

# 1

## PLEASE ALLOW ME TO INTRODUCE MYSELF

Most people think cows can't think. Hello. Let me rephrase that, most people think cows can't think, and have no feelings. Hello, again. I'm a cow, my name is Elsie, yes, I know. And that's no bull. See? We can think, feel, and joke, most of us anyway. My great-aunt Elsie, whom I'm named after, has no sense of humor. At all. I mean zero. She doesn't even like jokes with humans in them doing stupid things. Like that one that goes—two humans walk into a barn . . . Wait, I may not have much time here, I can't mess around.

Just trying to get certain things out of the way. Let's see, oh yeah, how am I writing this, you may wonder, when I have no fingers? Can't hold a pen. Believe me, I've tried. Not pretty. Not that there are many pens around anymore, what with all the computers. And even though we can think and

feel and be funny, we cannot speak. At least to humans. We have what you people used to call an “oral tradition.” Stories and wisdom are handed down from mother cow to daughter calf, and generation to generation. Much the way you receive your Odysseys or your Iliads. Singing even. Sorry for the name-dropping. Homer. Boom. I’ll wait while you pick it up.

All animals can speak to one another in a kind of grunt, whistle, bark, and squeal universal, beastly Esperanto: lion to lamb, bird to dog, moose to cat—except, really, who would ever want to have a lengthy conversation with a cat? Very narcissistic they are. But we, the animal kingdom, have no words or what you would call language. And yes, I know that was bad grammar just then, I was using that for emphasis. I’m not a marsupial. Marsupials are well known for their inability to understand the rules of grammar (ever try to have a dialogue with a kangaroo? Nearly incomprehensible even if you can penetrate that accent, mate). And who knows what the hell fish are talking about. But I digress. That’s very bovine of me. Digression and digestion. It’s what we do. We cows have a lot of time on our hooves to chew the cud, as it were. We stand, we eat, we talk, maybe find a salt lick. It’s all good.

At least it *was* all good. Till about two years ago. That’s when the story I’m telling pretty much begins. My life up until that point was idyllic. I was born on a small farm in upstate New York in the United States. The Bovary clan has been there since time began. My mother and my mother’s mother and her mother’s mother’s mother, etc. The fathers

in cow families are pretty much absent. My dad, Ferdinand (I know), used to come around now and then, and I suppose that's how I got all my brothers and sisters. But for the most part, the boys are kept separate from the girls. They like to stare at us from beyond the fence. Sometimes it's a little creepy, to be honest. It's like the boys are a different species, but I don't judge. If I've learned anything in the past two years it's not to judge. I guess what I'm saying is since the beginning of civilization, boys and girls have been kept separate so we don't expect anything different. It's all I know so I don't stand around wishing my dad were around.

Humans love us. Or I thought so, we all thought so. They love our milk. Now personally, I think it's a little weird to drink another animal's milk. You don't see me walking up to some human lady who just gave birth, saying, "Yo, can I get a taste?" Weird, right? Not gonna happen. It's kinda nasty. But that's why you love us. The ol' milk. Leche. To each his own, I suppose. And every girl grows up knowing that every morning, the farmer is going to come and take our milk. Which is kind of a relief, 'cause we get swollen, and it can feel good to feel all svelte-like and streamlined again after a good milking. Yeah, we care about how we look. And we don't appreciate it that when you people think someone is fat you call them a cow. And pigs aren't very happy about the whole "pig" or "swine" thing, and chickens are pissed too about the "chicken" thing (which secretly makes me happy, 'cause roosters are the biggest pain in the haunches god ever created).

Oh yeah, we believe in God. In the shape of a cow. Not really. Scared you though, didn't I? But we do believe something made all the somethings in the world—all the animals, animalcules, plants, rocks, and souls. And whether that maker something is shaped like a cow, a pig, a person, an amoeba, or Jerry Garcia, we don't really know and don't care. We just believe there's a force for life and creation out there. The closest thing people have to it is Mother Earth. But that's just an approximation. And we don't just believe these things, we know them. In our bones and in the bones of our ancestors who lie out there in old Macdonald's field somewhere.

Man, I am one digressive cow. You're gonna have to get used to it. Homer was pretty digressive too, wasn't he? So I got a precedent there. Before I tell you what happened, let me give you a little more backstory, tell you what my life was like before the Event. That's what I call it—the Event, or the Revelation, or the Day the Patty Hit the Fan. Let me set the scene. Give you some flavor.

Life on a farm. It's pretty chill. Spend a lot of time out in the field hanging with my bffs, getting the hairy eyeball from the bulls. The grass is green on our side, my mom always used to say. She was a great mom, but she disappeared one day, like all cow moms do. We're taught to accept that. That a mom is not forever and it doesn't mean she doesn't love you if she leaves without saying goodbye once the job of raising you from a calf is done. And even though I know this is “the way things are” and “the way things always have been,” I still get a little choked up thinking about my mom.

She was beautiful—big brown eyes, wicked sense of humor. Never left my side until one day she did. But I'll get to that later. Give me a moment as I think about my mother. Feelings come and go, unless you don't feel them. Then they stay, and hurt, and grow pear-shaped and weird. So when we cows have a feeling, we feel it, till the feeling passes. Then we moo-ve on. Boom. Didn't see that coming, did you?

I recall the days of my childhood through the green grass-colored lens of nostalgia. It all seems so far away and so perfect. Every day a sunny day, even the rainy ones. We had grass and food and a place to sleep and good friends, and always some drama going on with the other animals, but nothing too major. The hierarchy of a farm is very fluid. I don't know if you'd call it a democracy. I think a better term is "live and let live," unless there are chickens around. Then all bets are off. I don't know if you've read *Animal Farm*. It seems like that's a book all human children have to read. Personally I prefer *Charlotte's Web*, though spiders can be tricky—*Harlot's Web* anybody? (And eight legs? Really? Two or four is the appropriate number of legs, everybody knows this. Maybe five, maybe. Eight seems desperate to me, or indecisive, indulgent even. You know?)

Anyway, a normal farm is nothing like the farm in *Animal Farm*—there are no bosses, we're all bosses, and we're what you would call matriarchal, the women run the whole shebang. No matter what the stupid roosters say. We cows have a saying—don't step on my teat and I won't step on yours. And then we add love to that. Animal love. Pure love.



*"That's where life happens—out in the field."*

## HOLY COW

Yes, we kill to survive, some of us have to, but it's not the type of killing humans do; there's no hatred or joy, only necessity. We're not Pollyanna. We understand even the fox who steals eggs, and the hawk who snatches away a baby piglet into a horrible death in the sky. It's the way. I thank the grass as I chew it down. You think plants don't have feelings? Maybe not the type of feelings you and I have, but they do have planty feelings. To a cow, the world is one big feeling thing.

Here's how it goes:

### *Monday*

SUNRISE: get milked. You're lucky if you get the middle son or the youngest, the eldest chump is very rough with his hands. He just does not want to be there. I get it, dude, it's way early, but still.

AFTER MILKING: the gates open and out we go into the field where we'll spend most of the day eating, chewing, talking, gossiping, etc. That's where life happens—out in the field. Sweet green grass and sweeter alfalfa hay.

SUNDOWN: back into the barn for the night. Another milking and then we usually go to sleep at sundown. We're at one with the rhythms of the earth and whatnot. When my mom was around, she used to tell me stories. I liked the ones where humans act like animals. My mom was a great storyteller, and usually I would fall asleep to the

sound of her voice like it was the wind rustling gently through the trees or a brook running over stones.

And then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday are exactly the same.

Pretty simple, right? Wake up, milking, eat, day in the field, milking, story, sleep. That was enough for me. I never wanted anything more. I never wanted to live anywhere else. And I wanted the same for my daughters and their daughters forever and always, even though I could never imagine leaving them the way my mother left me. That is, until, the Event, the day the earth stood still, the patty-and-fan thing. Then I understood it all, even Mom. And though the knowledge was painful, it led to forgiveness and understanding, and I wouldn't trade that for anything. Innocence is nice, but the world offers us more and it's wrong not to take it. You can't stay a calf forever.

We're almost there. You getting frustrated with all the preamble? The mood lighting? That's the problem with you crazy kids and the video games—no patience. Well, cow time is slow, and I will not be rushed. Gotta go do my job, then a nap, I like me a solid nap. Then the Event.