

A Calf is an Animal

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Even if it had rickety stairs from the back door and neighbours close on every side, at least the new house was much closer to the beach. If I stood on tiptoe at the kitchen sink I could see, on the horizon, the blue line of the sea. But still. It was a long way from where we had lived, from the place Dad and I went back to every second weekend.

The first thing I would think of when I woke every second Saturday was that it was only one more sleep till it was a second Sunday, the day Dad and I drove in his car to the oval where we met the girl who looked after Silo now. She would lead him slowly up the steep road to us, dismount her own pony, hold out Silo's reins to me and look at me without smiling. At any other time, this would have bothered me, but when I was with Silo I just looked at it as if I was looking at a picture in a book. Then I closed my eyes, pressed my face into his warm neck and breathed him in.

One second Saturday morning, at breakfast, the sky through the kitchen window looked like a big blue bowl, and Mum looked at Dad over her cup and said, 'Such a lovely day. Too lovely to be stuck inside.' I looked at him, too. Even my brother looked at him. But he just sipped his coffee.

In the afternoon, clouds came in. That night Mum opened the front door and I saw it was raining. Big drops fell shining in the circle of street light. Dad was sitting on the sofa. He was very still, and watching a man in a suit and tie talking on TV. I looked from Dad to the man and back. Dad was so still that I wasn't sure he was breathing. I looked from him to the talking man again, trying to understand what Dad was listening so hard to, what the man was trying to tell us. Mum was still holding the door open and she said, 'Well, we're going. Are you coming with us?'

I looked up at Mum. She was staring at Dad. So I looked across at him again. But Dad couldn't hear her. He just stared at the man. Dad's eyes were wide open and quite green, not their usual colour. He didn't say anything, and he didn't move. He didn't even blink. Mum had spoken loudly. I looked back up at her.

The three of us—Mum, my brother and me—were standing close together. I looked at her hands: she had one on the door knob and the other on my brother's shoulder. I looked at my brother's face staring up at her. Suddenly I felt frightened. I didn't want to go out. I looked at Dad who wasn't Dad but a statue of Dad and I stared hard at the side of his face to make him move, to make him turn his head and look at me, lift his hand and gesture me over:

Pleasedaddypleaseletmestaywithyoupleasedaddypleaseletme—

'All right,' Mum said. I looked back to her: she nodded, her mouth set in a line. She opened the door wider. I felt her turning towards it and I felt my brother turning towards it, too. I didn't need to turn towards it. I already knew it was cold and wet and dark outside and that Mum couldn't drive and in the moment when the thinking stopped and my head felt hot and fuzzy and I couldn't control it, I looked away from all of them and into the space between the lounge room and the kitchen, and wished I were over there, around that corner, out of sight. Or under the table, or in my bed or the toilet, or in my mother's wardrobe with the hems of all her dresses around me. I wished my legs would move—curl me up on the floor or lift me up into the air so I could fly out the room, or just walk me straight into

my father's arms—but they wouldn't do anything. If this was what I thought it was, it was all back to front. It should be him at the door with us, his car keys in his hand. It should be her in the middle of the room, shouting, 'Go! Get out! Get out all of you!' the way she often did.

A little while before, I had been in my new room of this new house, on my bed, reading *My Friend Flicka*, and Mum had called, 'Get ready, we're going out!' And my brother and I had raced to put on our good shoes and coats, excited because we didn't go out much at night. And we were there, ready, at the open door, and Dad was staring at the man on TV, and Mum had said, 'Are you coming with us?' And then somehow, in an instant, everything changed: we were way over here and he was way over there and my head was hot and I could feel myself start crying and I couldn't move my feet but I could move my hands so I lifted them up to cover my face, and I bowed my head like I did when I prayed.

Mum never cried. She always said, 'For God's sake, stop your noise' or 'Get out of my sight if you're going to do that.' But once it had started it wouldn't switch off, so I covered my face with my hands and bowed my head and then there was just the sound of me and the voice of the man in his suit and tie, and Dad was going to let her take us away. He hadn't even looked at me. He had forgotten. He had forgotten the plan I had made in my head, forgotten what he was supposed to do, that he was the one we would live with, that she was the one who needed to go, that we would all be happy then, that I could learn to cook the dinner and wash the dishes, that there would be no more shouting.

Then I felt Mum's arm around me and her soft belly press up against my cheek, and her voice sounded different when she said, 'It's all right,' and the door clicked shut behind me, all the dark, cold rain still outside.

When I woke the next morning it was sunny again. I sat beside Dad in the front of his car, and looked at the houses and trees and animals

we passed and my stomach just kept flipping because at last it was a second Sunday and the girl with the shiny hair who looked after Silo would meet us, with Silo on a lead rope, and I wouldn't care that she didn't smile at me. I would stroke his face and talk to him and swing myself up high into the saddle.

When we arrived at the meeting place, Dad pulled the car off the road. There was the loud crunch of wheels on gravel and I had the door half-open before we stopped. Beside us was a line of huge trees where my brother and I had built cubbies from fallen limbs and strips of bark in the summers when we lived up here, and behind the trees was the oval where Mum had sat on her fold-up chair and watched Dad play cricket. There was no cricket now. There were just two boys far away on the other side, kicking a footy to one another. Dad and I stood under the trees, as we always did, to wait. For a long time I watched the road that narrowed as it fell away down the rise. The voices of the two boys reached us across the flat green space behind us and reminded me of lunch times at school, the way boys shout like that. I picked up some gum nuts and turned them over and over in my hand. I stared at the toes of my polished riding boots, tried not to think about the time that was passing, then I picked up small stones and tossed them a little way just to hear them clatter.

Beside me, Dad leaned against a tree and smoked, lighting one from the other, just as he always did, grinding out each butt beneath his shoe. He stared straight ahead and was quiet. After a long time, I glanced at the watch on his wrist: twenty to eleven. I peered down the street and bit my lip. They'll turn up. She'll say she's sorry. Or Dad will say something to me. He wouldn't have driven me all the way for nothing. The sun slanted in under the trees. I closed my eyes and tilted my face to it. For a while, the inside of my eyelids turned to gold.

When Dad threw down a butt without lighting another, I looked at him. He put his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth

Then I ran alongside the house to the back yard and I crouched as I ran so they wouldn't see me if they looked through the window on that side.

on his heels. His shoes crunched over the stones. He looked like he was thinking, still looking straight ahead, across the road and into the bush. I followed his gaze. There were wild flowers over there. He said, 'Well, it's after eleven. I think we should go.'

I said, 'Why haven't they come?'

He turned my way but he didn't look at me, and shrugged. I followed him back to the car. All the way home I stared out the passenger window, my stomach full of things I couldn't ask.

I waited. No-one said anything about it all that week and all the next, and soon it was a second Saturday again and I knew everything must be all right and that tomorrow we'd go up to the oval in the hills again and this time the girl would bring Silo. After our Saturday lunch, Dad looked at me. He had to visit a farm for work; did I want to come? I jumped up and down. Just him and me again. Him and me on a farm. A farm with animals. Not Mum being angry or my brother snuggling up to Dad in the car and Dad carrying him around on his shoulders.

We were still in our street when it happened. I gasped and jerked forward, maybe I shouted. Dad swung the steering wheel to the right, swerved across the road and back again before he regained control. It was just a flash of a brown dog, running. I swivelled around to look behind us. No yelp, no bump beneath the wheels. No dog lying in the road. No dog at all.

Dad said, 'You shouldn't have done that.'

I said, 'But there was a dog—.'

'It doesn't matter. It's dangerous. Understand? We could have crashed. It's just a dog. Don't ever do that again.'

I looked at the air in front of my face and blinked. He had swung the wheel. We had missed the dog. I had thought he would be pleased, like me. I looked down at my hands. 'Sorry, Daddy.'

We drove a long way. The farm was at the end of a sandy track. Dad pulled up outside a house surrounded by trees. An old dog was asleep in the sun but stood when a man came out of the house. Dad and the man talked, and Dad patted the dog on its head, pat pat, and

said, 'Hello, boy.' Dust lifted off the dog's coat and into the bright air. Dad and the man went into a shed so I found a long stick and poked at the ground, then squatted to watch ants. The dog stood outside the shed door, looking in, its back to me.

We were on our way home when Dad said, 'I'm going to tell you something and you mustn't cry. Is that clear?'

I looked at him. He was staring straight ahead at the road. 'Your horse is dead.'

We were hurtling forward, just him and me. I was sitting in the passenger seat. A moment ago there was a world outside the window. We had been at a farm with a dog. The day was sunny. And a moment before that we had stood under trees. There were wild flowers across the road. He had stared at them. It had been twenty to eleven. We were going back tomorrow. There had been another dog. The dog had lived.

Dad said, 'There's no use crying over spilt milk. Do you understand? It won't change anything.'

At home, he got out of the car so I did, too. I walked through the door after him. He threw his keys on the table and took off his shoes, just as he always did. Mum said, 'Do you want coffee?' He said, 'Lovely.'

I squeezed my fingers together then walked down the passage to my room and stopped in the middle of it and looked around. It was bigger than I remembered. Then I walked out of my room and towards the front door because they were in the kitchen, talking, I could hear them, and they'd see me if I went to the back door, even though it was closer, and besides there was that rickety staircase outside the back door that shakes when you step on it and goes down steeply in one direction and then turns to the right halfway down and goes all the way to the ground just as steeply in that direction, so I walked to the front door and opened the wire door and ran across the front porch and cut through the car port, running between the car and the house and it was so cold in there and smelled strange, just as it always did. Then I ran alongside the house to the back yard and I crouched as I ran

so they wouldn't see me if they looked through the window on that side. In between the house and the fence there was never any direct sun, and I crouched and ran as fast as I could towards the big fat slab of yellow in the back yard ahead, and I squeezed my fingers together as I went, squeezesqueeze squeezesqueeze. And then I broke through into the bright yellow burn of it, and I was there in the sunlight and I stood in the yard and no-one knew I was and I lifted up my face and it beat and beat and beat on me.

Later, the bath was half full and steaming. There was a clean towel on the rack. I knew Mum had put it there when she ran us the bath. I wasn't allowed to close the door when I was in my room or in the bath, that was the rule, so I stood on the mat in the space between the bath and wall and turned my back to the door and undressed quickly because it was cold by then.

Somehow my skin came off with my clothes and I had to concentrate hard on my arms and legs, careful how I stepped in. My limbs belonged to some other girl. I was just minding them. So I kept very still and the water turned into a mirror around me. The overhead light floated across it. The ceiling was the floor, the floor the ceiling. I watched the round yellow light beside me and it watched me back.

After dinner I sat in the lounge room with my book open in my lap. I turned the pages, looked at all the shapes words made. When I got up to go to bed, I held the book in one hand while Mum and Dad kissed my cheek and the kissing felt the way it always did, and when I got into bed I ran my fingers over the cover of the book, over its picture of a mare and her foal. The mare's head was turned to look out of the book at me. I tucked it under my pillow where it would be warm and safe. I lay very straight on my back under the blankets and stretched my legs out carefully and thought about Silo, how they had always been nearest to him when we were riding, had been the part he had felt most then and that felt him most, too. I thought about the muscles in each of my calves and how calf is also a word for an animal, and I remembered how they felt when they were against Silo's soft flanks, and how he would do what I asked when I kicked him there.

I listened for a long time for shouting in the kitchen or the lounge room but that night there wasn't any. I could hear Mum washing up and Dad drying, things clattering into cupboards and drawers as always, and I wondered what they were saying to one another, if he picked up a plate and wiped it, and said, 'So I told her not to cry over spilt milk.' Maybe Mum stopped washing another plate and looked at him: 'Why did you tell her that?' And Dad said, 'She's a cry-baby, you say so yourself. She needs to learn.' And Mum wouldn't say anything, she would just lift out the clean plate and start washing the pots and pans because he was right, she knew it. And then I turned onto my side and slid my fingers under my pillow to feel the edge of *My Friend Flicka*, and I closed my eyes and remembered how Dad's hand looked on the old dog's head, pat pat, and how pretty it was when the dust flew up from dog's coat into the sunlight, and I couldn't help it, that was when the thinking stopped and I pulled the blankets up over my head and I cried and cried like a cry-baby until the next thing I gasped, it was morning.