

Princey

By Elizabeth Schmidt

The old slaughter truck was a ragged grey color, the paint flaked off in places. The truck itself was ordinary, but the crude plywood shell looming over the cab tainted that innocence. Slightly off center, the angled construction thrust up over the cab by a good four feet and was covered with peeling whitewash. A large rear door latched with three heavy metal straps. There were no windows on the shell and inside the darkness of its interior, hungry-looking hooks hung from a bar that ran the length of the ceiling. The smell entered your nose and made your heart shrink.

All the animals recognized the truck. They smelled the death as soon as the truck entered the valley; and while still hidden by curves in the road, long before it started up the driveway. Heidi, our old black lab, would suddenly slink to her chair on the front porch, curl up, and refuse to lift her head.

In late October, we called the slaughter truck to butcher a young steer. Princey was our milk cow Loretta's first calf. My two daughters had helped raise him, all of us delighting in his glistening nose, his luminous black eyes, the soft reddish hair that tickled your nose. And he was warm, always satisfying to lean into, the smell of fresh hay and grass so comforting.

Of course I had known that eventually Princey was going to be slaughtered and we would eat him. That was the plan anyway. But he hastened this demise when he found a piece of rope left in the upper pasture by fellows working on the telephone lines. He ate it. Or tried to eat it. I found him with ten feet of rope hanging out of his mouth...impossible to know how much of it was inside. There were calls to the crew that left the rope and to the vet. We made a number of attempts at extrication, but nothing

worked; and given the intricacies of four stomachs, it was inadvisable to pull. The best hope was that in time the stomach acids would dissolve what was in there. I didn't have a good feeling when the vet said, "Cut off as much as you can and then, we'll just have to watch the little feller."

So we watched as he slowly lost his ability to ruminate, all his digestive functions snarled and strangled by the loops of rope. He still ate but steadily lost weight. His listlessness became a daily reminder of something gone wrong. Of something that we couldn't fix and that probably wouldn't change no matter how much we wished it to. In the first weeks my daughters watched carefully for signs of improvement; but as weeks turned into months, they asked fewer questions and our eyes met with quiet sorrow as they came in from doing the chores. With winter coming on, we knew he wouldn't make it. And so, we called the slaughter truck.

The morning the truck was to come for Princey, I stayed in the house making apple pies, one for dinner and more to freeze. A job that kept me busy, peeling off the fragrant skins, quartering and then mixing the juicy slices with flour, sugar and cinnamon. As I rolled the yielding dough into flat circles of crust, I noticed that my arms were weak, trembling.

Heidi kept me company. She curled up by the unlit wood stove and refused to go outside.

The morning was so still. It was as if the whole valley knew. Princey was alone in a small corral by the barn, not far from the house; and I watched him from the dining room window. He, at least, seemed unconcerned as he stood with his head hanging down in the fall sunlight. I knew I should go to him, hold him, and talk with him until the final

moment; but my stomach churned in a horrible emptiness and I wanted to curl up beside the dog.

The low plywood rattle brought me to the window. Then I heard the deep motor gear down and looked up to see the small truck with its dingy white box slowly coming up the drive. The calf brought his head up with a wild and sudden energy and looked right at me. His eyes rolled and he let out a strange, agonized bellow, a lamentation that filled my heart with its desperation. It was a moment of such stark recognition.

I went outside to tell the men that, yes, that was the calf. After all these years, I still am ashamed and sad that I turned my back and returned to the house, flinching when the one shot rang out. He deserved much more. He deserved some comfort, a final embrace, and a thank you for all the times his sweetness had cheered our lives.

They took him away. We did not eat him.

The fear aching in his call, the pleading terror of his rolling eyes: the memory stays with me. And sometimes, sometimes I wonder if my death will come like this, with the realization that death is starkly, unmistakably present and the obvious choice is to leap into its arms.