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Warnings We Do Not Heed

2189 Words

Blue in the Black of Night

She felt him calling. At least that's the best she could explain it. Just woke up early—earlier than her uncle -- which surprised her because, back home, she never woke before noon if she could help it. Pulled on a pair of rubber Haymaker boots her uncle had given her, and headed outside into the blue-grey early morning. Because she'd heard him calling.

The barn was warm inside. And noisy in a way the house wasn't. Alive with the shifting of large bodies moving in their stalls – waking to the day -- breathing, groaning, shuffling heavy hooves against paddock walls, anticipating breakfast. And behind all that, something soft and vulnerable mewling in the corner, calling to her. She wasn't sure at first so she waited till instinct told her it was okay to move closer.

He was tucked into the corner, half-hidden in shadow, making unsure noises. Till her boot scuffed the gate. Then he went quiet and turned toward her. Looking so awkward and vulnerable, her chest felt strange.

Charlotte crouched down and held out her hand. He took three unsteady steps toward her -- she stayed very still – and then he took three more. Then he pressed his nose into her outstretched hand, trusting her, breathing into her. She stared into his eyes and felt another twinge. They stayed that way for a long time.

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Uncle Drew said nothing. Just watched as she carried a bucket of water out to the barn to wash him. Watched her learn where to stand so as not to frighten him.

Watched her figure him out through quiet negotiations conducted entirely without words. She learned he liked to be scratched behind his right ear but not his left, liked the sound of her voice but not any sudden movements, liked to lean into her the way tired things lean into solid things.

On the fourth day, Uncle Drew commented, "He's taken to you."

"I've taken to him," Charlotte answered.

Her uncle looked at her. "Same thing, I suppose."

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She'd been staying with her uncle because her mother needed 'time.' That's how she'd said it — 'time.' Charlotte didn't quite understand, but knew her mother was desperate so she didn't complain. Uncle Drew didn't know how long either, at least so he said when he picked her up at the bus station. But, getting sober, as far as he was concerned, required patience, and a great deal of courage -- patience on her part, courage on her mother's. He drove her back to the farm, fed her, showed her to her room, and left her alone. It was the most comfortable she'd been in months.

The days took on a shape and importance she hadn't expected – every moment, and every task, necessary to the care and feeding of all that lived on her uncle's farm. Not a lot of wasted motion. At her mother's, days had been formless. Cut to long dissolves of screen light from the television flickering, washing the light from the room. Long hours waiting for her mother to wake up. Long hours of a particular boredom in a house that didn't quite function well -- where takeaway containers and beer cans lined just about every surface – and the smell of cigarettes permeated, having worked their way into everything.

On the farm, the days began in the earliest hours with the sound of boots being pulled on, and ended only after the last of the sun's golden light dipped below the fields. The sight of which made her reach for her camera every night in an effort to

capture the moment. Knowing the photograph would never be the same as sitting and watching.

She photographed him too. Constantly. His knees. His ear. The way his eyelashes caught the light. The way he slept, folded down into the straw, trusting the world not to do anything while he was gone from it.

She sent one of her photographs to her mother.

Her mother texted back: *He's sweet. How are you doing?*

Charlotte texted, *Fine*. Then deleted it. Then typed it again and sent it.

At night, through the curtains of her window, she could see stars – countless stars that never existed in the city. She tried counting them, but had to give it up. Because you couldn't count things that kept blinking in and out.

In the evening, she took photos of her uncle too. He didn't mind. He even talked to her. A little at first. More as time went on. But never in the way other adults usually spoke to her – impatiently or condescendingly. He just talked the way you did with someone you've decided to trust.

Mostly he talked about the farm. About how dairy farming worked, the rhythms of it all, the way the seasons determined the timing of everything. The way particular grains produced different yields of milk. How the cows -- all forty-three of them, each of whom he knew by name – had their own little world of dramas. A few times he even talked about Charlotte's mother – mostly about when they were kids running around the farm. And once he talked about his dead wife and child -- briefly. Charlotte didn't say anything, just sat there listening. Which he seemed to appreciate.

But he never talked about the calves. The yield of the spring. Which Charlotte didn't notice for a while. Until she did.

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"Where are the other calves?" she finally asked.

They'd just finished dinner, were clearing the dishes and about to head outside to watch the sun set. Uncle Drew stopped and set his cup down. He was quiet for a long moment, trying to decide how much truth was the right amount.

"When they're born," he said, "we move them. That same day. To a separate pen."

"Why?"

"When calves are born, their mother produces milk for the calf to drink. The calves are moved away so the milk can go to the supermarket instead."

Charlotte was quiet a moment. "What happens to the calves then?"

"They're sold to other farms. Generally within a few days. To be bred, or raised as milking cows. Or, if male, sent to the meat processing plant."

She looked at him. "So Star —"

Uncle Drew held his tongue a moment. "Three weeks old. He should've been gone his first week."

"Why didn't he?"

"You'd arrived. It seemed a shame."

She sat for a while with that. It felt kind. But it hurt anyway.

"And the mother — does she — know?"

"Yes," Uncle Drew said. "Yes, she does."

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She asked if she could keep him.

Uncle Drew looked at her steadily. "This is how farming works. He's not a pet. He has a purpose and was never going to stay."

"But he could," she said. "If you wanted him to."

"No," he said. Simply. Not cruelly. "No."

She walked out without answering, the screen door hitting the frame behind her harder than she meant it to, heading to the barn. She sat in the straw next to Star with

the barn door pulled half-shut behind her, pressing her face into his neck and crying until she was empty and her throat ached. Star stood very still. She didn't know if he understood.

"They can't," she told him. "I won't let them."

He shifted slightly. She tightened her arms around him.

"You could run," she said. "I could open the gate and you could go into the field and nobody could take you."

She looked toward the open barn door and the gate to the pasture not far beyond. It was late now, the yard turned silver in the moonlight. She got to her feet. "Come on," she whispered. Star followed without hesitation, stopping whenever she stopped, walking when she walked -- as though the game belonged entirely to her.

The latch was stiff, giving off a dull click that sounded impossibly loud in the night. She swung the gate open.

"Go on."

He didn't. Just looked at her, waiting.

She waved her arms, shooing him the way she had seen her uncle move the cows. He took two uncertain steps away, then returned, pressing himself gently against her side.

"You're supposed to run," she whispered, her voice breaking.

Behind her came the crunch of slow footsteps on gravel. Without a word, Uncle Drew walked past her, rested one weathered hand on the gate, and quietly swung it shut again. The latch clicked into place. For a long moment he stood with her, letting her accept the truth.

"He doesn't know," her uncle spoke softly. "Nor will he be treated poorly. It's just is how it is."

Charlotte swiped at her face, brushing the tears roughly away.

After returning Star to the barn and returning to the house, Charlotte headed upstairs, her feet loud and deliberate on each step – slamming her bedroom door with a bang that said everything she hadn't downstairs.

In the morning, she came back down, pale and hollow-eyed, without a word. Uncle Drew put her breakfast in front of her and watched her eat standing up, looking out to the barn through the window.

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She spent every free hour with Star after that. He was growing bigger, his legs more certain beneath him. He moved through the barn with a new confidence, and she was proud in a way she couldn't explain. She wasn't teaching him anything. Not really. He wasn't teaching her either. At least, that's what she thought. They were simply together. Which was something she hadn't known before – that just being together could be enough. Years later, she referred to it as '*Calf love*.'

She photographed him. Photographed him in the barn, in his stall, in the field. Out in the sunlight. Under the trees. Then in a little pasture along the fence where an old elm once stood. The grass grew differently there, as if remembering something once had been there, but taken away.

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The night before her mother arrived, Uncle Drew prepared Charlotte's new 'favorite' meal – rice with avocado and a side of teriyaki sauce – a recent development after declaring herself vegetarian and swearing off being a carnivore ever again.

"He will go to good people," Uncle Drew soothed. "The farm I chose—I know them. He'll be fine there."

Charlotte looked at the table.

"Can I visit?"

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know if that would help."

She went to the barn one last time that night.

Star was awake. Looking at her with such trust, it broke her heart. She crossed the space between them and pressed her forehead gently against his—the way he had once pressed his against hers—and stayed there till she felt her breathing slow. She didn't say goodbye -- didn't even know if he understood goodbye. Scratched behind his right ear and walked back to the house.

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Her mother arrived in the morning. Emerging from the shadow of a taxi, looking different. Better in a way she hadn't in a long time. But still unsure, careful in the way she moved -- like someone learning to trust the ground again. She quickly walked to Charlotte and hugged her for the longest time. Charlotte let her.

They sat quietly in the kitchen watching Uncle Drew make coffee -- her mother looking around, judging the amount of time since she'd last been there. And secretly relieved knowing the last elements of danger within had died – with all his possessions removed and the place scrubbed clean. Uncle Drew knew this, having stripped the house within days of the funeral. But he had no idea how to say this to her – or how sorry he was for not having protected her better.

Charlotte watched her uncle and felt something in her chest ease, knowing he hurt too having watched his sister leave home wounded, refusing to return. Till now.

Soon enough, another taxi arrived to take Charlotte and her mother away. But as they were leaving, her mother stopped and looked across the yard at the barn. “Can I see him?” she asked. “The calf. The one you told me about.” They walked together across the gravel and stood in the door of the barn. Star was at the back, his ‘star’ mark visible even in the low light.

Her mother was quiet for a moment. “Oh,” was all she said.

“I know,” Charlotte added.

They stood there together for a while, not saying anything. Letting the barn breathe around them. Listening to the cows shift and settle and go about their cow

business. Then her mother put her arm around Charlotte's shoulders, and Charlotte put her arm around her mother's waist, which was new —she hadn't done that in years. They leaned into each other, the way tired things lean into solid things.

They left. Charlotte sitting with her mother quietly in the back, her camera in her lap, saying nothing till the fields had long gone and the farm reduced to a tiny speck before disappearing for good.

Charlotte photographed her mother then. Her mother smiled. Tiredly, but with genuine hope.

The End.