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Small Mercies

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One

Dimple helped 3027 to her feet. The cow was too heavy for him to lift, but if he held the base of her tail he could steady her as her weak legs wobbled and found their place. Alongside, her tan, soft-eyed calf probed impatiently, nudging the flank, his tongue like a long, flat, rippling leech, survival its only agenda.

There was a bloke on the ute radio saying confidently that drought could be a good thing because it removed the bottom rung of farmers.

'Wally frigging Oliver,' Dimple muttered to the cow. 'Trust an Oliver to insist on survival of the fittest.'

The cow lowed softly as her calf suckled. Reflex or instinct demanded she stay still while her calf drank. Her health bade she was capable of nothing more.

The scene pleased Dimple. At least cow and calf would survive. The birth had been assisted by Dimple and Ruthie, and it had been pretty rough. The calf had been big inside her, had presented with one front leg tucked backwards, and the cow was low on energy. In another year, she would have kept pushing: walking; getting up and down until she convinced the

calf to slide into the world. In this season, all she could manage was to push the muzzle and one front foot out.

He'd found her sitting in the paddock, the hair on her shoulder and hip bone rubbed off from thrashing around, trying to give birth in between attempting to get up. They'd pulled the calf in the paddock, but it had taken five days for the cow to be able to push herself up onto her feet on her own. For the five days they had lifted her up with the tractor.

They'd helped cows plenty of times before. Not always with this amount of success. Some cows had a fatalistic tipping point: after being down for a couple of days, they gave up. One day of 'give up' took away their options: they didn't eat enough, and then they couldn't eat enough. They became too weak to stand, and then too weak to sit up. Dimple didn't let them get to that last stage. And he had to stop himself from hating them for their obstinacy. As if he expected them to acknowledge his labours and to try harder.

Wally Oliver was now saying farmers were 'business people making business decisions'. The pictures in the media of people in desperate straits, shooting their beloved animals, were not a fair representation of the industry. The insinuation, barely disguised, was that the struggling farmers were losers and should be treated as such.

'Losers by definition,' Dimple informed the calf. 'They've lost fucken everything.'

But Wally Oliver was right. Farming was a business: a cutthroat business masquerading as a community project.

3027 and her calf would be sold when they were well enough. That was a business decision. Like selling all the others

had been. It meant he and Ruthie had money in the bank, which stopped the bank manager's monthly email asking when the interest and the agreed amount of the principal would be paid. But it wasn't real money (except to the bank). It wasn't money he and Ruthie could spend, because if they did they would never be able to buy cows back. Which meant they would never have enough income, which meant they would cease to exist. Who would employ a bloke in his fifties who had worked for himself all his life? He didn't fancy working for another farmer, but that was probably what he'd end up doing. He kept his grip on the cow, not yet confident that she was ready to stand on her own.

Ruthie arrived with a bucket of water. 3027 pushed her muzzle into it and slurped like the pet she was not. 3027 had the kind of soft nature you wanted to build a herd around. That was not going to happen. Not here anyway.

The cow had accepted their offerings of water, hay, and cottonseed as if she understood they were trying to help her. Often as not, cows didn't. They took feed and water but begrudgingly, certain the humans could not be completely trusted. They weren't wrong. But death awaited every living thing. There was no way around that.

'Don't you get sick of being a good woman?' he said, watching Ruthie turn and head back to the tap for more water. The cow should have been able to get to the trough on her own, but Ruthie wasn't taking any chances. Dimple saw his wife smile in that tight way that meant restricted pleasure.

She looked back at him. 'Is that one of your trick questions?'

'No.' He let go of the tail. 'Don't you ever think, *Stuff it,*

I'm staying in bed today? I'm going to drink tea and flip through magazines? Eat a box of chocolates? Waste the day messaging the boys, my friends, my sister?'

She shook her head at him and bent down to turn the tap on. Posing difficult questions and phrasing them as a joke was a game of Dimple's that she didn't always find amusing.

'Or maybe take up with Fergus Bankbalance and spend the rest of your days doing whatever you wanted to do: travelling, redesigning his garden, holding soirees. We only get one go-around, after all.'

'Go away.' She took the bucket and offered it to the cow again. The calf took a break, and 3027 drank again, making sure they would continue to be amazed how much one cow could drink. Finished, the cow swayed and stepped forward, her legs holding, but only just.

Dimple reached down, picked up a length of baling twine, and wrapped it in on itself. He walked with Ruthie towards the ute.

'I mean, sure, you'd have to put up with him, but all your money troubles would be solved. There'd be holidays, nice clothes, and a big house. You might even help the kids out with a bit of cash. And old age wouldn't be a problem. Retirement would be a breeze …'

He saw the bucket swaying in her slim brown fingers. Ruthie relented: 'Yeah, he does have his charm.' She might as well play along. It was a game too dangerous to be taken seriously.

Dimple laughed quietly, and so did she. Fergus Banner was a friend, of sorts. One of the few divorced men in the district.

The departure of his wife, Helen, for the city, hadn't appeared to put a dent in his confidence, his wealth, or his lifestyle. Hence Dimple's privately held nickname of 'Bankbalance'. At local parties, with the help of alcohol, Fergus always paid special attention to Ruthie. He never overstepped the mark, but Dimple had a sense he was ready to, the minute the signals were right. Dimple didn't know what he could do about it. If Ruthie took up with someone like Fergus, it would have been a decision long in the making. It would be too late to fight for her.

As they drove down the paddock to check tanks and troughs before he took her back to the house, he didn't look at her because he knew she would ask: 'What?' But he thought how she must have at least fantasised about running away with Fergus or someone like him. The kids were grown up. She'd given their marriage a fair crack. Why keep bashing away at it? If you are capable of acknowledging that you only live once, then you have to at least consider an easier option. Don't you?

'I've never considered jumping ship. Even when you've been at your most painful.'

'I didn't say a word.'

'Yeah, but I know you. I know what you're thinking.'

A pause. Just the low rumble of the ute, the radio turned off.

'I have imagined living on my own. Taking a house somewhere. Getting a job a couple of days a week. Having a little garden, coffee dates, and walking groups. Maybe going to the theatre or an art gallery in the middle of the day. Spending time with the kids. Suiting myself, basically.'

'Sounds nice. You want to check that tank for me?'

Ruthie got out and climbed up the small ladder while he sat in the ute with the motor running. The float gauge had been stuck on empty for years. She came straight back, got in, and said: 'It's full.'

'Great.' At least they still had water. 'So why didn't you move to your little house?'

'I'm still working on it.'

'The old animal magnetism, eh? You can't drag yourself away from me.'

She shook her head again. There was only so much of his nonsense she could put up with.

He didn't need to look across at her to know she was as beautiful as she had ever been. A ludicrous assertion, but he knew it was true. There were wrinkles and the undeniable wear of gravity, but still. When he married her, she was beautiful for a 22-year-old. But that kind of beauty didn't relate to what she was now. Even beauty had context.

'I'm not going to have sex tonight.'

'What?'

'I'm too tired. I'm exhausted. I just want to sleep.'

She had been black-haired and brown-skinned, and she was still that. When they started going out, he couldn't believe his luck. When she agreed to marry him, he was certain someone would come along and point out: 'This is absurd. You cannot marry this bloke. He's nowhere near your standard.' And they would have been right. He knew his mates felt the same way about their wives. Or at least they used to.

'Fair enough.'

'Oh, come on. You had that look. I know that look. You were probably thinking about an old girlfriend, were you? Ginny — what was her name? Is that why you were asking me about changing midstream?'

'No. Don't be ridiculous.'

'You were thinking about doing it with someone else. That's why the jokes about Fergus. You're a sicko. Like all men.'

'I was actually thinking about how beautiful you are.'

She smiled thinly and looked out the window. 'I told you. I'm just too tired.'

The truth was, so was he. He couldn't wait for that time of day when he could go to bed and forget about everything for a while. Sometimes it made him want to go to bed at eight o'clock.

'Did you hear that guy on the radio? Talking about drought being a good way to get rid of failing farmers?'

'Yes.'

'People are killing themselves. Men mostly. Men who are only too aware they are failing. When did this happen? When did farmers decide to turn against each other?'

'He's probably right, though.'

'So what? He would have been right in the last big drought, and the flood before that, and the cyclone before that. No one said it then. No one thought it necessary to rub it in. It's awful.' She was suddenly fully steamed. 'I mean, what does he get out of it? Are we supposed to be impressed with how terrific he is? Are we supposed to be thankful that he has enhanced the image of farming by being a dickhead?'

'Like Dad used to say: "If you can't stand the heat, get out

of the kitchen" is usually said by someone standing next to the fridge. With the freezer door open.'

It cracked her open and she laughed, tossing her head back, arching her throat. It was something he loved to see. 'I don't remember your dad saying that.'

'No. I made it up. It's true, though. The guy talking was young Wally Oliver. His family operation is large enough to ride out three droughts, so he feels safe enough to speak up. Irrigation people.'

'Well, I think it's really shitty.'

They stopped at a gate, and she got out to open it. The paddock was dry, flat, and featureless. Only the clump of trees in the corner broke the eyeline. He drove through, and she shut the gate.

'We ought to go and see him,' he said as she clambered back in.

'What?'

'Let's go and see Wally Oliver and tell him he's a dickhead — to his face.'

The idea gave her sudden pleasure. 'That would be fun.'

'I'm serious.'

'No you're not, and neither am I. What would he care what people like us said anyway?'

'Better than attacking him on social media or something.'

'It would reach more people.' She stopped herself, a deliberate action he knew well. 'I don't want to do any of this. He's entitled to his opinion. I just wish he didn't feel the need to express it on the radio. It'll hurt a lot of people. Good people.'

They drove over the ramp to the house. The garden was green in places where she watered it. A luxury they were almost ashamed of. Almost.

He dropped her at the back door, knowing she would not sit still for a moment. She would make dinner, check the accounts, garden, and clean the house, all in the time it took him to bring a load of hay up from the bottom shed. He was sure some farm women spent their spare time watching movies, daydreaming, and reading romances, but not Ruthie — or Ruthie's friends, for that matter. The only time she was not doing something useful was when she was asleep. And she didn't sleep much. There was always something to keep her awake. Not least the accounts.

He drove to the hayshed, parked the ute, and fired up the little lorry that waited in the awning of the shed and drove it round to the front of the hayshed. Then he started the tractor that was kept in the shed and loaded the lorry with six big bales for the coming days. When they were stacked neatly, he put the tractor back in its dusty place and drove the loaded lorry to the cattle yards. He parked it in a holding yard where the cows couldn't get to it, and then walked the kilometre and a half back to the hayshed and his ute.

The dogs, Ringer and One-eye, came with him, hoping he would provide more action than the trip back and forth from the hayshed. But they respected routine and were glad to be in his company, no matter how uneventful.

In the east, two ravens that everyone called crows circled and landed heavily, guided by their special magic: they knew within minutes when an animal was dead. They knew when

ewes were lambing. They knew when the chooks had laid their eggs. This time, they didn't seem to have anything on the ground. Somewhere, something was dead.

He didn't bother to count how many bales were still in the shed. He knew the number, and it was small. Another load was coming. It was supposed to be here, but trucks were in demand, and as Liam, the owner of the trucks Dimple used, had told him, he had to wait like everyone else. He had known Liam would say that, and he also knew hay was scarce, so he had put in his order some time ago. Liam would be only profiteering a little bit, much less than other trucking companies. The hay guy would be profiteering a lot, but a bit less than the other guys, so it was a matter of accepting your chosen evils. In the meantime, the media were reporting that some of the drought charities receiving the goodwill of city people might not be as pure of heart as everyone expected. People loved to romanticise about communities pulling together when a crisis hit. 'Not everyone caves in to altruism,' he said to no one.

Dimple was calm. He had always assumed the worst outcome was the most likely one, so he was at least a little prepared for this long dry spell. But this approach meant that, over time, he had not made as much money as he could have. He had never held onto his grain in the hope of receiving a forecast high price; he didn't put in the huge legume crop that everyone else did, and made a fortune on, because he never believed the price would hold or that there would be enough rain. And so on. Now, after a lifetime, he had finally been right. He'd sold a good proportion of his cows when prices were high, back when everyone thought they were just having

a dry season. 'What if it rains this month?' they'd asked him. 'You'll have done your money, and you won't be able to afford to buy back in.' It hadn't rained in that month or the months since.

'Bravo,' he said softly. His long-delayed brilliance wasn't helping much. He and Ruthie still had to live on something and pay the overheads, as well as find the money to buy the hay for the few remaining cows. Cows that would not remain for much longer. But they would have enough money to sow a crop if it rained enough. They were still in the best financial shape they could be under the circumstances. Ridiculous, unprecedented, climate-fucked-up circumstances.

The weather forecast on his phone offered false hope. He checked it so often he could almost predict when they would downgrade a 'significant weather event' to 'scattered showers'. They usually weren't scattered in his direction.

Now he drove towards the house, looking up to the slight rise on his right broken up by the fingers of a soon-to-set sun. He saw a dark shape on the crest of the rise above the peak of a contour bank. Dimple had looked at this country every day for so many years that a slight change in the lines of the landscape stood out like a statement. In this case, the statement was most likely a cow on her side, no doubt in distress. Cattle did not lie down on their side for long periods. A snooze maybe, an afternoon nap, a camp before coming rain, but never more than that if they were healthy. He swung the ute around and headed towards the dark object.

He stopped close and got out. There was no reaction from the cow. She was on her side, her eye already bloody and pecked

by crows, her stomach not yet distended. If she was dead, it hadn't been for long. For one moment his chest lifted, and a sob shook it. He pushed it back down. Was the sob for her or himself? Neither was a good response. How had he missed seeing her? He scanned this country every day. There was no long grass to hide her — nothing to conceal her in fact, except a few rocks. Against reason, he knelt to put his hands under her head and push his knee behind her neck, so the cow could push against him and right herself. But there was no point. She was not breathing, not seeing, and it was stupid to keep pretending that she was. He stood back and brushed down his hands. There was little sign of struggle. Perhaps she'd had some sort of heart failure, and simply lain down and died. The words in his head made it sound like some sort of gift.

It was spring, so only a few flies had gathered, with their faultless timing. He took a moment to stand and take in the awfulness of death: the brutal, fleshy fact of it. He had not looked into his father's coffin, because he knew what there was to see.

It was only when he reached into the cab to retrieve a rope to tow the carcass away that he thought of the money her loss represented: over $2,000 at the top of the market; $1,000 now if she had been in reasonable nick, less if she hadn't; unsaleable if she had been too skinny. But the money was abstract, as it always was. It only meant something when you turned it into something else. There was nothing abstract about the animal on its side in front of him starting to leak pink, mucousy fluids.

And, of course, he knew her. There were too few cows left for him not to know her: an Angus cross with a fine coat and a

neat udder, who always produced one of the better calves. She was a good servant: never the rogue; never the fence jumper; never one to kick you or rush you in the yards.

He understood as he attached the rope to her leg that only part of his grief was for himself; the rest of it was for his sense of her years of service and the fact that he had not been able to treat her better, not seen her when she first went down; not noticed that she might have been susceptible to whatever it was that killed her. He dragged the body behind the ute to the gully and the small pile of other bodies — sheep he'd killed for meat and a fox that prowled the chookyard — ashamed of the indignity he was imposing on his cow. He could not help but remember photos and movies of Belsen and Auschwitz when he pulled her onto the pile. But he knew from experience that it was important to shake off morose thoughts, because they could take you like addiction did. It was just a cow; this was a drought; it happened. Enough.

He drove back to the house thinking of the jobs he should have been doing, but refusing to do them. Ruthie would be distressed by the loss of a cow, and critical of him for not having found her earlier.