

She Can Have This Calf

by Alison Bergblom Johnson

I remember sitting in my Dad's office chair, which was ancient, having belonged to my grandfather before it belonged to my Dad, and looking on the web to make Dad and Boyd's travel arrangements to New York City. I found them a flight, a hotel by the airport, an Amtrak ticket to visit a college in Upstate New York. And then I sent them on their way.

Dad went over the chores carefully with me. Give this much grain to this group of yearlings, this much to the pregnant cows and heifers. I don't remember the whole of the details, just that it was March, and that I was expected to carry pails of feed across the yard. And I was to make sure that any cow or heifer who was calving was separated from the herd. There was only one Dad was worried about. She was a heifer about to have her first calf.

I talked to Dad and Boyd every day. They were probably only gone for about four days, but it felt like a lifetime. This was the time period during which it was pretty much impossible for me to get ready to leave the house in less than two hours. I would start with the simplest thing, with underwear, and then move on to the more complex. Finding jeans, a t-shirt, a sweatshirt, coveralls. This makes it sound as if it was simple, but the reality was that I would find myself fascinated with the cat, with the scene outside the window. Everything in the world was a potential distraction, and I was certainly distracted by it. I found that I couldn't just tell myself that I had to get dressed, I had to go through all the steps with myself, and in the middle of it I would see something else that seemed more interesting.

That afternoon, once I was finally ready to leave the house, being responsible for the farm left me feeling completely out of my depth. I went out and did the chores first, bringing feed in. I found the whole atmosphere around the cattle was different. There was tension, somehow. It was a moment to think of as fraught with something.

But, wait, before the heifer you have to understand the weather, there was snow everywhere. The gravel was frozen, and didn't give beneath

my foot. The dog loved me so much that she kept blocking my path and flinging herself towards me. Sadie was a big dog too.

When I went outside, I kept breathing in the air. Thinking this good country air should make me well. I believed that if I could only keep to a schedule I would be well. And it should not be a surprise that I thought this because this was what my aunts and uncles kept telling me. If I could only do something rigorous for a few hours and then rest for a few more, I was certain I would begin to slowly get stronger every day. But it didn't work that way. During this time, my few comforts were Rabbit, who was a stuffed animal, and the internet, and television.

Outside, breathing in the cold air, I was struck by how beautiful everything was. The snow covering the white farm buildings sparkled in the sunlight. The dog ran circles around me. We headed towards the cows and heifers. Immediately, you could tell something was up. The air was tight. I brought my pails of feed to the gate and carried them into the pen, after unhooking the chain that held the gate fast. It was big gate of metal tubular piping. It was of a certain type that my dad bought from Midwest Supply in Tracy.

As I was carrying the pails across the yard, I caught sight of a heifer hunched up in a corner with her tailhead up. I had to deliver my pails to the bunk, or they would get knocked over in the muck, so I couldn't go to her. I poured the feed into the bunk. Then I went up to the heifer.

"Hi," I said softly. "you don't look too happy." She does not answer me, refusing to be anthropomorphized. I touch her back gently, near her tail. "Come on, Hef," she needs to go up into the barn into a clean, dry pen. If she has the calf out in the wet, it will be much more likely to die. I walk her up into the barn, deciding to pen her across the center area. All the other pens are filled with cows and their newborn calves. I herd this heifer up into the barn. Once she is exactly where I want her I see that this isn't going to work. The gate I thought was fastened opens to her gentle nudge, and she

walks away from me, back out of the other side of the barn, back out again in the cold and wet.

I fix the gate. I go outside again, feeling so weary, I know I shouldn't be out doing this now, but there is no one else. This time, the heifer doesn't want to go into the barn. She simply refuses. She's seen the pen, and as large as it is, as nice as the straw is, she wants the relative freedom of the cattle yard. Every time I think I have her headed in the right direction she balks.

Finally, I leave and go get some grain in the palm of my hand, and I'm able to coax her back into the pen. This time my gate fails again. I've fastened the right side, but not the left. I felt like Sisyphus. So I fastened it. Then I try to think like a heifer, this is difficult because I'm not even able to think like a person. I move through the path I want her to travel, testing all the gates. They all hold. This time it is harder. The grain in the palm of the hand trick doesn't work this time. So I'm left slowly guiding her around the cattle yard.

Ever since I was head-butted by a cow when I was three, I've been afraid of cows. This didn't prevent me from showing heifers in 4-H. Though I was relieved when I quit, and I hated going to the state fair, I did this without letting anyone see my fear.

That day, I was so tired that I forgot to be afraid. A few minutes before I planned to go into the house and call Dad, asking what I should do, the heifer strode into my pen. Luckily, she hadn't had the calf yet. I went into the house, and took off only my Tinglies, which are rubber boot protectors, workboots, and coveralls. Then I collapsed in front of the computer, and read about Unschooling for two hours. I had to go out again and make sure the calf had been born. I suited up. This was helped by the fact that I was still wearing most of my outdoors clothes.

I went outside, crunching through the snow. Feeling the slip of the rubber Tingly against my heel because they were my dad's and too big for me. I opened the small door into the barn. I walked inside and shut it behind me, shutting Sadie out. She whined at me from the other side. I walked inside. The heifer was no longer hunched up. She was standing, as pregnant as before, inside her pen. There was no calf yet. This meant I had to call the vet to pull the calf.

I went into the house, found the phone book, and called him. There was no answer. Finally, I called my uncle Brian. Brian called the vet and came over. While we were waiting for the vet to come, Brian strode around the barn, putting in new lightbulbs, until it was bright and cozy. I stood there thinking, why didn't it occur to me to do that? Sadie barked, announcing the

arrival of the vet. He came into the coziness and looked at us, blinking away the cold air that had come in with him. I told him what I had done, omitting that it had taken me an hour to pen a calving heifer.

He went and took a look at her. When he came back to me, he said, "She can have this calf." "But I found her calving at 4, and it's 8 now." The vet nodded. "Can you save the calf?" I asked. I knew how valuable every new calf was.

"Let me think," said the vet. I had forgotten he was a man of few words. I stood anxiously in the cold night air, outside the door, while he went back in. He came back out again. "I'll need to pull it." I don't ask again if he can save the calf. I don't want to hear that he can't. That night, the calf's survival somehow became intertwined with mine, and I believed that if the calf could be born, survive, prosper, then so could I. And if not? Well then I would shrivel up, probably not die, but live like this forever.

The vet got some equipment from his truck, and pulled the calf; Brian and I stood watching. The calf didn't move at first, the vet stood it on its feet and got it to nurse, though. We all left the barn. Brian and I and the vet stood talking for a few moments out in the cold outside the barn, kicking our feet back and forth to stay warm. Both Brian and the vet drove away, and I stole back into the barn and watched the calf nurse from its mom, who was no longer a heifer, but a newly minted cow.