

A Second Spring

The diagnosis was delivered with sensitivity however a caring delivery alone couldn't lighten the humiliation she felt with the information imparted to her. As he continued to speak, she also identified guilt and embarrassment topped off with a smattering of foolishness in her repertoire of emotions. Evidence of his own discomfort was displayed through foot tapping and throat clearing.

"I know a bit about your change in status over the past year." "Change in status? Is that how I should refer to my grief and upheaval.", she thought. She had learned to despise careful wording during this last year. The more she was exposed to it, the more dismissive and intolerable it felt. She would have preferred a blunt remark such as, "Son off to college, dumped by your husband and your father dropping dead unexpectedly. Middle aged and alone, you must be wondering what's the point." That kind of language would have delivered the emotional punch her situation deserved. It would have felt honest and honored her feeling. But no, instead the vet continued in his irritating professional language, "I also notice weight loss and other signs that illuminate the stress you have been under." She instantly became aware of her disheveled appearance, too loose clothing, wrinkled shirt and hair put up without thought. A look completed with nonmatching socks. She reached up to smooth her hair and realized the futility. He continued, "I am not sure if you are aware that dogs often function in synch with the human they are closest to, leading to them sometimes mirror the emotions of that person." Shane could feel her chest and neck flush as she absorbed this information. He

was looking at her kindly, no a second glance, pity. “Are you saying that I am so sad, I am depressing my dog?” “Well,” he paused and sighed heavily, “those are not the words I would have chosen.... but yes, yes dear your persistent melancholy has affected your dog. Now the good news is I am finding no physical illness, so your original concern about Laddy’s health is alleviated.” This was admittedly good news and she gave him a forced smile. The smile must have fallen short of convincing, because he gave her a sympathetic pat on the shoulder and asked, “Have you considered professional support.” “Yes I have. I exploring the option of a two for one special that includes mental health counseling and medication for Laddy and myself.” The vet looked at Shane, and added his own unconvincing smile.

Even though the appointment had led to an uncomfortable conclusion, taking Laddy to the veterinarian had been the right decision. She had her answer, her dog wasn’t sick, her soul was. No longer could she pretend that her situation or her “coping” with it, was a secret in her community. Pride had made her attempt unsuccessfully, to put on a brave face, and pretend to have adjusted to her new normal, life on her own. Shane had suspected all along that she was failing at this facade and now this was confirmed. She hadn’t fooled anyone, including dear loyal Laddy.

Knowing that she didn’t have to pretend to be “okay” anymore afforded her a feeling of freedom she hadn’t expected. Instead of feeling further defeat or shame, she felt relieved. Shane suddenly understood the up side to “hitting bottom”. She didn’t have to try to keep up appearances anymore. She could give up and permanently quit on this place, admit defeat. Her options were greater, not fewer having been beaten. It was like she had been climbing out of a burning building, holding a rope, arms aching, afraid

to drop and finding she was only a foot off the ground. She had no restrictions, no ties. She was lonely with few social contacts in her home of the last twenty years. This isolation was equal parts her choice and friends pulling away. There was no decision to make, the most essential part of her had already moved on and the “where” required no deciding.

Shane’s father had lived his dream for nearly three decades on a small, ranch sixty miles from where she currently lived. The change she needed could be accomplished moving to that ranch. She could continue living her father’s modest dream, albeit a limited version of his dream. Shane wasn’t going to castrate or de-horn the neighbor’s steers. She wasn’t going to reposition and pull calves in the middle of the night but maybe she could develop a hobby farm. She could have a large vegetable garden, grow and sell some Timothy hay and have an animal or two to decorate the place. These actions would help keep her father’s memory alive. She could create a place to honor the best of him. The hour of travel to the farm would dissuade those who found Shane an entertaining source of gossip and was not a daunting distance for those who still truly cared and with who she wanted to maintain a relationship.

Shane had needed this full year to gather the courage to return to her father’s farm, initially the thought of the place without him there had been too painful. But now with time passed, the intensity had subsided slightly and there was joy comingled with pain. She was flooded with the memories of her parents building their home on the ranch, life as a family there, the too soon loss of her mother and her father continuing to build his life there afterwards.

Shane was learning the hard way, that it was futile to try to ignore grief. This had been her strategy for the past year and it had left her exhausted and stuck in her morose state. Grief was painful, messy, inconvenient and unavoidable. It was better to give in to it, feel it and attempt to trust there was an end to it. Believe that the feelings would become less intense and more tolerable eventually. Four seasons had come and gone with a gray film coating her perception of friendships, music, scenery and stories. It was time to find a way forward.

Going to the livestock sale on Saturday with her father was something Shane had enjoyed frequently from the time she was a child until a year ago. It was time when her father was at his best, comfortable, talking with friends about his favorite subject, cows. The man loved cows. He knew everything there was to know about them and he named and kept records on all forty in his herd. He knew their histories, how many calves they'd had, how many days for each cow's gestation and the weights of the calves. Shane kept these records, written in notebooks in nearly illegible handwriting, a mirror image of hers. She took them out and read them frequently. Not written in a diary format merely a word or two of the highlights of the day. An entry would have a cow's name, a date of birth or the weight of the newborn calf. As a child he had been a very poor farm boy in South Dakota before moving out further west. His first herd of cows had been rocks and his fences, nails and string.

These thoughts and memories of her father and her relationship with him, led Shane to attend the livestock sale and the sale didn't disappoint. It hadn't changed in look, feel or smell in years. The men in jeans, flannel shirt sleeves rolled unevenly up to their forearms and heavy, leather, work or cowboy boots. The women dressed nearly the

same. Her father and his friends always arrived early to preview the coming attractions. Looking at all the animals before they came into the ring. Guessing what the animal weighed, the general health, hip width, breed of the animal and discussions related to the pros and cons of the various breeds of cows. Shane would stand by the men and listen to the talk. Rarely, did she have anything to add to the conversation, nor did she want to because what she had loved was to listen. The content was somewhat interesting, but always seemed a bit repetitive. Her true enjoyment came from the men's love of the subject. The fine distinctions between the animals that were not worthy in their eyes. The easy postures they took while talking, feet up on the metal fences, leaning over elbows on the top rails and the gentle teasing that accompanies familiarity between people.

Shane didn't want to change the sale rituals and she immediately went back to preview the animals. There they were, a genre of men she recognized both in their look, mannerisms and the bits of conversation she could hear. She was glancing pen to pen and enjoying the banter between the animals and the people. The tune and lyrics from Old MacDonald's farm started to play in her head and she smiled. While she perused the animals to be sold, she observed an old cow that she noticed was observing her in return. A large deer eyed Jersey cow sizing Shane up. The Jersey was with a large group of cows to be sold that day. Some of them were old, some sick, some poor producers of milk and some afflicted with all three. What the cows in that pen shared was that they were all being sold off from dairy farms. Shane stood by the rusty metal gate and watched them all, feeling badly about how their lives had been dedicated to producing milk, turned into products she enjoyed consuming and yet they were not granted a

retirement to a beautiful green pasture and a comfortable barn with a thick bed of straw. Their retirement was to become packaged hamburger in a chain grocery store. All those years of bearing calves they didn't get to raise, producing gallon after gallon of milk and this was their unappreciated fate.

The Jersey slowly approached Shane at the gate. Shane gingerly put her hand between the metal slats, scratched the old cow behind the ears and whispered a sincere apology to her. The cow responded with a gentle bump with her nose to Shane's shoulder, apology accepted. The Jersey had some years on her, shown by her bony frame and broke-down udder but her coat was shiny and she held her head high in the midst of this sad and uncertain environment. Shane knew she was beginning to over identify with this old Jersey cow, she and the cow having been put out to pasture before their time. Shane readily admitted neither of them had the udders or hips of a spring heifer but this didn't mean they were without worth.

The cow couldn't produce enough milk to meet the quota for the dairy business so she was going to be butchered as a final insult. Shane was a woman in her late 40's whose child was grown and she hadn't met unknown quotas set by her ex-husband so was tossed aside. Shane and the Jersey cow had been both labeled as disposable mammals.

As the cow entered the ring and the bidding started, Shane's right arm took on a life of it's own. She kept raising it each time the auctioneer looked in her direction with a higher bid. Her arm would not stay still. She tried to hold it down with her left and then she tried to sit on it to no avail. She imagined herself, other displaced women and herds of old cows in the ring being sold for hamburger and her arm couldn't be controlled.

In short order, Shane made an important discovery. If one bids high enough and long enough one is sure to be the impulsive and bewildered owner of an old Jersey cow. As long as she had already set free her reason for the day, she continued bidding and bought a discarded day old calf for her old cow to mother. She felt like everyone in the stands could see who she was, a floundering woman seeing herself through the eyes of an old cow. These buying decisions, she might as well own, as obvious as her motivation had been.

Shane realized she needed to get away from the sale ring before her mid-life undoing gave way to more buying impulses. Maybe there was an old sow, nanny, ewe or mare that needed a home. When she went up to pay the cashier for her purchases, the woman was obviously curious about the new woman in town. “Need a milk cow?”, “No.”, Shane grinned slightly. “Need something to eat down your pasture?” the clerk asked. “That’s part of it.”, she mumbled. She looked at Shane quizzically waiting for an explanation. The questioning look sparked an increase in Shane’s heartbeat and when she should have walked away, she spoke. “This cow is starting a new life. She still has something to contribute. Life has beaten her up but she’s not beaten.” The woman gently handed Shane the receipt, pausing then nodding without making eye contact. Shane was reasonably concerned that the cashier might be hitting a buzzer under the counter and calling for security so she hurried out back to figure out a way to get the cow and calf home.

Standing by the worn gate her new roommate was chewing her cud and scratching her back on a post. Shane handed the receipt to the sale hand, a lanky, slightly older man. “Did you make this purchase?”, he questioned. “Yes.”, she said. “So you are the Shane

on the receipt? That's a lot of name to live up to.", the man stated. Shane loved it when people make the leap and referenced the story to her name. "Yes it is. My father was maybe the biggest fan of the book and the movie that ever existed, so boy or girl that was the name his first born was going to carry. Quotes were frequently used in conversations and the morals presented in the book as standards to achieve. I do my best to do the name justice but feel I often fall a bit short." Shane said. They met eyes and shared a knowing smile. "Well Shane, I am Joe, Joseph, named after my Grandpa. My name also comes with huge shoes to fill and I have average sized feet."

Joe looked behind into the corrals and said, "I'll go round'em up and you go get your rig. "Um there's no rig to get.", Shane replied. She got that same questioning look she had received inside from the clerk. "You need me to find a hauler for hire?", Joe asked. Shane knew how ridiculously stubborn she was being but she dug in anyway. "No, the three of us will manage.", she said. Joe looked at Shane with a poorly stifled smirk, "How?", he questioned. "We'll walk", she said without confidence.

Shane knew it was a silly hill to die on but she just couldn't bear to admit needing assistance, especially from a man. Sometimes being stubborn, supersedes sound judgment. Good sense was gone but luck was with her. If you don't have one, the other really needs to show up in a hurry. The Jersey was a gentle cow and didn't mind two-mile walks with foliage to be munched along the side of the road. The calf was lighter than she looked, thank goodness because she got tired and needed to be carried the length between telephone poles alternately. Lastly, the weather was cold and dry. This walk would take time but time she had.

There was a lot to consider and this occupied her mind as the trio ambled along. The cow needed a name that represented her newly acquired status. Someone who could be an example for the down trodden and was female. Eleanor Roosevelt fit the bill perfectly. Eleanor the cow, owned by Shane the questionable. Naming completed now there was also feed to consider. There was not enough grass yet to feed a full-size cow for another two or three months, spring not yet having sprung. A bale or two of hay and a salt lick would fit in the back of the Jeep. What container to use to give them water to drink? She ticked through her list and identified a large crystal punch bowl given to her by the ex sister-in-law as a wedding present many years before. It was a gaudy monstrosity that she had never used in all the years she had owned it. The woman had never approved of her and hadn't known her, as shown by the present she had chosen. Maybe she would send a picture of the bovine drinking out of the crystal bowl as this year's Christmas card from the farm. She laughed and Eleanor looked up from snacking on underbrush to regard her.

Admittedly, this wasn't her first choice as to how to introduce herself to her new neighbors. Was there a way to seem like an average new neighbor or at a minimum sane, leading a cow, rope wrapped around an arm and carrying a calf both arms under the belly like a completed curl up? She pictured herself from another's perspective and said, "No, no chance." More likely were words like odd, unusual, unstable and other adjectives from that genre. She held out a faint hope that "determined" might be one of the words used in the mix.

As the three walked, there were honks from trucks and a few shouts out from rolled down truck windows decorated with resting elbows. Shane decided to interpret

the attention as signs of support for her miniature cattle drive so she tried very hard not to hear what was actually being said.

Walking down the driveway, the ill repair of the fence came into focus. Shane quickly realized that the cow had better be fed well because if she decided the grass was greener on the other side of the fence there would be no stopping her. She put the calf down and hoped the feeling would return to her arms.

The cow's udder was at maximum capacity and Shane thought she would be anxious to relieve the pressure. What a mistake to assume that cows and women think alike. Shane pushed the calf towards the udder and as soon as she nudged the cow's taunt udder she gave the calf a kick. Not a hard kick, but an annoyed, get lost kick. Well now there were two adult, female mammals that were annoyed. Poor baby girl was easy to discourage and she wobbled away looking defeated. Shane herded her back to the cow with a hand on each side of her behind. When she was back in position, Shane whispered encouraging words explaining that bonding takes time and it wasn't that she wasn't an adorable and loveable calf. She stood between Eleanor's back feet with the calf and reminded the cow that she had been one wave of the hand from the hamburger market. She wanted the former first lady to know that she was still just a kick away from that option.

After two frustrating, colorful language filled, sweaty hours, two of the four quarters were nursed out. Shane had mistakenly thought that the cow was missing being a mother the way she was. Eleanor was tired and old. Shane had saved her but miscalculated the cow's needs. "If you raise this little calf Eleanor, I promise you an easy retirement will follow." Eleanor let out a si, the calf's little belly bulged and she

curled up under a heat lamp in the corner of the stall to nap. These wrestling/nursing sessions continued five times a day for two days before Eleanor began to care for the calf independently. She began to bathe her with her tongue, feed her and they curled up together to sleep. The calf had immediately accepted Eleanor as her momma and rarely ventured more than a few feet away. It was a relief when the affection wasn't one-sided.

Eleanor was tired and for weeks this little calf nudged and tugged at her steadily. Poor old cow both victimized and saved by Shane.

Shane had begun to feel the energy to take on more change. Maybe try and meet new people. Put her mind to better use than pondering, "Does it count as drinking alone if you are watching TV and the people on TV are drinking." She was getting tired of herself not in a self-deprecating, unkind way but in a, I am ready to make some changes way.

Observing that old cow gave Shane a different perspective. Watching her over the weeks and months Shane came to understand that this was an uncomfortable transition time and she had to stop resisting it. She was single, her child was grown and she was old enough that her parents were gone. All new territory but territory it was time to explore. She hadn't ever liked the unknown. Didn't like the necessary mourning of changing roles and roles that were gone. Resilience however had always been a fascination of hers. The people she had observed who were able move forward during difficult times in their lives, walk through regrets, disappointment and unwanted change. Those who continued to live and find new meaning. She resolved to find her way.

Shane began to even more actively rebuild her life. It was a decision, not an accident and she realized she had been moving in that direction already. She didn't

reconstruct in original ways but in time honored ways that worked. She joined a book club, she volunteered tutoring adults trying to get their GED, she rekindled old friendships, apologized where necessary, picked the guitar back up, attended a support group and she went back to work part-time as a nurse for a rural home health agency. She ate well, exercised and made sleep a priority. She met people, was invited to gatherings, invited people over for dinner and woke up one day and realized she was feeling something close to content. Shane remembered how to belong, contribute and the importance of these. She felt renewed kindness towards herself.

Shane still felt like she was navigating in a foreign country during this unfamiliar time in her life. There were signs she didn't recognize and the cars were driving on the wrong side of the street but now her tires were gripping the road. She was beginning to feel at home with herself. She watched Laddy and could see her own progress in his behavior. Laddy's tail was curled up high, his appetite returned and he daily completed his job of overseeing the property. There were rabbits and deer to chase off his property and endless smells to investigate.

It was the end of February and the calf, permanently named Baby, had decreased her dependence on Eleanor. Shane had learned that the answer in her life wasn't to be a wife or an active parent and neither was that the answer for Eleanor. That was their past and they had completed their jobs well. Eleanor could watch her calf across the pasture and enjoy her becoming a fine heifer springer. Shane would have visits and phone calls from her son. They would have a solid and satisfying adult relationship.

Introspection is not what cows are known for so Shane decided to help Eleanor develop her new life. More accurately, Eleanor was going to continue to be drug along

on Shane's journey of discovery. Eleanor wasn't going to play an instrument, tutor a cow with lagging skills or organize a fundraiser for mad cow disease. Companionship was what she needed and Shane needed to provide this for her. Shane walked two miles to the sale as this time she knew she would be walking home. She sat through the cheerful part of the sale and bought a six-month-old nanny goat. Goats Shane had read were good companion animals and Baby needed a friend. Goats had the added benefit of being deadly on invasive plant species such as the vicious blackberries she suspected she would battle and lose to without assistance.

Shane looked forward to purchasing and dreaded seeing the infirm and overused bovines. She was already feeling guilty about the cows that she wasn't taking home. There were many old cows today, so ample opportunities to feel guilty. She perused the herds in the pens until one caught her attention. This time it was a very large Holstien mostly white with large black spots that resembled the continents. She had a large frame, with a smooth gait, walking slowly with her eyes displaying confusion and a disorientation in this situation. Shane recognized this look.

There were two hamburger brokers down at the ring-side of the sales corral and those were the men that Shane would be bidding against. They wanted the old Holstein and turned to see who the third bidder was. Instead of feeling self-conscious, giddiness surfaced and Shane felt powerful. She gave them a little smile and a rookie's wave that counted to the auctioneer as another bid. The brokers looked at each other, shrugged, each putting up a couple more half-hearted bids. Shane decided she must have looked like a woman willing to pay way too much for a cow, so they quit bidding, turned and tipped their hats to her. She flashed, a mission accomplished smile and trotted down the

stairs to welcome the new family members. She was once again the proud owner of an overpriced, old cow and the first time owner of a reasonably priced goat.

Shane approached the clerk to pay, afraid that she had made a memorable appearance her first time at the sale. She felt nervous but decided this was the time to put self-consciousness aside and complete the business side of this excursion. Shane paid for the livestock and the clerk asked no questions. To complete the transaction the clerk handed Shane her the receipt, smiled wryly and said, “Husbands sometimes go, mine did too.”

Shane approached the cow and goat feeling vindicated. The cow looked calmer now and Shane decided her expression was that of a deep thinker who understood the world. Her name was to be Maya for Maya Angelou. Shane loved the idea of both poetry and politics out in her barn. She began to unlatch the gate and he approached her. “Hello Joe.” “Well hello”, he said with that same twinkling smirk. “I don’t see a truck. Are you planning to take your new cow and goat on the scenic route like you did the first pair?” Shane nodded yes. Joe bit his lip, thinking what to say. He settled on, “You’re new to goats aren’t you?” Shane nodded again, wondering what he was planning to tell her. “Well I don’t want to be the annoying guy who disrupts a woman’s new farm animal walking hobby, but a goats a goat, and they don’t lead unless they want to be led and they almost never want to be led. I see a big furrow forming on your brow but hold tight and hear me out. I am finishing up here and I have a livestock trailer and a truck. I am hungry and would really appreciate some lunch at your place as payment for delivering these animals. I am sure you can find something else to be stubborn about later today but for now allow me to grant you this favor. That way you, myself and your growing herd

can spend the rest of the afternoon getting acquainted.” Shane wanted to be irritated by his speech but his mild teasing manner and kind offer made her smile.

Shane watched him throw a rope over the cow’s shoulders and watched Maya follow him into the trailer. He made a small loop and slipped it over the goat’s horns. The goat dug all four hooves into the ground and Joe carefully dragged the goat along making thin hoof print lines in the soft dirt. Joe was skilled with animals, firm but gentle. There was confidence and competence in every movement. He was a man at home in his skin and in this place.

They rode in a comfortable silence taking in the old farmhouses, pastures and classic barns along the way. The animals were unloaded, lunch built and eaten on a blanket in the yard near the pasture. The cows sniffed each other and rubbed shoulders. The goat climbed repeatedly on a stump, the calf nearby watched in admiration and later they shared a bucket of grain. Shane and Joe’s afternoon was well spent in the type of conversation that is constructed in a manner that leads to future conversations.

It was unseasonably warm for February. It was one of those teasing warm weeks thrown into the midst of nearly every winter. The frogs were croaking and the sound of birds had returned. Shane was wearing a denim shirt without a jacket and the sun felt warm on her back. She had experienced this before and wouldn’t let herself be fooled. This weather wouldn’t last. She knew the weather would get cold again, the woods would grow silent and the buds would fold back in on themselves. Shane would be ready to put her coat and hat back on and wait for spring, the true spring. The winter as does life, makes us wait, teaches us patience and makes us earn life’s second spring.

