

*Milking Mercy*

*“Ping.”*

*“Slosh.”*

*“Ping.”*

*“Mooooooooo.”*

I press my head against Mercy’s side and scoot the stool closer to her hind legs; this Jersey cow has moved backwards forcing me to readjust my body. I blockade my left leg against her knees—a precaution to minimize her ability to step into the bucket. But instead of wrapping my fingers around her teats to restart the steady rhythm of milking, I allow my forehead to simply lean against her, appreciating the sounds of the barn.

*“Tap.”*

*“Tap.”*

*“Creak.”*

Somebody is coming down the steps—probably arms full of hay. Normally, I’d look to see who it was, but my head remains still. Inhaling consciously, I allow air to completely fill my nose and lungs. I exhale long and slow.

I breathe in once more and place both hands on Mercy’s two back teats. They are warm and full. Exhaling, I gently press my fingers to my palms in a downward motion. The milk releases and streams into the bucket hitting the sides.

*“Ping.”*

*“Ping.”*

My song has resumed.

I play in harmony with the other milkers.

*"Ping."*

*"Slosh."*

*"Whoosh."*

*"Ping."*

*"Ping."*

*"Whoosh."*

*"Creak."*

*"Mooooooooaahhh!"*

*"Mooooooooaahhh, mooooooooaahhh!"*

The twin male calves join in their voices—reminding all present of their plight. Just last night we had placed them in a different pen from their mother in order to wean them.

*"Mooooooooaahhh, mooooooooaahhh!"*

Their cries overpower our simpler melodies. So effected by the separation, their whole bodies extend enabling their bellows to be at maximum volume. I watch as their voices move through their entire bodies. Their necks jut forward and their tails are so straight they could be parallel to the floor.

*"Mooooooooaahhh!!!"*

Emotion floods through my veins. I relate to their trauma. My hands slow, and I consider my own separation anxiety. My breathing is a conscious process once more.

My head still against Mercy's side, I acknowledge that I love him. Yes, I love him. I have tried so hard to stop, to quench the feelings, or to direct my love elsewhere. Nevertheless, my heart has consistently refused to change its beat.

I feel the tears start to form.

It is not professional to cry in front of others. I focus on milking and quicken my speed. My *"ping"* has disappeared. My bucket now one-third full joins in with my neighbor's *"whoosh,"* although mine is more of a *"shwoot"*. The pressure and steadiness of my hands create milk bubbles, and remind me of how as a kid, I'd blow air into my half-filled glass with a straw.

*"Shwoot."*

*"Shwoot."*

*"Shwoot."*

His image, his features, his presence fills my imagination. My whole being aches for him. Oh, how I miss him! I want him to be part of my life more than anything else.

*"MOOOOOOOOAAAHHHHHHH!!!"*

I want to scream along with the calves.

*"It's not fair!"* I softly erupt.

The whole barn is unsympathetic; its rhythm unceasing. I say the words again but this time silently and with more conviction. This rare moment of strength abates my pain for a few seconds, but the reality of the situation, his chosen absence, pierces me again.

*"He's not coming home. Just let him go."* I hear the advice of my friends. My body shudders. I go into fight mode, which unfortunately for my cow means that I milk more fiercely. She turns her head and looks at me. This is disconcerting.

I want to get out from underneath her.

Her two front teats are nearly shriveled—having been almost milked dry. A small amount of milk trickles down into the bucket. The back ones have more to coax out, but their stream has also greatly lessened. Despite the hard work of my hands, the bubbles in my bucket begin to die; the milk is starting to look flat. I feel the depression creeping in.

I sneak a glance over to my neighbor's bucket. He has managed to whip the top of his milk into a beautiful foamy peaked layer. Ah, what froth! He probably isn't thinking of a lost love.

Mercy starts to move around in the stanchion. Her grain completely consumed, her cud chewed, and her teats being yanked, I sympathize with why she is restless.

I force myself to refocus. Maybe she'll let me finish without kicking the bucket. Again, I press my leg against hers to re-establish that she is not going anywhere.

I let my fists slide up into her udder. Perhaps my gentle pressure will release any lingering drops in the back teats.

I make a conscious effort to forgive him.

My hands slide down from the udder releasing the tiniest amount of milk. I will the healing. *"I forgive you."*

I do this again.

And again.

The milk is no longer trickling out. I check the front teats once more.

Nothing.

I slide out from under Mercy. My priority now is to keep the bucket safe from sudden leg and bowel movements of my cow.

Success! My milk is safe. Mercy had mercy on me

I weigh my bucket. The milk minus the weight of the bucket weighs 13.75 pounds, which is approximately a gallon and a half. Not great, but not bad.

I walk over to the filter and pour in the fresh raw milk. The sudden pour makes my product bubbly once more. I watch it drain down. Some of my depression lifts.

I wash my hands with hot water and the pink dishwashing liquid.

One day, I'll be bigger than his rejection of me; meanwhile, I will continue to milk Mercy.