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David Branning starts every morning at 4:30 a.m. with 100 sit-ups, 150 push-ups, half a hoagie from the local deli, a large coffee, and an ibuprofen pill the size of a piece of chalk. His usual uniform is a pair of white-washed carpenter jeans and a ribbed tank top the glowy grey of white cotton that's been bleached many times. If it is below fifty-five degrees, he will pull a blue sweatshirt over the tank top. If it is below forty degrees, or if he has run out of propane and his single-wide trailer has no heat, he will layer a t-shirt, a long-sleeve thermal shirt, and a colorful wool sweater his daughter made for him. If he is working, an old pair of navy blue styrofoam pads will be attached to his pants at the knees with a flurry of duct tape. If he is not working, and if his pale blue eyes seem to be swimming in a bath of watery pink, he will be drunk.

Branning, known to his friends as Davy, will be fifty this year. Two days after my husband Mark and I met him at the cow farm down the block from our Pennsylvania farmhouse, he chugged up our driveway in his shit-brown station wagon, the sun glinting off the broken windshield like a crystal. "If we're going to be friends," he said, handing my husband a manila envelope smudged with grease, "this is what you need to know about me." He grinned, his top incisors straight and horselike and false, his bottom lip stretched like a

tent across the empty space on the bottom. He shuffled back to his car, dragging his lame left foot along with him.

Inside the manila envelope were two items: a high school yearbook from 1976 and photocopies of Davy's medical records from 1978 through 2006. Inside his yearbook, on the hard cardstock flaps of the front and back covers and throughout the pages next to pictures of homely girls and hale and hearty boys were the looping wishes for Davy to *Have a gr8 summer!* and *Lets get waisted at the lake!* As we flipped through the yearbook, my husband and I recognized names from the local farms—there are Leonards and O'Neils and even Johanna McGarry, who grew up in the house we now own. Next to Davy's name, which was listed in the section for graduating seniors, was a line of recognition for Best Body and Best Athletics. In his picture, his blond hair curls around his face in waves. His skin is bronzed beneath his short sleeves, and he is smiling with all his teeth.

The yearbook tells what was. The medical records tell what is. In the summer of 1977, a year after graduating high school, there was a car wreck. The pages don't talk about the other car, or blood alcohol levels, or the two boys that didn't make it. Instead, they report that an eighteen-year-old male presented with a broken jaw and nose, fractured skull, crushed torso and pelvis, and a possible broken back. The dates on the lined pages progress from summer to fall to winter as we flip, and Davy is still in the hospital. A metal rod has been placed through his head to hold his face together. He is suspended in traction to repair his back. Pain medication is increased and reduced and increased again. Reconstructive surgeries are listed. X-rays are discussed and described; progress, or lack thereof, is debated. As we shuffle through the pages, the distance between the dates grows longer, first by weeks, then by months, then by years. The pages themselves change from hospital stationery and lined report paper to notes about appointments scrawled on plain printer sheets, to reminders about addresses and phone numbers, the hand writing them slanted and slow, lacking the urgent edges of the earlier annotations.

It was Davy who first told me about Little Kelly.

"Have you heard about your cow?" he asked. I was on the porch and he was halfway up the ladder leaning against the front of our house. He was

helping Mark install a pipe on the roof that would carry the exhaust from the new wood stove they just installed out into the crisp blue sky.

“I haven’t seen her yet this week,” I said, suddenly suspicious. “Why?” The farmers down the road, Pat and Tom Joe Leonard, had recently acquired a baby cow from another farm nearby. Pat and Tom Joe raise cattle but don’t slaughter or milk them—instead, they are a feeder farm and raise the animals until they need money or someone needs a cow. The Leonards have seventy or eighty cows—they don’t know exactly—and this was the farm where we first met Davy. The three men had recently named the new cow Kelly, after me, because I had grown attached to her, a development whose wisdom they seemed to debate daily.

Before they allowed me to feed her the first time, Pat warned me that many cows don’t make it past the first few months. I gathered he felt relatively comfortable with my attachment to the small, skittish animal because as a Holstein heifer she would be sold off to a farm for her milk, not for slaughter. I could imagine her on a nearby hill, happily munching Pennsylvania bluegrass or clover. I promised not to grow too attached, and I swore that I understood that she may not make it and that I would be fine with that. But the first time I slid my fingers into her sandpaper mouth, she sucked with a desperation that stung deep in my belly and I was lost.

“Uh-oh,” Davy said. I grabbed the porch railing and repeated my question. Without looking me in the eye, he started and stopped talking, mumbled something, and said maybe I should go down to the Leonards’ farm and talk to them.

“Is she dead?” I pictured my cow’s wet black eyes fringed with eyelashes long like string. She was white with black markings that shape-shifted across her body like clouds. I didn’t breathe for a moment until he answered.

“No, no, she ain’t dead! Kelly just, well, she ain’t a she.”

I climbed down from the porch and stood at the bottom of his ladder.

“What do you mean she isn’t a she?”

“Well, your cow is an it.” He pretended to be busy hammering at the pipe in the roof, but I remained standing by his ladder. His cheeks had turned pink.

“Wait a minute, Davy. I don’t understand.” When I’d feed her in the mornings, after unhooking the sack of powdered milk from the nail in the barn, scooping out an old faded plastic cup’s worth of the sweet candy-smelling silt and mixing it up in lukewarm water using a martini strainer, she always

slurped hungrily. By the time I would allow Babe (a female pitbull) and Dude (a male mutt) to finish licking up the leftovers, a fountain has usually erupted from between Kelly's legs. At the bottom of the ladder staring up at Davy, I imagined a cork plugging the rush of fluid pouring out from her four stomachs. *Does* a female cow have a vagina and a urethra like a human female? I'd never seen a penis between Kelly's legs, but I'd never exactly looked. I tried to figure out how I could get a straight answer from Davy without embarrassing him. "Does she have neither, or does she have both?"

He struggled for a minute, during which I imagine he shuffled through his anatomical vocabulary. Then he shrugged and just came out with it. "Your cow has no pussy."

When we first moved to our farmhouse two years before Little Kelly came to the farm, the Leonards were keeping a dozen or so chickens in one part of their barn. A small radio was perched on a beam and played all day and night, either to keep the chickens company or keep the coyotes and weasels away. We used to go once a week to pick up a carton of fresh eggs from the old yellow refrigerator next to the chicken hutch, which was actually just an old cow stall stapled over with chicken wire. The hens would squawk and strut, protecting their nests whenever we opened the door.

Someone had scrawled a note on a piece of masking tape and stuck it on an old refrigerator next to the hutch: *\$1.25 with a carton, \$1 if you bring your own.* The idea was to place your empty carton in the freezer and trade it for a full carton. One morning in late summer I pulled open the barn door and there were no chickens—the radio wasn't playing, and the refrigerator doors were flung open, the inside dark. When we asked what happened to the chickens a few days later, Pat Leonard said they'd gotten rid of them because they were too much work for too little money. When we pressed him to elaborate on where exactly the chickens went, he shrugged and said simply, "We took care of them."

The Leonards' barn is a sort of headquarters for the neighborhood. If Pat and Tom Joe aren't in the fields, they are usually in one of the two barns—the "hang-out" barn, where they fix machines and drink in the warmer months, or the cow barn, where Kelly lives. The houses in our area are far-flung and

isolated, so it is a comfort to know that you can usually find someone at the barn. The neighborhood group is made up mostly of men. There are some women tucked into the hills, and a few of the men are married, but most of the men in the neighborhood are single.

Neither Pat nor Tom Joe nor Davy have wives. Davy was married shortly after his car accident, but his wife divorced him after a few years. They got back together and had three children, but they never remarried. She kicked him out for good a month before we first met him and he was living in a trailer on a hill near our farmhouse. The brothers live in the farmhouse they grew up in with their eighty-six-year-old mother.

Pat is the younger brother, and he recently retired from his job as a corrections officer on death row in a nearby prison. He keeps his white hair clipped close to his scalp, and he has a tattoo of an eagle and a heart on his right bicep. Pat collects skeletons and skulls and hangs them in the barn; he has a coyote, a deer, a raccoon, and the shriveled corpse of a weasel. He is dating Linda, a forty-something divorcee who lives with her nine-year-old son down the block. She has a yellow mullet and a deep smoker's voice and Pat calls her his "Linda Evans," from his favorite soap opera, *Dynasty*. We are usually the only women drinking beer in the barn.

After Davy finished his work on the roof and went home, I sent Mark down to the Leonard farm to figure out what was really wrong with Kelly the cow. He came back two hours later, a little woozy from the plastic cups of Busch beer from the keg, and without a satisfying answer. "Pat told me, *She's got no lips*," Mark reported. And then laughed.

I went down the road myself the next day. I lingered in the barn and had a few beers before broaching the subject. "So how's Kelly?"

"She's fine, she's fine," Tom Joe said, not meeting my eyes.

Pat shifted in his seat on the picnic bench in the middle of the barn.

"Davy told me that she was having some problems, that she was an *it*." Both of the men were fidgeting now. "I don't quite understand what he means though."

Pat cleared his throat and said he was going to kill the farmer that gave him the cow. "It's a freemartin. It happens. But he shoulda known it." He spit

on the floor and lit another cigarette. “But she’s gonna be fine. The vet came down last night and gave her a shot that he said will hopefully help.”

I walked back into the dairy barn. Kelly lifted her head when she saw me and struggled to her feet. Sawdust pilings stuck to her body like confetti, and today the black markings on her right side looked like an old woman knitting in a rocking chair. I rubbed my fingers on her head between her little Spock ears, and she nudged my forearm with her wide mottled pink-and-black nose, gathering the cuff of my shirt and then my hand in her mouth. I could feel her teeth against my palm like the rim of a glass. I had heard about a baby cow who had suckled off the tail of a horse that had been kept in the same stall, and as I ran my thumb along her scratchy chin I believed it. I made a move with my other hand to lift her spindly tail, in an effort to understand, but she refused to detach her mouth from my fingers. We circled for a few moments in an awkward dance, and then I gave up.

A Web site on the clinical examination of the cow lists a sloped tail head, small vulva, enlarged clitoris, or long vulvar hair as suspicious signs of a freemartin. Wikipedia defined a freemartin as a “female bovine with a masculinized behavior and non-functioning ovaries.” I learned that Kelly must have been a twin, and when she was in the womb hormones from her twin, a male, crossed over to her, and her hormones crossed to him. Usually, the males are stillborn or miscarried, and the female cow takes on traits of a male. Ninety-nine percent of freemartins are sterile. In *Brave New World*, Huxley used the word “freemartin” to describe a woman made sterile by the government policy of exposing her to hormones during fetal development; seventy percent of the female population in Huxley’s futuristic novel is freemartin.

I casually mentioned some of these facts—the twinning, the hormones, the percentages—to Pat and Tom Joe the next time I was in the barn. Mark has earned his acceptance into the group through his carpentry and Canadian roots, but I am a woman, from the city, and at thirty-two still have no children. I know they are unsure what to think about me, and I often have a hard time understanding how exactly I fit in, too. But I wanted Pat and Tom Joe to know I was taking my part in raising Kelly the cow seriously.

Pat didn’t seem to have ever heard about the causes of freemartinism. Nor

did he seem to care much. “Well, all I know is a heifer is worth more money than a bull,” Pat said. Heifers only begin to give milk after they give birth to their first calf, which they usually do once they reach two years old. I realized that if the hormone shots didn’t jump start her ovaries, Kelly would be sold as a bull, for her meat rather than her milk. My picture of her future—happy on a nearby hillside, chewing cud and being milked by a man with soft hands who sat on a short three-legged blue stool—slowly dislodged and began to float away, a small bundle of teeth and course hair carried off over the hills.

The next day, I started making pies. I gave my third ever apple pie, made with apples from a nearby orchard, to the Leonards. I knew it was only a matter of weeks before we would be able to tell if the hormone shots were doing their job, and I was hoping they might spare Kelly. I understood that if they couldn’t, they’d probably have to sell her for veal or to another farmer to grow her into an adult cow for steaks and such, but I had to at least give her a chance.

I drove in our red pick-up truck down the road and parked in their long dirt driveway. Little Dude, the small black mutt they had found in a nearby ditch, ran up and tried to bite my tires. I balanced the pie as the small dog followed me into the hang-out barn. I stood in front of the rickety picnic table and said hello to Davy, Pat, and Tom Joe. I put the pie on the table and told them I was new at baking and that suggestions were welcome.

“Thank you!” Tom Joe said, shaking his head so hard he rattled the table. “That’ll be real good, real good.” He smiled.

Davy kicked his lame foot out from under the table and stood up, lumbering over and giving me a hug. “That’s so nice,” he said. “Don’t take it wrong if I tell you to put more or less cinnamon or nutmeg or whatever in it, okay?” He went back to the table, landing hard on the little wooden bench.

Pat was silent at the end of the table and simply raised his beer in salute.

“I’m going to check on my cow, okay?”

It was early winter and had started to get cold. The barn door had been pulled shut. Inside Kelly rustled to her feet when she heard my voice. She was still very small but growing quickly; two weeks earlier she’d looked scrawny, shoulder and hipbones jutting out like a wet cat’s, but today her belly was

swollen.

The black mutt came near, trying to lick some milk caught on her chin, and Kelly stamped her hoof at him, hard. She was learning, I thought, smiling to myself as I slipped my hand into her mouth. Another thought crashed sharply against that one: or was she masculinizing? Was this the freemartin side showing through? She dipped her head, pulling on my hand as if trying to force milk out of my fingers. The skin on my hand pricked with pain as her teeth scraped my knuckles. I pulled away.

From behind the barn came a chorus of loud bellows—the sun was going down and the heifers were coming into the nearby field to feed. I looked at Little Kelly expectantly, searching her face for a shimmer of kinship as the female cows continued their raspy song. There was nothing. My fingers were raw and pink where her teeth had caught, and I wiped my hand on an old t-shirt hanging from a nearby nail. The heifers' cries slowed and gave way again to the quieter soundtrack of the barn swallows' soft murmurs and the rub of the cow's chain against the wood stall. I returned the t-shirt to its nail, and as I turned to leave, a shock of laughter exploded from the picnic table, catapulting Pat and Tom Joe and Davy's voices through the barn. In the last light of the day, I saw the cow's white head whip quickly through the darkness in the men's direction. I closed my eyes and imagined the barn as empty as that broken-down refrigerator near the old chicken hutch, doors flung open and the inside dark, the warm loamy smell of the small cow gone.