



HOME ALONE MILKING

For reasons not exactly clear to me, I was elected to stay home and milk when my family took off for the lake and Susan's family reunion. *Someone* began a few weeks earlier telling me how tired I was and how I needed a rest and just to spend some time by myself, and wouldn't it be a good idea to do that when everybody else went to Horseshoe Lake?

The hints were not lost on me, I just never realized the full horror they implied. We have two milch cows, Ginny and Molly, and a few weeks ago we had their calves butchered. That means that there is no longer a calf to milk the cow, so a human has to be present twice a day, without fail, or the cow will explode.

Now why anybody would elect me Sole Milker is beyond my ken or imagination. I am no milker. I can barely, just barely, empty out a thin cow in about twice the time it takes a competent milker. And here my wife was threatening to leave me to milk by myself (plus feed pigs and chickens and put out fires) from Thursday afternoon through Saturday afternoon.

I panicked. I went to see Randall, my bee buddy and man of all talents. Would he help me milk if I got in trouble?

"Sure, I milked four cows every morning before school while I was growing up," he said. "Look at that forearm." He squeezed his hand and a lump the size of an emu egg stood out on his forearm.

My first afternoon alone Randall showed up after I had nearly squeezed the teats off the first cow. I thought—I hoped—I was about finished. Very



little milk was coming out. Randall grabbed the teat, and a Niagara of milk cascaded into the bucket. I wasn't finished yet.

Milking is easy, really. Just imagine trying to fill a fifty-five-gallon drum an eyedropper-full at a time.

First you open up the little Tupperware container with bleach water. Then you take a clean cloth, dip it in the bleach water, and wipe off the cow's udder, ignoring the green stuff that comes off on the rag. You clean it again, with a fresh rag, then you wipe it dry.

You are seated comfortably next to the cow, knees around your ears, spine curled up like an o-ring, and lean over to grab the teats. You push your forehead into the cow's side. Humans run a temp of 98.6 degrees, cows 125 degrees. In the winter time, they actually steam. The sweat breaks out all over your body, and you haven't milked the first drop yet.

Yawning in front of you, under the udder, is a stainless steel bucket. You can't see the bottom of it, but you know it must hold fifty-five gallons. The people who told you it is only a three gallon container are mad, raving lunatics. You grab the teat, ringing it with your thumb and forefinger high up. That closes it off at the end nearest the udder to lock the milk in the teat, then your fingers squeeze on the teat to force the milk out and into the bottomless bucket.

Ssssst! A tiny stream rings into the bucket, almost enough to wet a space the size of a dime. (This is the way it looks when I do it. When Randall, an Olympic milker, does it, it looks like somebody opened up a fire hose.)

What you want to do is establish a rhythm, two hands, two teats at a time. Maybe you squeeze both teats at once, or first one and then the other, but either way the rhythm's the same. *Ssssst! Ssst! Ssssst! Ssst!* Hey, I've got it! It's working. Then I think again about how I'm supposed to do it, squeeze, and nothing comes out. Beneath my fingers I can feel the milk squeezing back up into the udder. Or I hold the teat the wrong way and the milk all comes out into my palm. Or on my boots. Or my pants. How in the world can you miss a 55 gallon bucket? I do. Regularly. Okay, now, I've got my rhythm back, *Ssst! Ssst!* Don't think about it, don't think



about it! And occasionally I'll hit a good one, right into the milk, *plooooop!* with a full satisfying sound.

Ssst, ssst, ssst, the flies buzz, the sweat pours down my neck and face—watch it, don't sweat into the milk! My left foot begins to ache, then goes numb. That's better. *Ssst, ssst!* Ginny steps back gently, looks around at me as if to say incredulously, "Are you *still* there? What are you *doing* back there?" She sighs, and steps forward again in the perfect position. I grab the teats again and start to spritz milk into the bucket. At some point she begins to lean into me, slowly easing more and more of her weight onto my arms and head. At last I realize that I am holding up the whole cow with my forearms and head. She has gone to sleep in my arms.

I won't say that this goes on for hours, but it's long enough for me to begin having visions of my family finding me dead in the barn, curled up on the floor in the milking stall, hands and arms frozen into the milking position, Ginny standing over me, smirking through a mouthful of hay.

They'll be sorry then.

When I get finished, I have to take some of the milk to the four Great Pyrenees puppies in the barn. (If you want them to stay with your sheep, for the first eight weeks of their life they have to sleep, eat, and breathe with the sheep.)

Next I take the milk inside to strain it. *Ahh*, but before I strain it I have to find jars, jugs, bottles, bags, something, anything to keep the milk in. My family has been gone for a week, and with them they took the yogurt-making expert and the cheese-making expert and all the milk drinkers. Meantime these cows are still putting out three to four gallons of milk a day, and I am filling up my second refrigerator with milk.

Fourth of July was the best part. Friends in Alabama invited me down for ribs, but I woke up late. By the time I finished milking, feeding pigs and chickens and setting up a beehive that had fallen over, it was 1:30 p.m. I drove down for a pleasant afternoon in Alabama, then got back home about 7:00 p.m. to milk.



I squeezed, I sweated, I worked, I did my best to strip those udders. The sun went down. The stars came out. The moon rose. The crickets sang. I was still milking. By the time I finished it was pitch dark, so dark I was worried the cows couldn't find their way back to the pasture. I grabbed the big milk bucket, picked up the little milk bucket, and realised I was out of hands. I had to pick up the little plastic container with bleach water in it. *Ahhh*—I'll stick that into the small bucket. Then I had to grab something else, so I put the bail of the big bucket into my right hand, and the bail of the little bucket, and the little bucket tilted, just a little. In the dark I heard the fatal *splurt!* of bleach water pouring into my milk.

I tell you, I wanted to cry, right then and there. But I didn't. I just gave the milk to the dogs. They sniffed it—"For heaven's sake, Cleo, it was only a couple of drops!"—and looked up at me doubtfully.

By the time I got finished, my boots smelled like milk, my pants smelled like milk, my hands smelled like milk, even my *watch* smelled like milk. When I finally got home, I realized that I was all alone, and there was nobody to fix dinner.

I was so tired, I just drank a glass of milk and went to bed.