

And the Cow Jumped Over the Trailer
by Kelly Chastain

Cows know things. Don't let anyone try to tell you that they are meat sacks on four hoofs with nothing between their ears but a thick plate of lard-filled bone. They know the sound of the lawn mower will eventually yield bags of fresh cut grass. They watch us shucking corn for the weekend's family bar-be-que knowing that we'll let them eat the husks, and at the end of the day, the cobs. They know what it means when my dad backs the trailer with its slat wooden walls into the pasture, and one of the herd is singled out, filed inside, and driven away. They stand stock-still at the edge of the pasture, circling the distraught mother who bawls like an incessant fog horn, her moo pulled from the end of her tail. Guttural. Low. Forsaken. When we hauled my steer off that morning, it came as no surprise to my thirteen year old ears to hear that long desolate call from the fence line.

They all knew damn well where we were going.

Our biggest mistake was never halter-breaking him as a calf. His mother, a prize winning pure-bred Black Angus, edged away from the halter all her life, but once you lassoed her in the web of ropes she followed you like a puppy. She'd set up her own feet in perfect formation when we stopped, as if the world had turned into one giant show arena. This guy, her third calf, knew nothing of 4H and county fairs. He did know something about slat-railed confinement, his last memory of it, locked in the stanchion having his balls banded so they'd slowly suffocate of blood, die, and fall off somewhere in the field. His future would not consist of breeding with hot Angus heifers, but in providing Sunday's pot roast. Surely that had to have played in a loop in his head as my dad eased the Jeep onto the two-lane highway, the longest 12.2 miles of his life, in the direction of the auction yard. The fear thickening his blood to gravy.

Even the mere suggestion of confinement clouds our eyes like cataracts where we are blinded by the slightest glare of what we don't want, or, in some cases, what we can no longer bear. It's there where our futures morph into a dissonant blur. We aren't the only ones who fix our gaze on a filmy undesirable horizon. Cows stare into the same vista.

The Jeep zipped down highway 99 through the bucolic landscape passing winery signs and fields of raspberries. My dad kept the needle at fifty-five, and headed against the steady line of morning commuter traffic en route to Portland. I can't remember all the details but I can tell you this: it was Wednesday because that's the day the auction ran, and it was morning because it was still crisp outside. The Jeep jerked in the lane and when I looked back the first time, I watched my steer turn nervous circles in the trailer. My dad kept an eye on the road and the other on the rear-view mirror. We stayed at this for a few minutes, the hurky-jerky pull on our vehicle more and more pronounced.

"Dad," I said, the alarm mounting in my voice. "He's climbing out."

I am sure there was a string of profanities that left my dad's mouth sounding something akin to this, "Son of a bitch! What the...? Jesus Christ!" Scanning the narrow roadway for a place to pull off, his eyes darted back and forth calculating the few options in front of him: The ditch and the weigh station about a half mile further up the road. His arm came across that middle space between the front seats to shield me from an unseen danger, and his voice, loud, saying, "Hang on, Hang on, Hang on" as he gunned it toward the wide spot stretching out before us.

My dad pinned the accelerator to the floor as my cow climbed the side of the slatted wood trailer, one rung after the other. We whipped into the weigh station across from our friends' fruit

stand, and before the Jeep came to a full stop I had the door open, my seat belt unbuckled, and somehow had wriggled out from under my dad's hand holding me against the seat as he slammed on the brakes.

Everything slowed down, the thump-thump of my Keds on the black top, my eyes wide and staring at the trailer where my cow had climbed the wall and jumped. All four hooves lifted off with nothing but eight feet of air between him and the ground and freedom. Those hooves suspended for a second too long, arcing in the sky, charging, running through the thin molecules, away, away, away.

I read somewhere that fear is nothing more than a simple misunderstanding of circumstances, and that once all of the questions are answered, even if the news is horrible, the fear subsides. Still if those questions go unanswered for too long the fear overtakes logic, and suddenly ideas and actions once considered too risky become palpable choices. It must have been there, on that flat stretch of country road, that my cow decided the situation had become too much to bear. In the haze of an adrenaline overdose it made perfect sense for my perfectly sane and healthy cow to jump out of a perfectly good trailer while driving a perfectly respectable speed toward the predetermined ending place. But therein lies the problem, an ending place, something that steer, whose name I cannot recall for the life of me, could wrap his horn-free head around.

About this time my dad would begin an affair with a co-worker that would end his marriage to my mom, cause the sale of the farm, and the broken family diaspora. His choices, seeming few, the constraints, perceived or otherwise, closing around him like the locking door of the stanchion, the tight squeeze of a neutering band. The risks now bearable, the sneaking around,

their time spent at work devising a plan for both of them to get out of the hell hole of everyday life. Looking back I wonder if he told her, the other woman, how he gripped the wheel of the Jeep and looked to providence to send that god damned steer ditch-side and out of the oncoming traffic where he would absolutely, positively kill someone if they hit him.

I am too old now to think badly of his decisions or the way in which he executed the final blows that dissolved everything. It still puzzles me, but I wasn't the one driving. I wasn't the one throwing my hand in front of my daughter, doing everything I damn well could to keep it under control until the hurricane force winds swept us up away, away, away.

The moment the steer touched down, time picked up speed. His momentum carried him forward stumbling toward the ditch. I ran and ran, forever in his direction, and jumped like the gymnast I still was, planting my right knee behind his shoulder, all one hundred ten pounds of me shoving him into the ditch, out of the ceaseless oncoming stream of traffic, down, down, back into confinement. Twisting around with my back arcing into his, my legs pushed against the side of the ditch to keep him there. His hide, sweaty and rich with dirt, the smell of the pasture rising into my nose. I held him there. Animal against animal.

In the midst of a struggle our minds flip through our experiences like an old Rolodex file looking for a solution to our current conundrum. Most times, we drum up abstract thoughts with little connection to the present situation. So in that moment I knew the following: Simon, my cat, was probably asleep in my tree fort, the hamburger my mom had taken from the freezer that morning sat in the sink in a bowl of water thawing, and the Jeep was still running. My cow, on the other hand, knew a serious shot at escape lie in getting out of that ditch, that home was

tailward and about a three hour walk away, and that his mother was likely still calling for him in the only pasture he'd ever known. Unlike me, his determination sprang from a linear thread.

Many things, I wouldn't know until later. That afternoon when he appeared on the auction floor with his weight flashing in red LED numbers above the auctioneer's head, I would discover that had I wrestled an 1,192 pound steer to the ground. I wouldn't know until moments later that two men from an auction yard a few towns over had watched the entire scene unfold and pulled in behind us to help. It wouldn't register for a few seconds that my half-ton cow had jumped for his life when no other option, presented or otherwise, seemed the right thing to do. His knowledge of a short future in a packing plant livestock pen closed in around him, the weight of it too heavy to stop him from sliding over the tipping point. Just jump. Get off the disorienting ground. Run for something solid. Run. Away, away, away.

With that knowledge we stayed in the ditch at that wide stretch of road beside the weigh station. It could have been either a moment or an eternity that the steer and I imposed our will upon each other.

"Stay on him, stay on him," one of the men from the auction yard yelled to me. I pressed my heels hard into the ground, the muscles in my thighs screaming and shaking. I felt the animal beneath me, fighting to find his own legs, to push himself up and make another run for it.

"Just stay down," I whispered to the steer, over and over, my mouth inches from his ear. His black eye stared back at me, wildly determined. I wanted to stop time, to pull him out of the ditch, throw my arms around his neck like I did his mother's so many times, and tell him I'm sorry it was all going down like this. It wasn't personal. Not on my end anyway. Instead, I arched

my back and pushed into him with all my might, the tissue and tendons flexing, the hardening of sinew beneath me, and him forcing his way up. My mantra continued, “Just stay down.” I felt myself rising off the ground despite my best efforts. “Please,” I added, and out loud that time, where everyone could hear it.

The first man planted his knee behind the steer’s shoulder and threw not one, but two, halters around his head. His gloved hands working faster than any calf roper I’d seen. Cinching the rope behind the ears and jaw, he wrestled the cow’s head. His flannel shirt blew open, unbuttoned, the tip of it grazed my cheek and smelled of alfalfa and oats and wide open pastures, a phantom freedom. My dad and the two men worked him from the ditch and stayed clear of his rear hooves, kicking wildly. Desperately. Furiously.

With the men coaxing on all sides, I stood there shifting on my feet, caught between wanting to help and being in the way if I tried. They returned him to his six by ten foot cell, this time tying both halters to the trailer tongue, giving him less than eight inches to maneuver, and yet, he persisted, and only a mile before the auction yard would he tire himself out with pulling and fighting.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like that,” one of the men said. They looked in on the steer, each of them inspecting him.

“All I could think,” My dad began, “Was if he jumped the other side into oncoming traffic.” His face was pale, something I rarely saw. I stood outside their silence as they tallied the implications of that, the financial ramifications, the lawsuits, the ambulance bills, and the potential loss of life, all something I couldn’t yet fathom.

I got the address of the two yardmen so I could mail the halters back to them, we shook hands like real men, and after piling into their truck, they turned back onto the road with one last glance at the steer still fighting against the ropes and the trailer and the inevitability of the slaughterhouse. My dad and I stood there for a long moment, each of us on opposite sides of that trailer, looking at the steer and wondering how he didn't break a single bone.

“Jesus Christ,” My dad said, shaking his head.

My brother would say the same thing in a few years when everything fell apart. Soon after, I would say it in my head when I saw her, this airborne steer's mother, my 4H bottle baby, standing in someone else's pasture. I would stare through the grime covered bus window on my way to school, not even an eighth of a mile from where the steer jumped out of the trailer in his last bid for freedom. His mother's image, grazing in that pasture, would haunt me all day, and I would not believe it until I saw her again on the way home. Then I would have a truth, the cold hard version of it, to placate the oncoming fear.

We climbed back into the Jeep and drove away, my dad and that steer and I, into a future that would come down on us as hard and as inescapable as the butcher's knife.