

The Brown Swiss

It was early fall when Thomas killed the cow. The moment is as stark and plain in his being now as it was years ago. September is the month when the scrub oak first starts to turn, when the aspens on the hillsides are ablaze in the crisp yellows and deep reds of autumn, when the alfalfa fields are finally done being harvested. The air starts to feel thinner, a sure sign that a vengeful winter is prowling somewhere above the tree-line. During this time of year, the mornings make finger joints stiff and the afternoons oppress with a dry and heavy heat. By October, the aspens will stand in the distance like a platoon of skeletons, leafless and haunting, and the first snow will fall like a bad omen. But not now. Now, the coolness seems a blessing.

The Flying Dog Ranch starts three and half miles past the place where Upper Woody Creek Road turns from pavement to dirt. No one else lives up there, except the ghosts of Lenado, a town long dead and crumbling. It's a big spread, six hundred acres or so, although it hasn't been surveyed since the early sixties. If you stand on the deck of the house with blue trim, the house where Thomas Northrup grew up, you can see the peaks of the Elk Mountain Range erupting tall and ancient from behind the foothills that surround the ranch.

The cow had the colic. Her intestines were tangled up in themselves and her death was imminent. Not an uncommon problem among cow-calf operations. *She had it real bad. It's something that can be fixed. But you don't do surgery on a cow. It's not fair, but you just don't. That's the way it is.* Even then, death was nothing foreign to the boy. All the cows eventually got shipped off the ranch to go to slaughter. Thomas knew

this. He had killed before. When the Mexicans came up to buy a pig, he slaughtered it. When the chickens got too old to lay eggs, he snapped their frail necks. When a coyote was spotted hungrily eyeing the calves, he took aim on it. Killing had never bothered him. *I had never killed anything that I loved.*

They called her The Brown Swiss. Colored brown and white, like most of the other Hereford cows on the ranch. Built sturdy to survive the wearisome Colorado winters, built thick to fetch a good price from the slaughterhouse. *A lot of cows are dumb. I'm not saying that The Brown Swiss wasn't dumb, she was. But she wasn't skittish and mean like the other cows. Like Black Devil or Eleanor.* She was gentle and Thomas sat on her like a horse on the days when he had no fence to fix and no fields to irrigate. The children climbed on her back, dusty with dirt swept down from the hills, and she plodded along without resentment. Sometimes, they grabbed handfuls of oats meant for the horses and snuck them out to The Brown Swiss when their father was down at the tavern. Other times, they made tiny fists and stuck their whole arms into her mouth. *She'd just suckle on your arm; she never bit. Like a cat's tongue, warm and rough. Poor Brown Swiss.*

Even now, so many years later, Thomas cannot say why his father made him do it. Although he speaks of the cow as some distant and unfortunate memory, he speaks about his actions as if the blood is still tacky on the barn's floor. His voice gets low when he tells the story and he stares down at his feet. He fidgets when he talks about it, like he is still a child, afraid to implicate his father in any type of wrongdoing. But Caleb Northrup did a lot of things wrong. He cheated on his wife and he drank whiskey in his coffee and he made his only son kill that cow. Young and reckless and a little too sure of himself.

He was a cowboy, after all.

“Get over here, Thomas,” Caleb refuses to let anyone call his son Tom. Only Thomas. “This cow is sick, son. You need to shoot her.” Caleb puts one of his big calloused hands on the back of Thomas’ neck. His father’s breath smells like Yellowstone Whiskey, sharp and strong. Caleb smiles at Thomas and the boy smiles back because Caleb is his father. “Don’t fuck this up.” He pats his son on the back and hands him a loaded .30-30 Winchester. Thomas is nine years old.

Thomas trudges to the field to get The Brown Swiss. He brings her up to the barn, his steps slow and deliberate, and he ties the forsaken cow to a post. Thomas has learned not to shoot a cow in front of the others; they’ll all stand around nuzzling at the body, smelling blood and wailing. The floorboards creak under the weight of The Brown Swiss but she goes where she is led. It is afternoon in the Rockies and the barn has the thick scent of hot mildew and dust. Sunlight filters through the slats of wood, casting shadows in strips on the walls. Alone in the barn, Thomas makes a fist and the cow suckles on it for a while, her tongue massaging the tiny, dirty arm. Her eyes are big and warm and yielding. He slides one finger up and down from her forehead to her nose and feeds her one last palm full of oats. Thomas’ hands are shaking now. She is so exposed and so unaware. “Don’t worry, girl. Everything is gonna be alright.” The Brown Swiss chews her oats. Even though Thomas is only a boy, he knows that this will not be the hardest thing he ever has to do.

My father always told me to draw an imaginary X on an animal’s forehead when I took aim. It’s supposed to help you get it right. The gun feels unusually heavy in his

hands. He is sweating now from the heat, looking at this cow, this cow he must kill. The big black X the boy has drawn with a permanent marker stares back at him from the cow's forehead. Thomas fits the gun tight against his shoulder like his father does, like he has done so many times before, and his finger flirts with the trigger. The sunlight is too bright and it is too hot in this barn. The Brown Swiss stands still and heavy, staring at this boy with a gun. "Don't worry," Thomas says in the moment before he kills the cow, "I'll be going to Hell before you."

As the syrupy blood fans out on the floor, Thomas does not cry. But there is a sinking feeling in his heart and a hardness creeping through his insides. His hearing is muffled and his body is taut. His gut clenches and unclenches. *It was the best aim of my life.* The Brown Swiss lies dead at the other end of the barn, her muscles twitching out the last signs of life underneath her brown and white hide. Her chest heaves; he watches the cow's last breath create a cloud of dust that hovers for a moment before falling like so many microscopic stars. Thomas will not feel as bad as he does right now for a long time. He will only feel such hardness three other times in his life: when he is seventeen years old and he has to kill a broken-legged horse named Paint, when he is twenty-two—after his best friend kills himself on County Road 17, and when he is twenty-eight—when he has to bury his father.

He must clean up this mess now. The cow needs to be dragged out of the barn, across the field to the ravine where the other dead animals are left for the coyotes. *I shouldn't have killed it in the barn but I didn't know.* The bottoms of his shoes are gummy with blood. Thomas ties a rope around the cow's bony legs and hauls the carcass away with a tractor. He hears the sound of the body thumping over rocks and marmot

mounds above the laboring hum of the machine. The sun descends behind the foothills like a casket into a grave and it is starting to get cold outside. When he cuts the tractor engine, he hears only the sounds of the crickets chirping. His father is probably home now, playing the guitar and singing Johnny Cash songs to Thomas' sisters. He looks down into the ravine; he can only make out the bleached white of old bones. The air smells of rotten meat and dying chokecherry blossoms. The Brown Swiss lies on her side on the edge of the gully, her glazed eye looking up at Thomas. *I couldn't look into that eye without feeling like a thief.*

Today, eighteen years later, Thomas is no longer that boy in the barn with a gun. He sits at a kitchen table, looking much the same as the young boy I've seen in pictures. Blackened hair, green eyes, high cheekbones. Savagely handsome. He still wears Levi 501s with a handkerchief and a pair of pliers in the back left pocket. He still calls everyone sir and ma'am like his father taught him to do. He is still quiet. *My father was just liquored up. I know he regretted it everyday. He was a good man.* But he is taller now, gaunt looking at first glance, his skin tanned by a sun that is far away from the Rockies. The young man sitting here now has a wide square jaw and a stoic face and he knows something more of death.

That night, Thomas stands there with the cow until he can hear the coyotes howling behind the wall of spruce trees at the edge of the field. He stands there until he hears his mother calling him for dinner from the house with blue trim. The faint, yellow lights waver in the distance. He bites his lip and shakes his head and shoves The Brown Swiss over the edge. He is only a boy, after all.