passenger seat yelled something to my lecturer, and he took a quick peek to ensure his load was secure before slamming the door tightly and slowly revving.

I stood frozen in horror as the truck began to move, yanking Bernice by the neck. She bellowed, only to have her protest cut off as the chain pulled to restrict her air flow. Behind me I could hear the echo of a constant bark, but all of my attention was on the rashy scraping of Bernice's immense body against the dirt as the truck's tailpipe pumped its carbon monoxide mix out over her tortured face. As she was torn further and further from view, the occasional bounce that immersed Bernice in the air made her appear so much smaller and lighter than she really was. And with each heavy thump of her fracturing spine back against the ground, my heart thumped against the withered pit of stomach below it. Her choking screams continued even as she crossed the horizon and left my paralyzed line of sight.

When I could no longer hear her cries to me, I felt my tense legs turn to jelly beneath me, and I sank to the ground. Jessie was immediately at my side, licking my hand and whining her tentative little “Are you okay?” whine.

“No, I'm not okay,” I whispered, eyes still glued to the horizon. She nuzzled my cheek, and I let my face fall toward her. “Sorry, girl. I'm still here with you. But I have no idea what to do.”

My eyes fell to the collapsible water bowl, flattened to its original shape by the tires of the truck. I had thought before that I didn't know what to do, that I was helpless to save her, but the thought of giving Bernice water had made me hopeful. Yet Bernice had refused the water. Maybe she had been trying to tell me what I had been too naive to understand: that she was marked for slaughter and that a drink of water wasn't going to prevent her from suffering at depths I couldn't even begin to comprehend.

I shivered to think of the nightmare that awaited Bernice at the other end of her journey—the captive

bolt that might just fail to put out a cow with so much courage and conviction, not to mention sheer tonnage; the knife that would stick her; the saw that would peel her open; the skin that would be spread to reveal her mighty, pulsating ribcage; the guts and the blood that would spray into the eyes of the line workers. There was no peace to be had for Bernice, nor for her captors. And no peace to be had for me.

What to do now—continue on my daily walk? The thought seemed almost laughable. It felt like I had witnessed a gory traffic accident that I would re-watch on the local news when I got home, but in reality it would play and replay only in my mind. No one else would ever know.

Still, it seemed more appropriate to turn around and head home rather than finish my regular loop. In fact, I wasn't sure I would want to do this loop ever again. I grabbed the collapsible bowl, attached it to my belt, and crawled through the fence, closing my hand around a clump of Bernice's hair in the process. Then I began to trudge back westward, Jessie slow, steady, and panting at my side. She was probably thirsty. I sure was.

My brain processes were deadened as I traversed what seemed an alien landscape. Like driving home and not remembering how you got there, as I gripped the handle of the back screen door, I could only vaguely recall the most irritating of innocuous thoughts that had flitted through my mind as I'd walked: Still had to order tickets for the rodeo grandstand. It'd been awhile since I'd acquired a new pair of footwear. And this collapsible water bowl was damned inconvenient to haul around everywhere.

Once the door was open, however, and the warm, familiar waft of Joanie's cooking embraced me, I relaxed with a sigh. Home. Maybe it wasn't such a bad place after all.

I unlaced and shucked my boots slowly, then peeled off my sweat-drenched socks to let my feet breathe again; they had started to feel closed in by the thick leather that I usually found so comfortable. The cool slate of the floor massaged the balls of my feet as I padded toward the kitchen, breathing deeply.

Jessie was hot on my heels, and she parked herself dutifully on the sidelines as she waited for me to dig into her cupboard of treats and kibbles—only the best, high protein and locally grown—as was our custom. But I bee-lined for the fridge instead, eyeing the lovely figure of the woman at the stove, wanting to go up behind her and lay my hands on her shoulders and kiss her slender neck. But instead I gripped the cool stainless steel handle of the fridge, which would lead me to the slender neck of a bottle, a neck much more easily accessible to the insecure slump that I was at that moment. The door shucked open, and I grabbed a cold one between a thumb and two shaky fingers.

I turned back toward Joanie, and she still hadn't looked up from her cooking. “You're home early,” she commented.

“Yeah, didn't feel too well,” I lied. At least it felt like a lie, although it was true. I wanted to tell her everything, but it was too much—whatever “it” was—and I needed a couple in me first.

She whipped her head back over her shoulder, eyes full of blame. “Frank and Lillian are supposed to be coming over. Don't tell me you want to cancel.”

She again faced the sizzling from the cast iron, but her head hung down slightly. “And I made your favourite,” she added more quietly.

“Which favourite?” I joked, feebly pulling out the stool at the island.

“Salisbury,” she replied absently.

“Salisbury?” I echoed, feeling suddenly unbalanced. I gripped the stool for support.

“Yes, Salisbury steaks,” she elaborated facetiously. “Remember them?”

Suddenly a sick realization was trampling the gray matter of my brain. The smell that had been so inviting was suddenly an assault on my nostrils, stabbing into every pore and making me lightheaded. I swayed, and the pop of the grease in the frying pan gave way to the horrified screams of a cow being dragged by the neck to her end. “I can't eat,” I moaned.

“Are you all right?” she demanded, eyes still blazing with “How dare you?”

“I can't eat *them*,” I murmured, abandoning the beer at the island and stumbling for the living room.

“Well I'm not just watching TV tonight!” she called after me. “So I'll just tell Frank and Lilly some excuse for *you*!”

Jessie trailed after me, not the least bit offended that I'd missed her snack. I had just enough life in me to draw the curtains in haste before expiring on the couch in a lumpy pile of bones and blood. Jess was immediately at my feet right where Joanie wouldn't want her. Then I lost consciousness.

Over the hours, I faded in and out, occasionally stirred by the kitchen's din—Lillian's squeaking, Frank's guffawing, a soft, gentle twitter from Joan. Something about sunstroke, a comment about no hat. Plates clinked by forks and scraped by knives. The shuffling of cards, a jest and a laugh. “—musta bin a wild one”; “escaped from 'er handlers that way.”

My ears perked past Jessie's snores.

“Thought I'd do a good deed and call it in,” Frank declared.

“Oh, I hope no one loses their job over it,” Joanie fretted.

“They're not gonna let anybody go,” Lillian quibbled. “Even if they could, which they can't because of the union, they're not gonna get rid of someone who actually *wants* to work there.”

“Oh, Lilly. It's the highest retention plant in the country. Those immigrants are just happy to have a job.”

“Frank, they're people,” Joanie replied, her voice full of emotion, yet also calm. “Yes, they're grateful. Perhaps they'd be lost without the plant. But not everyone is bursting with joy at the working conditions, even with the union.”

“Okay, Joanie, you got me,” he soothed her. “Anyway, I just called it in to a buddy's mine.”

Management'll never know."

"Frank!" Lillian giggled. "You're so *bad!* Cuz management's your friend, too!"

"Eh, well, as I said. A good deed every once in a while don't hurt."

I begged to differ. It hurt—almost unbearably, from my aching legs to my pounding head. But it hurt even more mercilessly for the lady who just wanted to live. A good deed—what's a good deed? Certainly not what Frank had done. But whatever it was, I hadn't done it, either. The thought was oppressive. Darkness overcame me once more.

I awoke gently to the click of a steaming mug against the coaster on the side table. Joanie retracted her hand from it and perched her bottom in the nook between my knees and my chest. "How's your tummy?" she asked.

"Mm, okay," I mumbled, not really sure.

"Well, I'm just headed to bed," she said softly. "Are you going to come?" Her look was hopeful, and I melted.

"I'll be there in a bit," I promised, and closed my eyes to her fruity scent as she bent over to leave a kiss on my cheek. I noted as she exited that she hadn't even glanced at the naughty Jessie still blanketing my toes.

"Ahh." I groaned as I slipped out from under my sleeping angel and raised my stiffened body. I smiled at Jessie's peaceful face as I reached for the toasty mug and pressed it to my lips.

I sipped at the frothy contents, expecting the flow of the milk to be cozy and lulling. But when it gurgled into my stomach, the response was a grumble, then a growl. A nauseating heat crept over my cheeks, and I slammed my torso between my knees. As soon as I opened my mouth, the vomit choked its way out all over Joanie's favourite area rug.

Jessie leaped from the couch, and I briefly presumed she might help herself to my stomach contents, but she booked it to the corner, where she eyed me warily as I coughed and sputtered the last emissions of a cow's milk from my system on to the plush red of the rug.

Still couldn't eat, I guess.

Couldn't drink, either.

Wouldn't eat.

Wouldn't drink.

Her.