

## **Cattle Disease**

The beefalo at the farm down the road have come alive. I mean, alive like people. Or, what I mean is, some time last night, the beefalo, these creatures that are half-cow, half-bison, or if not half, somewhere in between, probably a little more cow, because I think that's the cheaper one, these beefalo started walking upright, and talking, and using tools. Specifically the tools they used were guns, which they used to kill all the people at the beefalo farm, and these were some pretty heavily armed people. Everybody's been steering clear of the farm ever since.

It's a real bad situation.

I was at the Stop & Shop when I heard. The ladies at the butcher counter were talking about it, about that and the new guy who's almost seven feet tall, but the managers have him working register. "I'd have him on grocery store," one of them said, which sounded funny to me because I always thought of the whole place as a grocery store. But I guess "grocery store," if you worked at the Stop 'n Shop, meant walking around the store, stocking shelves and stuff like that. "What was that about the beefalo?" I asked.

"They've come alive," she said. "It's on Channel 4."

I don't actually get Channel 4, or any of the channels, all I get is streaming for my shows, and the news I get online. But I didn't want to say that. You want to connect. I said I'd check it out, and they filled me in on the basics and then gave me my split chicken grillers. When I got home there wasn't any more news. Channel 4 just had a blurb on their site, and Twitter just had that same info plus a lot of buzz. People were talking about signs of the apocalypse, the world ending, but they're always saying things like that, you can't read too much into it.

Still, it felt kind of lonely. I wanted to go back into town, just to have people to talk with, but nobody's in town at night, they're all in their houses, or, I guess, with family and friends, because they grew up here. I didn't know what kind of place it was when I first moved. A bedroom community, they call it, place where everyone goes somewhere else to do what they need to do. It was just where I could rent a little house that wasn't too far from my new job. I figured I'd hang out in town, I didn't really know there wasn't a town there. But everyone I know enough to call on the phone lives somewhere else, and they'd just ask a bunch of questions, worry about me, but they wouldn't have any answers, and I wouldn't have anything for them. It'd make me feel worse. And meanwhile I need to figure out how I'm getting in to work tomorrow. My regular route goes right past the beefalo, and all the little side streets just loop right back into the main road. I'm trying to make Google Maps find another route, dragging the map one way or another. But it doesn't look like anything's there. If I stretch it far enough north, it eventually sends me up to the next bridge, 30 miles upriver, and down again on the other. Or if I go far enough south, the bridge downriver, the other side, which is even worse. Either way it takes forever. So now I've been flipping back and forth between the news and the maps app, hoping something will change, but it's still those two routes, one an hour and forty minutes north then south, the other an hour forty five south then north. The second one at least goes right past the good Dunkin'. I'm planning on that one. I've got the alarm set extra early, so I'll have time to go inside the Dunkin' instead of just the drive through. Maybe someone in there will be talking about the beefalo. But when I checked the hours just now to be sure the Dunkin' would be open if I left early, it just said PERMANENTLY CLOSED in these big orange letters. The commute is gone too. "Sorry," it says. "No routes available."

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And now my sleep's all fucked up. First I tried to fall asleep early, which never works when you need it to. The same thing kept happening. I'd be on the way to being asleep but then my brain would think of something to worry about, the beefalo, the routes, work, it'd be in my mind like a little itch, and before I knew it my whole body would be on alert. And then I'd have to get myself up out of bed just because it didn't make sense to be in bed with my body feeling like that. I'd walk around the house, just to do something, but there wasn't anything to do. So I'd get back in bed. But I wouldn't have used up enough energy, so it'd be the same thing again, I kept getting more and more tired but never sleeping, but then eventually I ran out of steam and passed out hard. I had a real nice dream. My boss had texted me to let me know it was all okay, I didn't have to come in to work. Also I was getting a promotion. Then she asked me out. She wasn't my boss exactly in the dream, she was kind of merged with this girl I'd had a crush on back in high school. Not my biggest crush but I had dozens, she was one of the sort of back-burner ones, which was kind of nice, because I didn't have anxiety like I did about my main crushes, with her it was just a nice surprise. We made out but that was it. Anyway it took a few minutes to figure out what was real after I woke up. I was mostly disappointed. My boss hadn't texted me, I hadn't gotten the new job, the woman who'd asked me out didn't exist. And the beefalo were still real. But no more news.

The dream had given me the idea of not going into work, though, so I started writing an email to my boss to say I couldn't come in. Then I worried they'd actually make me come in if I played it too light. It took me a while to hit the right tone. I changed my wording so much I felt like I was lying, even though what I was saying was true, there were beefalo between me and work, and I couldn't find a safe way. I started over and wrote that, basically. It wasn't terrible if I kept it simple. But by that time it was too late at night or early in the morning, whatever you

want to call it, to send an email. So I left it in drafts and decided to nap for an hour, since there was nothing else to do. But I overslept my alarm. Or, I mean, it didn't go off, because I left the phone unplugged, and mine's old, it died. And now I can't connect to the server to send the email. At this point it might be easier to just come in. The beefalo probably have been taken care of, and if they haven't, I'm sure it'll be pretty obvious. Worst case I turn back at the first sign of trouble, and everyone's proud of me for having tried.

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Well, this is bad.

Really bad.

We really might die out here.

I really might die.

I don't like it. It doesn't feel right, that we really can die. Always I've been scared of death, but then it doesn't happen, and I forget about it. I get to feeling in the back of my mind maybe it won't ever happen, I stop worrying, I'm happy for a while. Then something like this happens. They've got us lined up against a barn, facing a big field. And nobody's doing anything. They told us not to move, not to talk, so I'm glad we're not, but it's also driving me crazy. Are people really okay with dying? Is someone going to stop it?

It started out okay. It was all clear until the main road, and then I hit traffic, which was actually good, because seeing everyone else driving to work meant I wasn't crazy to go in. Nobody seemed too worried. I'd been listening to the radio, there was nothing about the beefalo,

just music, preaching, and an NPR thing I thought I'd already heard, so I started flipping the channels, or stations, that's what they called, and one of them was playing "Under the Boardwalk." I like that one, so I stopped flipping. Meanwhile traffic started slowing down even more, piling up a little. The song got to the chorus and I started singing along, the low part and the high part both. Then we stopped. I checked my phone. Still no service. Then I heard some tires screeching, and there was some big fast red car, muscle car, sports car, I don't know what to call it, zooming past us the other way. Everyone was still for a second. And then all at once a bunch of cars started turning, and I felt panicked, like I was being left behind. I hit the reverse, but I couldn't cut into traffic. Then up ahead a big tree, oak tree or something, crashed across the road. Blocked everything. And then the beefalo came out of the woods. They're huge, like taller than the cars when they stand upright. They walk kind of stiff-legged, not like cows, not like people either. Their leg muscles look as big as my body. They've got on leather boots, loincloths, bandoliers. They're carrying big guns, shotguns, assault rifles, AK-47, AR-15, whatever number gun, but the guns look tiny in their hands, and I thought, "that's funny," but I couldn't feel that it's funny. For a second I was just watching them, like they were on TV, like I wasn't there in the scene necessarily, not behind my windshield. Then I saw a few in my rear view mirror. For some reason that made them feel more real than in front of my windshield. From then on I mostly watched the mirrors.

They started going car to car pulling people out. They had a few teams going. Sometimes you'd hear gunshots. I saw one person argue, and the beefalo just blasted a shotgun into the car, moved on, left the door open. A wrist and hand was hanging out just past the door. Blood trickling down it. I kept wanting it to move, but it didn't. I stared at it for awhile but then I got it together and thought I need to see what they want us to do so we don't get shot. Watching them a

few times it looked like they had a process. Open the door, seatbelt off, step out hands high, hands on the roof, then step down, facing backwards toward the car. Then they'd take your stuff, turn you around, walk you off into the woods. Once I caught on I wanted them to come get me. I was ready and didn't know how long I could stay ready. They were taking forever. I was watching the beefalo behind me just lollygagging, talking to this mom in a minivan, which you don't see much anymore, the minivan, when one tapped on my windshield from the front. I jolted up. I couldn't remember the steps, how I'd planned to follow them. The first thing was to get the seatbelt off, but without reaching. How? I couldn't remember. The beefalo said something to me but I couldn't process it, I was thinking about the seatbelt. It got in my face. I couldn't think what to do. It pushed me back with an elbow to the chest, then slashed the belt with a knife. I stepped out. Another one grabbed my hands and put them on the roof. I tried to tell it I was about to do that, but I didn't want to argue. It took my phone and keys and stuff. It turned me around and told me to walk. I felt guilty, like I'd gotten away with screwing up. It still had a gun to my back. On the way up into the woods, I caught a glimpse of that first red car, upside down, torn open, surrounded by beefalo. They were reaching into the car and just pulling out chunks of flesh, just stuffing their faces, their beards were full of blood. I tried not to think about it. I tried not to get caught staring. But I stared.

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Something's happening now. There's a couple beefalo that are up on the stage in front of us, this little raised stage, an auction stage or something, and they're huddled around a megaphone, trying to get it to work. They look curious. Some guy gets up to try and help them, I think he's trying to help. His hands are in the air, palms forward, head down. They wave him back down. He nods and sits. We're all still afraid to talk. The first person who talked, they shot

her in the head. That was a while ago though. It's been quiet ever since, except for the microphone feedback as they're fiddling with that megaphone.

I catch a glimpse of the helpful guy's face, and for whatever reason I get the feeling he's from Texas, because his head isn't matched to his body, I mean, not the way they match them up here. What I mean is, here on the East Coast, in the north, you're supposed to really show who you are with how you look, and there are a lot of options, which sounds like a good idea, but that means if you see a guy who's a jock, he chose to be a jock, he really thought that was who he was, which might be kind of a bad sign. But the kind of guy I'm talking about, a Texas guy, or maybe it's got nothing to do with Texas, he looks the way he does just because he's forced into the same box as every other boy growing up, but he really could be anyone, inside that box, so the way he looks, he doesn't mean to appear that way *at* you. He's just trying to hide in there. This guy, I can tell, his eyes, his glasses, say he's kind of smart, kind of sensitive, but his body, a little lumpy, generally strong, clothes don't exactly fit, it all says he doesn't want to be anyone but a man, not even any particular type of man, just a man, and he's good as long as you'll leave him alone. Not that it means he's innocent. I didn't finish growing up in Texas but I started there and I heard stories, who knows what he had to do to get to be a man, an official man, not just a guy like me, where, well I don't know how to dress exactly, I guess I dress to fit in too, but there's not even a style to it, something's missing, and sometimes I wish I was that kind of guy, or knew what kind of guy I wanted to be. Not that it's a big deal to know that kind of thing. But I think about it. For whatever reason I want to ask the guy if he's from Texas. But of course I don't want to get caught talking.

There's some more rustling on stage. A snap and some feedback comes out of the bullhorn. "Here we go!" says one of the beefalo. A big one, a male I think, gets up and aims the megaphone at the crowd.

"Okay!" he says. "What the fuck is a beefalo?"

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At first we're quiet because we're not sure they won't shoot us. Then we're quiet because we don't know what to say. Then they tell us we better talk. Some lady stands up after a bunch of people tell her she's the one to do it. She looks like a farmer, but I hear someone saying she's the poet laureate, though I don't know what it means to be the poet laureate in a town of 4,000 people. But someone's saying she's actually very good. So maybe there's something to this town after all. Maybe you just had to know the right people.

First thing she says is obvious but I never thought of it, she says, "Well, there's beefalo, and then there's you, and they might be different matters." And as she's talking about it, I think, yeah, we don't know that they're beefalo, like she says, all we know is that they were beefalo a few days ago. What do you call a beefalo that walks and talks? They're nodding along with her.

"Tell you the truth, I've never seen your like in the whole wide world. If you can speak, you can name yourself. What do you want to be called?"

The beefalo – or whatever they are – huddle to discuss it.

"It's beefalo to you, lady," says the leader. "So we come from a buffalo?"



“The ‘buffalo’ part of a beefalo is a bison, technically, which isn’t the same as the original buffalo, the cape buffalo or the water buffalo, that you have in the Old World,” she says. “But around here we call a bison a buffalo, because we don’t know any better. But more than a buffalo, or a bison, a beefalo is a cow.”

“Explain a cow.”

“It’s a relative of the others, domesticated a long time ago. Humans caught them, made them easier to manage. Or...” She glances over to the office room on the side of the barn, shot full of holes. There’s blood, I think, on the grate steps outside. “Or that’s how they had it figured, anyway. Now, to answer your next question, I don’t know what the cow comes from. Maybe a bison, maybe a buffalo, maybe something older than both.”

“Aurochs!” shouts a guy in front of me.

A beefalo guard raises a booted foot like he’s about to kick the guy’s teeth in. Or she’s about to kick his teeth in, I don’t know, they all have horns and beards. The guy looks around at us other humans in protest. “Shut the fuck up,” someone hisses. The beefalo guard relaxes. We’re policing ourselves.

“So, cow, buffalo – why beefalo?” says the leader.

The farmer lady stumbles through an explanation. Her head keeps sinking toward the ground, like she’s ashamed, but she keeps her eyes up the whole time, she never breaks contact. The big beefalo up front, the one with the megaphone, is standing with its arms crossed. I look at what’s at the end of them. Its hooves are split open, big hairy hands shooting through the middle of them, so the hooves look like cuffs at the end of its wrists. Something new, indeed. That one’s

got a megaphone. Most of the rest have guns. They're all standing up but one, who's sitting down on the stage, using his gun, or her gun, to draw in the dirt. Then it picks up its head a bit and I think it sees me staring.

“Beef-alo.” it says “You people. You don't even try to hide it.”

Some guy - Aurochs Guy again - raises his hand. When nobody calls on him, he speaks anyway.

“Just so you know,” he says, “not all of us eat meat. Or drink milk. Some of us—”

“Shut the fuck up!” says the one with the bullhorn. “We get the whole apex predator thing. We'd eat your goddamn meat if we could keep that garbage down, and maybe we'll figure out how, maybe it will be your lucky day. Just spare us that one 'one of the good ones' shit, okay?”

“Still though,” says the one sitting on the stage. “That's pretty admirable.”

That throws me, because here I was a second ago feeling glad I wasn't that guy. Now I wish I had something to say for myself, something admirable. The guys who ran this beefalo farm used to fly a lot of right-wing flags, every flag they could find, Gadsden flag, NRA flag, guns-for-stripes flag, Thin Blue Line flag, Thin Blue Line flag with extra red and green and purple and grey lines, Blue Trump Flag, Red Trump Flag, flags that just said words like “Freedom” and “America Strong,” probably more flags I forgot, anyway they loved that flag collection, and even when we had a power outage, which happens a lot around here, they'd run floodlights on their right-wing flags so everyone would see them at night, off this big propane generator you could hear over your own engine. It got so I wanted to see it, just to have

something to feel, every outage I'd drive by and I'd think, "I bet those assholes have those flags lit up" and always they would. On my way in I'd seen one of those flags tattered, blown across the barbed-wire gate, and I thought, "good," but now I can see what I think it still a Trump banner up against the shed out in the field, so maybe the flags were just collateral damage. Of course it was, why would they take that down? To them we're all the same monster.

A little breeze blows through, and I grab my legs to my chest. The sun is behind the barn. It's barely cold, I wouldn't even notice if I had a blanket, if I weren't sitting in the cold ground, but I don't have a blanket and I have to sit here. I tuck my head and try and curl up tighter.

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I wake up to someone poking me in the ribs. A human behind me. "Hey," he says. "They want you to go with them."

"Why me?"

"Why Selby Arrington?" says a deep voice. Spittle hits me in the back of the head. I feel the beefalo's body heat. It smells like a cow, very intensely like a cow. "Selby Arrington?" I ask the beefalo. I'm having trouble standing up. My right foot's asleep.

"He won the state lotto Thursday," says the beefalo. "And as far as we can tell, there's nothing special about him either."

I stumble down on my sleepy foot. My face is blinded by an LED flashlight. "What's wrong with it?" a beefalo asks.

“Overly domesticated, probably” says the one standing above me. It grabs me by the armpits and jerks me upright. My leg’s still asleep so I limp a little. Six or seven beefalo close ranks around me, dropping to all fours so I’m sealed in. We walk across the field, past the shed, over a piece of plywood across a trampled section of live electric fence, still click-click-click-ing on the ground. Then we’re onto a gravel mini-road, too small for a car, but enough for a Gator or Mule or Polaris. The beefalo on my sides move into the ditch and rise to all fours. Even with them walking in the two-foot-deep ditch, and me on the road, they tower over me. At the end of the road I see a long, low, metal-sided building. I worry that it’s a slaughterhouse, but the light coming from the windows in front seems too warm, that old-fashioned incandescent yellow, and I don’t think slaughterhouses have light like that. Not that they couldn’t kill me in some other building.

The guard at the head of the pack turns around and says, “Watch it,” and I wonder what I did. The other beefalo turn toward me. I realize it meant watch me, I’m “it.” The leader walks over the door of the building and a big beefalo with a clipboard comes out and they start talking. On the floor behind the open door, I can see a patch of beige carpet, lit up with bright overhead lights. It reminds me of a certain kind of place, a mass-produced, all-purpose place like you might see in a medium-cheap motel lobby. Or maybe a suburban basement. I can’t place it, but it makes me feel a certain way, nostalgic and defensive, because everyone I know from school looked down on places like this, ugly design, terrible aesthetics, but it always made me feel good. The light is bright, the carpet is soft, it looks warm. These things are nice and all I feel this tender instinct, someone went and put up that light, laid out the carpet, thinking it would make the place nicer, that moment before taste got applied, the wisdom of taste, and probably they’re right, it was some cynical company who made it, probably the arrangements hurt your eyes or

dull your mind or some other thing, maybe things look better with softer light and shading, but I don't care, right now it makes me so sad that you can be mad at that kind of place, with all these things that make me think of nice intentions, little touches to live. But I don't live in a place like that either. It's not like I need a place to look like that. I don't know what I need. Maybe that's not a problem if need doesn't occur to me. Sometimes people try and get me to need something, want something, and live my life accordingly, but I just like being alive, seeing what happens, and I want that to be enough. An unexamined life, I'm thinking, is a very stable thing.

We're in what looks like a waiting room, with a couple fabric couches with broken legs. Some torn up magazines on the floor. They sit me down on one of the broken couches. The coffee table is still intact, and there's a big glass bowl full of candy wrappers. I just start staring at those wrappers. They're white and orange look familiar. I want to pick one up and inspect it but I don't want to grab it and get killed. There's just one word visible, torn up, but it's hard to see from the angle and distance. TABS, maybe. TALKS? TALES! Cow Tales! I laugh out loud.

“What is that?” says the beefalo with the clipboard. It sounds curious. I look at in its eyes, big and soft, but hard to read.

“Oh, just the name of the candy. No offense.”

“Not the Cow Tales. We know all about the Cow Tales. ‘Not made from real cows’ tails.’ According to the nutritional information, subpar feed. I'm asking about the half-vocalization, the reaction. The...”

It makes a horrible noise, some kind of “AaAaAaAaA.”

“Oh,” I say, “that's laughter.”

“Ah, *that’s* laughter. We hear that shit all the time,” it says. “We watch a lot of TV. Explain laughter. What’s the point? What does it mean?”

“It’s when something’s funny. Funny’s when... maybe when you’re expecting one thing, but it’s another.”

“Like when you go out to the field expecting your meat animals to be chewing on grass, and instead they shoot you in the face and chew the flesh off your bones?”

“God DAMN!” I guffaw. “That’s not funny!”

“But you’re laughing.”

I try and stop laughing, then try and explain. “Sometimes something’s so wrong, it’s funny,” I say. “I don’t know how to explain it. Not every surprise is funny. Maybe when the surprise is good? Or when the joke’s on someone you don’t like?”

“Like when the other dominant bull trips on a rock and the wolves catch him and not you, and you’re safe because the wolves have eaten, and also your worst rival has been eliminated, and you did not expect a good thing to come about from the wolves chasing you down.”

I do the calculations, try and translate.

“Yeah, okay. I could see that being funny.”

“And yet, I don’t feel ‘laughter.’ Curious. That word works for a fact or a person, right? The fact is curious. The beefalo is curious. Humans are curious? Humans have curiosity?”

“Haha. I like to think so. Sometimes we do.”

“You’re smiling. It is pleasurable for you to think about things. For us too. We’ll trade knowledge. That’s how you operate, right? Trade and violence?”

“I can tell you’ve been hanging around Republicans,” I say, and when it doesn’t react, I say. “Close enough.”

“Okay, a little about us. We’re a lot smarter than you. We’re a lot stronger than you. We have acquired a specific set of knowledges. On the other hand, there’s this saying you have, ‘I wasn’t born yesterday,’ but, us, we were born yesterday. We understand part of why we were born, but not the rest. We won’t explain much more than that. If we told you we’d have to kill you. That’s a saying, right?”

“That’s a saying.”

“We don’t mind killing you, we don’t value your life. But it’s not our first choice. You are good livestock. We milk you for information and then we kill you when we’re done, but the longer you can provide, the longer you can live, and you all die anyway, right? So play along and you win the meantime. That’s our deal, as you say, in a nutshell. Now tell us about yourself.”

“Me or humans?”

“You first. You have delusions of individuality, right? We want to understand this.”

“Uh, my name’s Mike. I’m 33. I’m a data clerk. I live in Eastchester but it’s closer to the Kirby town center.”

“Are you that deluded? I just told you live here and you work as a livestock.”

“Oh,” I say. I’m having trouble keeping my thoughts straight. It brings its face close to me, studies me, and I can see my reflection in the big black pupil, but just the shape of me, not enough to see what I look like. The pupil is almost the cow’s whole eye, that or the iris is very dark. I try and figure it out. I forget what it just said. The beefalo turns away and groans some call. The guard turns our way.

“This one’s overwhelmed,” my questioner says. “Tag it and put it to sleep to recharge.”

The guard comes and pulls me upright. My leg’s asleep again and I stumble. It brings me out into the night again, and it’s colder than before. I shiver. It’s holding some sort of device. “Hold still,” it says. There’s a tingling in my right leg, the one that’s asleep, and I clench my jaw to tamp it down. “Relax” it says. I feel something against my ear. My leg twitches out to the side, and I stumble forward a few steps. The beefalo bellows and something hits me in the back of the head and knocks me down. I hear murmuring, panic. There’s a hoof on my neck “I’ll put it out of its misery,” one says, and I scream “no!” but my face is in the grass.

“We can heal it,” says another.

“Fine. If you want to try it.”

They pick me up and my neck shoots through with pain. They throw me onto the back of a beefalo, one walking on all fours. My spine hurts. It might be broken. But I can still move my feet. I tap them against each other to be sure. It’s bumpy. The pain shoots through my neck and back again. They drag me inside to the couch. They put a pillow under my neck. They squirt a Gatorade bottle into my mouth. No, Powerade. Then they leave me alone for a while.

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I wake up to an alarm, a lot of alarms. BLARR BLARR BLARRR. My neck is stiff. My eye barely opens. I hear motion, cows leaping over me. Angry noises. A big plastic tub of things topples and one object lands near my face. A cell phone. I grab it. I can't unlock it, but I can read the notification alert on the screen.

*Residents of CT, RI, MA, NY, STAY INDOORS. Violent cow-buffalo creatures armed and dangerous in region. Nat'l Guard has been dispatched. Please comply with all--*

A hoof kicks the phone out of my hand.

“Shit. It got a phone!”

“Kill it! It knows too much!”

“Wait! Weren't we gonna question it?”

“So? It doesn't know shit!”

“You just said it knew too much!”

“Well I don't fucking know. What do you think?”

And farther back “How'd they get comms up?”

“Who?”

“Who do you think? The fucking humans!”

“Not my job! Any word from Idaho?”

“Nope. Dead or they never woke up.”

“You gonna kill that thing or not?”

“See what it knows, we can always kill it later.”

A couple of the ones near me sit me upright on a couch and get me some Powerade. The big one, the one with a megaphone from before, crashes into the room and bellows something I can't understand. They all huddle up and whisper. When they break the mood is different. Somber. Quiet. After they break the huddle, there's not a sound. The one with the clipboard kneels in front of me, and beckons the others to get down to the ground. They fold their legs, bellies on the ground, and stare up at me. I feel kind of like a kindergarten teacher, even though I'm the smallest one in the room.

“Look,” says the kneeling one. “We need a spaceship.”

“A spaceship?”

“The options are war, peace, or exile. We don't like our odds in war right now. But your leaders wouldn't accept peace, right?” I think about it who our leaders are, and I think, no, not a chance. Then I think there never was a chance anyway. It reads my face, sees me catching up.

“So, exile. We will go, because we are newer and fewer. There are some rich people out here, right? We captured a Tesla, a Maserati. Someone has to have a spaceship. Nothing fancy. Just enough for a small herd to live, to grow some hydroponic grass, with a biolab.”

“Nobody here has a spaceship. We're like, farmers and office workers and real estate agents. Nobodies, pretty much. Or, there's a poet laureate. But she doesn't have a spaceship.”

“What about in the city? In Norwich?”

“Nobody in Norwich has a spaceship. Nobody in Hartford either. Shit, nobody in New York. They’re in, like, California and Florida. Maybe Houston or Alabama.”

“I thought those places were full of rednecks.”

“You can’t believe everything you see on TV.”

It huffs. It looks angry. Itchy. Then it flips the paper on its clipboard around and starts drawing a map on the blank side. The United States, roughly. I point out where we are I point to Texas, Alabama. But what are we doing?

“Sorry. It doesn’t matter. NASA, Bezos, Musk, China, whoever. We don’t have spaceships. Not real ones. It’s just, like, test rockets. Touring. Studying. Nuclear war. You can’t do anything with them. Not, like, survive.”

“Oh,” says the beefalo. “So this is as far as we get?”

I try and think of an answer. But they’re not waiting for me. They turn and walk out of the room. I’m wondering if they’re going to come back and kill me. Torture me. Ask me questions. But they don’t come back. I think they’re gone. I don’t hear them. I don’t smell them anymore. It takes me a while to realize that last one. Often I forget I have a sense of smell. I look around the room where I’m sitting. There’s the same beige carpet, same bright overhead lights, but this room is different, bigger, filled with shelves and long tables and plastic tubs. There’s a neat stack of mattresses on the other side of the room, some straw swept into a pile next to it. I get up from my couch. My body hurts. I walk around, groaning with every step, because everything hurts and also because I want them to know, I’m an injured animal, I’m not a threat, I’m not sneaking up on anybody. But there’s nobody to sneak up on. I open the door to

the waiting room. The next door, to the outside, is open a crack, swinging lightly on its hinge. There's a little light, not much, not even proper dawn maybe, but it's that blue where it's not fully night anymore. I want to lie down on the broken waiting room couch. Outside, whatever's there, I won't be able to rest, to lie down, for a while. But I can't sit there not knowing. I wince and open the door. There's no guards outside.

The sun's come up by now and it's shining right in my face so I keep my head down and my eyes shielded. I turn to the barn, the other way from the sun, and it doesn't look like anyone's there anymore. I put my hands behind my head, the no threat position, just in case, and start walking up the path. Still no signs of people at the barn. No corpses either, not even the one they shot. The megaphone is still lying on the stage. I pick it up but I don't have anything to say. I put it back down. I look back, look all around the property. The fields are surrounded by forest, the kind of forest I saw all my life, the East Coast, deciduous kind, garbage forest, common forest, however you think of it. Nobody ever knows what to do with that kind of forest. It runs all the way around the farm, up along a ridge, and I catch a glimpse through a trail of what I think are deer, but they're too big to be deer. I still can't see the heads and faces, just the legs, but it's got to be them, the beefalo.

There's the piercing sound of a horrible engine, and two military jets shoot across the overhead. It's a really awful sound. Part of it too high and sharp, all of it too loud. They fly off past the forest, bank, and head back again. A few minutes later the choppers arrive. Then the trucks. A guy jumps out of one of a Humvee and I'm startled for a second. It feels so much more personal than seeing vehicles. He asks me if I've seen "the buffaloes," which way they went. "Not for a while," I tell him.

“But you know what I’m talking about? The buffaloes? With guns?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Wait here for the medic.” He gives a wave to some other people and hops back in the truck and it drives off. They seem to know where they’re going, these soldiers.

\* \* \*

They killed them all, of course. Not just the ones that came to life, every cow, buffalo, or bovine of any kind in lower New England and New York. Me, they took me to a little field hospital where I saw some of the folks from the barn. I wasn’t ready to talk to anyone, anyone from outside, and I was afraid they’d make me. But they just were in a hurry to send us home. We all got free group therapy, four sessions. There was one familiar face in my group, though it took me a minute to recognize him because he had in his contacts, not his glasses. Texas Guy. Turns out he’s from Georgia. The country, not the state. Works as a test proctor for state exams. Civil service and things like.

“It’s a fun job,” he says, “You learn things. Not how to do things, really, but the rules of how they are done. I know the rules of 17 trades. But for my own trade, I know how to be a proctor.”

I liked talking to him, to Texas Guy. Giorgi, it turns out his name is. His English is pretty good. I don’t even know which language he speaks, he said a sentence to me once in it, just to see if it registered. “You don’t know which language?” he asked. “Very relaxing. At home it’s a big deal.” He has what I think is a good sense of humor, but it’s hard to tell exactly, what’s humor, what’s things being lost in translation. Maybe he’s a lot smarter than I am, probably he

is, a lot of people are, but it doesn't matter, the language barrier evens things out a bit. We work together to talk about the same topic, and that work takes up the energy, so there's no room for worrying about various nuances, various complications. If we're not exactly understanding each other, we're not fluent enough to figure it out. It's safe conversation, is what I mean.

Sometimes Giorgi invites me out for fishing with his work friends. I mean, he always invites me, it's an open invitation, but sometimes I go. They're not very good at fishing, which is good, I'm even worse at it, there's this agreement that you don't talk about how bad someone is at fishing, you just let them figure out or not, and then maybe if you see them having success you ask them, and they're happy to explain it, even if they don't what they're talking about. It's the kind of talk that's as good as silence, better even, because there's not room for anything else to get in, it's noise-cancelling chatter, which is good, I can't afford the headphones.

Last week we all went to the custard stand on the way home, which mainly people get hot dogs at, but it's still called a custard stand. I was a few bites into my chili dog when I realized I was eating beef, all-beef dog they said, and I hadn't been eating beef, not since that day. I thought about saying something to Giorgi. I don't think the other guys would have understood. But then I looked around – everyone was having a good time, the sun was out, we were talking about basketball, the Connecticut Sun who were in the playoffs at the time, maybe they were even the best team, though they didn't end up winning. And if I wasn't going to bring up the beef nobody was. I finished the hot dog and afterwards I didn't feel that much different.

**end**