

Red Flag

by Eugenie Doyle

Monday morning and the beef truck just passed by. It never stops here anymore. Our cows are gone.

At our old farm, our first farm down on Route 11 in Riverton, the way you signaled the truck to stop was to put a red cloth on the mailbox or on a fence post by the road. Any scrap would do, just so it was big enough to catch Jim's eye, considering he drove early, before he'd had his second coffee, and it might be foggy in the valley. I always used an old T shirt of Tony's, deep red, dotted with battery acid burnholes so it easily looped the handle on the mailbox door.

Here in Greensbrook, at this bigger place, you needed to phone in a request for the truck to stop. I'd dial early before the boys set out, but not too early. Chink and his sons were cattle dealers, not farmers. So I'd call about seven. Chink would answer, "Commission Sales". I'd say, "Lisa Mallory in Whitney, we got a calf to go." "Who?" he'd ask, and I'd say, "Tony Camp's wife", to help him out. I kept my own name when I got married; I know it's too much for some folks to handle but I liked to start out fresh on a Monday stating the truth even if it might be a little tricky for someone like Chink. Hell, what can you expect from a guy who uses a nickname from a customer who thought his real name "Rutkowski" sounded Chinese?

Then, sometime before noon, one of his boys would swing the long rattling trailer up to our milkhouse door. He'd dash in and come out again through my nice hosed-down milkroom with the marked bullcalf in his arms. He stuffed it into the small section of the trailer away from the big cows. Does it make you sad? A baby going to butchery just cause its a boy? If you'd a carried it out and got peed on right down your front where a bull's thing hits, you'd forgive Chink's boys a swear or two. I just wished they'd use the side barn door and not muck up my milk room.

But let's talk about sad. Sometimes I had to call about a full grown cow. Now if a cow dies, you don't call Commission Sales, you call a different number for the "down and dead" man whose name I just now can't recall. It's on the yellow scrap of paper in the top desk drawer. If the cow isn't dead but can't get up and there's no hope, then you call that same number. You might think it's a strange business to be in, more or less collecting hides and dogfood. But let me tell you, it's a needed thing and this particular fellow, Taylor I think it might be, is helpful and good at his job.

One time, he called Tony late at night after picking up a dry cow we'd found dead in the pasture along side Turkey Lane. Nice cow, Mina, three weeks from calving, the whole thing made us shake our heads. Then we hear from Taylor he's found a bullet in the cow, through the shoulder, we'd never even seen the hole, but that's what killed her. Some fool kid, some mean s.o.b. hunter, we will never know, but it wasn't anything we could have prevented and that made it some easier to swallow the loss. Taylor said he'd keep the bullet awhile in case our insurance man wanted to see it. Now he didn't owe us anything but he gave us some peace of mind.

But back to cull cows: that's what they are if they can walk but they are sick but not full of antibiotics, or, say, they won't breed or are just plain low producing. Cull. And if you want to think sad, I'll tell you about Jobena.

She was seventeen years old, the grand old lady of our barn. Tall, strong back and legs. A perfect udder, high and tight when full, it milked out like a soft glove with firm well-placed teats. She was a smart cow, never shit underneath herself, ate well, chewed constantly, knew her stall, and produced heifers, one after another, except for the year she had twins. One of those was male so of course the other, the little girl, was a freemartin, sterile, and should have been shipped off too. But our daughter, Emily, pleaded for them. We let her raise them a year for the freezer. Baby beef, the sweetest meat there is.

Are you vegetarian? Does this make you gag? I can't do anything about that. You might as well not listen. There's tender articles about soybeans for you. Go on.

But I'm going to finish saying about my farm. The small family dairy. Anyway, if you want us punished, I guess God is on your side, because we're all dying off.

But Jobena: when it came clear that in spite of expanding to this bigger farm, every milking meant emptying our wallets into the gutter, prices were that low and costs that high, we knew we had to have an auction; we all agreed we couldn't put Jobena in the ring.

She was my daughter's pet really. Emily learned to milk on her. That cow tolerated the child sitting on her back while I milked the others. That's rare for a cow which is not the same as a horse although I hear most children in America confuse the two. Emily made dandelion chains for her cow, called her "Jobo". She brushed her back and tail.

That last year Jobena's feet got bad and in spite of hooftrimmer and vet care, she got so she didn't like to leave the barnyard to climb on the hilly pasture to graze. Emily took the scythe in her ten-year-old arms and sliced sweet grass for Jobo's meals. She sometimes sat and flicked flies from the big brown eyes. She rubbed her udder with Bag Balm for sunburn that summer, for chapping as days grew colder.

Tony said, "Jeeze, Emily, you can't treat every cow like a pet. No wonder we can't stay in business." But he did a funny thing himself with that cow. Before the sale, he found her a home, on another farm. He just gave her to the nicest folks we know still in the dairy business who had room for an old timer; that meant a farm an hour away. There, she had her last calf, a heifer of course, but came down with milk fever. Tony went to help treat her but she died anyway. Our friends felt so bad they gave us her calf.

Now Tony had gone down in our family Taurus wagon and just put that calf in the back for the ride home. Over an hour away and that calf never pooped or peed. "Sure sign of a smart calf," said Emily. She named it Jewel. All Jobena's girls' names started with Js. Emily wanted to keep it and I said, "No way, one cow in a big barn is a foolish thing." But Tony said, "Why not? We can't stop being fools all at once."

So the auction's over and done and Emily and Tony do their daily calf chore for Jewel, ten minutes in the morning before school and work. Their chatter and the clink of a shovel in the big barn echo clear out to me by the kitchen window.

This is Monday morning. When I see the beef truck pass by I remember the morning I came home from the hospital after having Emily. It was winter; a shovel was stuck into a huge drift by the mailbox. Flying from the handle was a tiny pink undershirt. My husband, Tony, announcing our baby girl, a keeper of course, no bullcalf, but announcing it just the same.