Neighbors

I leaned in at the edge of the stall and looked on helplessly as the young heifer suffered in the lamplight. A fog of perspiration and her exhaled breath surrounded her and rose like a cloud in the chilly barn. Laying on her side in the straw, her back legs extended straight out from her swollen body. They bobbed up and down as her breathing alternated between shallow pants and loud, frustrated chuffs. Occasionally she raised her head, looking at me plaintively over her shoulder, her eyes rolled back in a woeful plea for help.

I pulled my watch out and flipped it open. Nearly one o'clock. She'd been in labor since just after supper. A gnawing anxiety seeped into my chest. I snapped the watch closed and rubbed my thumb over its engraved cover, the monogrammed "C" rendered nearly illegible by decades in my father's service.

I returned the watch to my pocket and a growing sense of uselessness threatened to paralyze my thoughts. "*What would he have done? Think!"* I agonized. Then it occurred to me. Certainly not a choice he would have made, but in my desperation I could see no other option.

I walked across the barn, grabbed my coat from a nail near the door, and put it on. I grabbed my lantern with one hand and slid the heavy door open with the other. The frigid February air shot down my throat and caught in my chest as I slid the door closed behind me. I turned and looked at the house across the dooryard. A full moon hung white and huge above the roofline. A light from the kitchen window cast a yellow square onto the snow in the shadow of the house. I saw movement inside, so I crossed the yard and went in the kitchen door.

It was warm inside. The smell of fresh coffee filled the room. My mother stood near the stove in her blue flannel night gown. She turned as I ushered in a whoosh of artic air.

"Coffee?" she asked, reaching for the pot.

"Mom – why are you up?"

"Couldn't sleep. How's Molly?" she asked, pouring coffee into a cup on the table.

"Just a little," I said, reaching for the cup. "Thanks."

"How's she doing?"

"Well, she hasn't made any progress since supper." A sip of hot coffee slid down my throat and overheated my chest. "She's suffering. I'm going to go over and ask Pete O'Connell for help." Mom didn't reply, but just looked at the stove with a perplexed frown. "I heard one of the guys at the feed store saying that Pete is real good with cows in hard labor."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose he is," she said, turning toward me with a distant expression. "You know, it's something your father wouldn't approve of."

"I know, Mom. But I don't know what else to do. I'm over my head here, and we could lose the calf or Molly or both. I'd better get going. Thanks for the coffee."

"Sure, Honey. Good luck." She smiled and turned back toward the stove.

I left the warmth of the kitchen and hurried down the driveway out to the frozen road. The light from my swaying lantern scattered and sparkled off the surface of thin ice in ruts along the way. Cold silence pressed in around me, swallowing the crunchy squeak of my footsteps. My breath shot out in jagged puffs. Soon I saw the O'Connell mailbox appear ahead in my lantern light, and I turned down the driveway.

As I approached the house I passed through ashen shadows in the moonlight, cast by the row of bare maples lining the driveway. A single scoop light illuminated their yard from above the big X-framed barn door. Ice crystals shimmered like glitter all around the light. When I reached the porch and started up the steps, they creaked under my weight in the icy air. At the top, the light of my lantern flashed in the dark glass of the storm door. I stepped up, took a deep breath, and knocked hard.

As I waited, my pulse pounded. I yanked my collar up high and leaned closer to the door. My breath fogged up the glass, and I wiped it away. Peering in past the gingham curtains into the darkness of their kitchen, I felt a weird tightness in my stomach.

"*If Dad could see me now, I wonder what he would say."* The O'Connells were Catholic, a minority in our predominately Methodist and Nazarene community, and we'd never had much to do with them. "Don't get mixed up with them Catholics!" Dad had often warned me. "They call themselves Christians, but their ways just don't square with the Bible."

I stood there, not sure if I should knock again or just turn and leave, when a single bulb flicked on above the kitchen table. Mr. O'Connell shuffled into the light in a red union suit, scratching his head. I tried to stand taller and smile reassuringly. I held my lantern at shoulder height to illuminate my face. Now that I think of it, despite my best intentions, I imagine I must have looked like the disembodied head of a leering Boy Scout telling ghost stories at a campfire.

"Hello? Who's there?" Pete called, waddling toward the door and squinting up at me through the glass. "Jeremy Conklin is it? What's going on?" Grey hair tufted out like a crown encircling his mostly bald head.

"Hey, Mr. O'Connell!" My half-yell felt incongruous with the silence of the night and the fact that Pete was now standing less than a foot away. "Sorry to bother you at this hour. One of my heifers is having a heck of a time delivering. It's her first calf. I'm afraid she's in trouble. Can you help me?"

He blinked hard, his sleepy, weathered face puckered into a scowl against the lantern's harsh glare. He opened the inside door a crack. "You could probably get the vet out here tomorrow. How bad is she?"

"I've been up with her all night. She's laboring, but she's not making any progress. I'm afraid I'm going to lose her, or the calf, or both! Please help me." He didn't move right away, but only frowned at me with one bushy eyebrow raised, scratching at the backside of his long johns.

"All right, then. Come on inside while I get dressed," he finally said, pushing the storm door open to let me in. "Holy Mary, it's cold out there!" he blustered. I stepped in and the door slapped closed behind me. "What's the temperature, anyway?"

"Nine degrees, last time I looked."

"Saints preserve us! Well, wait here and I'll be right back."

Their kitchen was like most farm kitchens in our part of the world. It smelled of wood smoke and the day's table scraps saved for the pigs in a waste bin under the counter. A long wooden table with eight chairs stood on worn linoleum over a painted slat floor. Yellow flames flickered behind the isinglass vents of a stove against one wall. The only decorations were a faded print of the Last Supper above the stove, a feed store calendar hanging on a nail next to the

wall phone, and a polished sandalwood crucifix above the door. I reached up and touched the tortured figure on the cross. "*Could it possibly help to send up a prayer?"* I thought.

My father had held a lifelong aversion to Roman Catholicism, maintaining a litany of theological objections from which he would pontificate at the slightest provocation. His argument against the crucifix was that, unlike our simple (and empty) Protestant crosses, the emaciated figure of Christ hanging forever in torment glorified the Lord's suffering without celebrating his subsequent resurrection and triumph over death.

Topmost on his list of complaints against the Holy Church was the sacrament of the Eucharist – their version of what we Methodists call "communion". He was appalled by their belief that when a priest performed the Eucharist, a miracle occurred transforming the wine and wafer into the actual blood and body of Christ not only absurd, but heretical. "Show me the scriptural backing for that!" he would rage.

As a boy I had learned something, (mostly through eavesdropping on adult conversations), that shed a whole new light on my father's abhorrence of Catholicism. As it turned out, his feelings were fueled by more than theological objections alone.

It seems that in their youth, my father's and mother's families had both attended the same Methodist church. Mom was one of the prettiest girls around and, as the story went, my father was deeply smitten with her. But as it so often goes with matters of the heart, Mom was blind to his feelings. She and a boy from a neighboring Catholic family had a mutual and powerful crush on each other. That boy was Peter O'Connell. Of course, because of their families' religious differences, the youngsters' feelings were dismissed as "puppy love", and the idea of anything lasting between them was generally disregarded.

For a time, the sweethearts resisted family pressure, sneaking in an occasional weekend walk or a ride on the Ferris wheel at the summer carnival. But in the end, their young love yielded to the strain of family pressure, and they broke it off, each settling on what everyone (but themselves) considered a more suitable mate. Mom ended up with Dad, and Pete married Katherine Monahan, a good Catholic girl from across the valley. Looking back at it now, I see that all of that history was never far from my father's mind.

"You ready?" Pete's voice brought me back to the moment as he clomped into the kitchen wearing his barn clothes and boots. He took a heavy work jacket from a peg near the stove and pulled it on over his faded denim coveralls.

"Sure, Mr. O'Connell," I said, stepping back out onto the porch. The cold air instantly froze inside my nose and shot into my chest like icicles. The stairs creaked and crackled as we descended to the flagstone walk.

"You're a man now, Jeremy. Please - call me Pete," he said, as we walked side-by-side.

"Okay, Pete. It's just that we, I mean I –"

"It's all right, son. You can say it. We've never had much to do with each other. It's the truth. Your Dad, God rest his soul, he never liked me. I guess that don't matter much anymore, but now that you're running the place over there, if you and I could be neighborly and help each other out, well, that would suit me just fine." He extended his right hand, offering a hand shake.

"I'd like that too, Pete," I said returning the gesture. We crunched out his driveway, back to the road, and turned toward my place.

On the walk back, I told Pete about my heifer, Molly. One day last spring, I had returned from town to find Blackie, our bull, broken out of his enclosure and mixed in with the cows. As I wrangled him back into his pen and mended the fence, I couldn't help but wonder what kind of mischief he'd gotten himself into. A few months later I found out. A couple of the older cows were carrying, and much to my surprise, so was little Molly.

"She wasn't quite a year old yet at the time," I said. "I didn't even know she was ready to breed. But Blackie sure did!"

"Yes – it appears so," Pete remarked wryly, as we turned into my driveway.

A few minutes later, we were in the barn. I turned the light on and slid the big door closed. Despite the exterior cold, the atmosphere inside was a pungent medley of manure, hay, urine, malted oats, whitewash and warm animals. We went over to the stall where Molly lay on her side. She raised her head and marked our approach with a pitiful roll of her eyes.

"Hmm. When did she start laboring?" Pete asked, looking her over.

"About sundown. She's been struggling ever since. A little bit of fluid came out, but that's it so far."

"Okay. Here's what we do. You go up and hold her head. Keep her calm. I'll see what I can do back here. Gloves?" he asked, removing his coat. I pointed to a pair of long rubber gloves and a tube of lubricant on a shelf nearby.

As I moved around Molly, she lifted her head up and watched me anxiously. Her wide eyes rolled back in her head, her tongue drooped out, and she drooled out of the side of her

mouth. I settled down in the straw and stroked her forehead and jowls while Pete put on the gloves, knelt down behind her, and went to work.

"All right. Good girl, Molly. Uh-huh, Hmm…" he mumbled in a soothing, veterinary tone. Down on one knee, he worked his hand inside. Tilting his head and looking up at the ceiling with one eye closed and his tongue between his teeth, he probed the birth canal. Molly huffed a little and jerked her head. After a minute he withdrew his arm and took a step backwards.

"Here's the thing," he said, "The calf is coming butt first. One leg is pointed back, but the other one is pointed up toward the front. I can't turn the whole calf around, but I can try and pull the one leg back so they line up together and give her a better chance."

"Okay. Let's do it," I said.

"First thing - we've got to stand her up."

I stood up, grabbed ahold of Molly's halter and pulled. She just laid there at first, but after some coaxing, she finally lunged to her feet. I stroked her face again as Pete went in after the errant leg. She shifted her weight from one back foot to the other and mooed a little as Pete struggled. His face turned red and he broke into a sweat, despite the cold. Molly was surprisingly tolerant of his efforts. *Is it possible that she could have known he was trying to help her?* After a few minutes of both of them huffing and grunting, he managed to pull the leg into position.

"All right. Good girl there," he said, gasping. He patted her lightly on the hip with his free hand as he extracted his other arm. "She's ready to deliver now, Jeremy," he said, pulling

off the rubber gloves. "But she'll need a little help. The calf isn't a small one. I just need to take a breather here for a minute."

He bent at the waist and duck-walked backward a few steps until he was leaning up against the stall, then he put his elbows on his knees and wheezed. When he bent down, a religious medal on a silver chain flopped out from the front of his denim shirt and dangled below his face.

As I watched Pete catching his breath, I was moved by his generosity. Getting out of a warm bed on a night like this to help a neighbor who frankly, up until now, hadn't been very neighborly displayed an admirable measure of compassion. And his gentleness with the heifer was extraordinary.

His actions brought to mind memories of how differently my father had approached animal care. By contrast, Dad's methods had been pragmatic at best. And on his worst days, he was capable of cruelty in the extreme. On more than one occasion, I had seen him beat a cow, thrashing the tops of her hip bones with a short length of two-by-four until they bled, simply because she wasn't getting through the barn door fast enough to suit his liking. Even as a boy, I had known that was no way for a farmer to treat his animals.

His population control program with our barn cats showed the same lack of compassion. Now and again, two or three of the perpetually fertile females would bear litters at the same time. A month or so later Dad would prowl the property with an empty grain sack, rounding up and tossing in all the kittens and muttering, "Too many consarn cats around the barn!" He'd drop a couple of bricks in with the kittens, tie it off, and on our next trip into town, he'd heave it off the

truck as we crossed the Chenango Forks Bridge. Anger swelled in my throat at the memory of watching those squirming sacks slip helplessly below the rippling surface of the river.

"You got any clothesline around?" Pete's voice brought me back to the barn and Molly. Standing upright again, he had apparently found his second wind. He was pulling the gloves back on for the next round of action.

"Huh? Oh sure, Pete. How much?"

"Oh, just maybe six or eight feet." I went to my catch-all bin near the door, found a suitable length of cotton clothesline rope, and brought it to him. "Perfect. Okay – now I'm going to work the calf's feet out to where I can loop this around them and pull some. Hopefully, little Molly will get the urge to push and help us get it out."

Pete reached in and got both the calf's back feet in his big right hand and gently pulled. They came out a little, but not far enough, so he pushed back in a bit then pulled some more. After several such repetitions he got the back legs about six inches out of the birth canal and was able to loop the rope around them and secure a sturdy but gentle knot.

"All right, Jeremy – here goes nothing!" he said. Then he began pulling with strong, steady pressure on the rope. Whether Molly understood what was happening, or just naturally felt the urge, she started pushing. Her legs quivered and her haunches twitched, but she kept pushing and Pete kept pulling. It wasn't long after that Molly pushed hard, and in one big swoosh, the calf and all dropped steaming onto the fresh straw in a wet heap.

"Whew!" Pete said, untying the rope and standing up, looking at the newborn. "It looks good! It's breathing and its eyes are open. Four legs, two ears, two eyes, a nose and a tail. And it's another little heifer. I think you've got a healthy calf there, Jeremy!"

In less than an hour, Molly had the newborn cleaned up and standing on wobbly legs. Once on its feet, the calf quickly found its way to mother's milk and nursed hungrily. I went over to the water barrel, broke a skin of ice from the surface, and filled a wash pail. Then Pete and I rinsed our hands off together and shared an old flour sack as a towel.

He grabbed his coat and I slid the big door open. By this time, the sun was just coming up over the eastern ridge. Everything outside sparkled in the sharply angled morning light. A fresh plume of smoke rose from our kitchen chimney. Pete stretched his back out as I checked the thermometer.

"Twenty-one degrees already!" I said. "Surprising how quick the rising sun makes a difference."

"Sure is," Pete said, straightening up. "Well, next month's March. It'll be spring before you know it." He smiled and squinted out the driveway toward the road. He rocked up and down on his toes with his hands in his back pockets, then asked, "So, how's Marjorie - that is, how's your Mom getting along, Jeremy?" His head was tilted to one side. "I mean – since you're Dad passed?"

"She's doing all right, Pete. Thanks for asking."

"Good, that's good," he said with a little nod. He looked toward the house, then down at the ground, scraping the toe of his boot back and forth.

"Would you care to come in for some breakfast?"

"Huh? Oh, no – thank you," he said, frowning. "I'd better get back. Kate will have something waiting for me. Give your mother my best, will you?"

"Suit yourself. Sure, Pete I will. Hey, thanks for your help with Molly," I said, extending my right hand. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"My pleasure, son," he said returning the handshake. "Glad to be of help. You know, there's something about birthing that fills me up. Well, see you around. Neighbor." He winked, turned, and headed back out the driveway.

"See you, Pete." I watched him until he was half way back to the road, then I turned and headed for the house.

The air inside the kitchen felt like a warm hug. My stomach growled at the smell of bacon, hot coffee, and fresh bread. A skillet sizzled on the stove. Mom was standing on her toes near the window in her flannel night gown and slippers. She had her back to the door and was watching Pete head out the driveway. I wasn't sure if she realized I had come in.

"Morning Mom!" I said a little louder than I meant to.

"Oh – good morning, son," she said, turning quickly, one hand up near her shoulder, the other holding a wooden spoon. Her voice was high pitched and quivery. "Was that Peter O'Connell just now heading out from the barn? You should have asked him in."

"Oh – yeah. I did, but he had to get home. He said to give you his best."

"Oh, did he? And how'd it go with Molly?"

"Great! You were right. He has a gift for it. We have a healthy calf, and Molly's just fine," I said, hanging my coat on a peg near the door. "I couldn't have done it without him. He seems like a really good man."

"Yes. He is," she said, leaning for a last look out the window. "Pete is a good man."

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