As I stand on the wooden rail and look out over the neatly fenced-in pastures and the shaggy reddish brown beasts, I know I am seeing them as someone who will never see them again. Then my heart fills with peace, and for a moment nothing has changed. I am the same woman I was when I first stood here eight years ago.

I came here to this large midwestern land grant university from the East, to be a “vetnary,” an animal doctor. I have always wanted to be an animal doctor, influenced first I suppose, by Dr. Dolittle, and later by James Herriot. I had worked in a small animal hospital in high school, but the inside scoop was that for a woman to be accepted into veterinary school she had to have some large animal experience. Upon my arrival in the midwest, I immediately applied to what was called the Purebred Beef Teaching and Research Facility, fondly known as the Beef Barn, for a job. Why they hired me, a woman undergraduate student from the suburbs, is still a mystery.

What a large animal experience I had! For four years I worked cattle the way I thought they had in the old West. The romanticism was not lost on me at all. We actually did most of our work on foot, not on horseback, but the half ton polled Hereford and black Angus cows were intimidating whether you stood in the saddle or in the mud. With cattle there always seems to be something that needs to be done. To “work” the cattle we herded them through the pasture and into a system of wooden chutes, at the end of which was a head gate. The cow or calf with her head caught could have her ear tattooed or tagged, be dewormed, vaccinated, bled, or whatever else was necessary. Bull calves could be castrated (no anesthetic needed), and cows could be separated from their calves at weaning time. There is a strange satisfaction that comes from working cattle, sweating and freezing with such powerful animals. Maybe conquering them is a part of it. I feel I am one with the cattle as I work them.

Some old cows won’t go in the head gate. They try to back up, leaning and heaving against the cows behind them, or they stubbornly stand their ground, inches from the steel bars that would entrap them. Other student workers call them stupid. They aren’t stupid to try avoiding the head gate. Surely after all these years they know its dangers. Perhaps they are stupid to believe they could avoid doing the will of the humans prodding and pursuing them. Back then this didn’t bother me at all. Later on it would change my life.

After four years of beef cattle, I started veterinary school. There was little time to work, but I occasionally hung out with the Beef Barn people, if for no other reason than to get a break from the rigors of vet school.

FICTION
In the spring before my fourth and thankfully last year of vet school, the Beef Barn hired a new manager, Scott Sanders. I heard about him long before I met him. His dad was a big shot cattleman from out west, and Scott was recruited straight out of college by my all-knowing land grant university. I didn’t meet him that spring or summer; I was busy as a senior veterinary student, and a typical day was 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. In fact, I met him on the first day of the eight week “food” animal portion of my senior veterinary curriculum.

It was a clear, sunny day in early October. The weather was warmer than usual, and the maple leaves were turning bright red, my favorite color. Our vet school operates a “Field Service” where students and a faculty member ride out to farms and do veterinary work. We were at the Beef Barn to spend three days bleeding every animal over twenty months of age for brucellosis (a disease transmissible to humans), vaccinating every animal, steering (castrating) the undesirable bull calves, doing tuberculosis testing and anything else Scott could think of.

Scott Sanders looked like he came straight from an old Western movie. He was just under six feet tall, and had brown eyes and a brown mustache. I guess a picture—the way he walked, the way he talked, an old Western movie. He was just under six feet tall, quite messy, especially if the cows have been out on a dream come true. East would have laughed out loud; to me he was a big shot cattleman from out west, and Scott was a clear, sunny day in early October. The weather was warmer than usual, and the maple leaves were turning bright red, my favorite color. Our vet school operates a “Field Service” where students and a faculty member ride out to farms and do veterinary work. We were at the Beef Barn to spend three days bleeding every animal over twenty months of age for brucellosis (a disease transmissible to humans), vaccinating every animal, steering (castrating) the undesirable bull calves, doing tuberculosis testing and anything else Scott could think of.

Scott Sanders looked like he came straight from an old Western movie. He was just under six feet tall, and had brown eyes and a brown mustache. I guess his hair was also brown, but it was covered with a cap that said “Angus” and had a picture of a well-muscled black bull on the front. Scott had on a silver belt buckle with another bull on it, and a leather belt with “Scott” tooled in. Straight blue jeans and worn western boots completed the picture. He was more a caricature than a picture—the way he walked, the way he talked, it was western cattleman. To my midwestern classmates he must have seemed out of place. My friends back East would have laughed out loud; to me he was a dream come true.

Bleeding cattle is done from a tail vein. This can be quite messy, especially if the cows have been out on a lush grass pasture as these had been for a few days prior to our arrival. The first cow snorted into the head gate and the metal bars clanged quickly shut on her neck. She tried to pull her head out, couldn’t, tried to push through with her shoulders and couldn’t, and snorted some more. Had the cows always reacted like this, I wondered? Another vet student opened the back gate so I, no longer Beef Barn employee, but almost veterinarian, could go in the chute. First, I lift up the cow’s tail with my left arm, then I pull the cap off the needle with my teeth, and stick the needle between the vertebrae of the tail on the midline. I quickly attach the glass tube, which has a vacuum, and hopefully the blood streams out steadily and fills the tube. (Luckily cows don’t often kick like horses, or I would no longer be a healthy vet student.) When the tube is filled, it goes in a pocket of my overalls with the needle, and out comes the tuberculin syringe. All of this is done one-handed; the other hand is busy holding up the cow’s tail. Pulling the cap off the needle at this time is the dangerous part, because it is most likely to have collected some manure. I’m sure in those three days I tasted cow manure several times, but for the life of me I can’t remember what it was like.

I rush out of the chute and the back gate is closed. The cow is vaccinated with an automatic syringe; it has a trigger like a pistol. She is vaccinated for a variety of things, bacteria like Clostridium and Hemophilus, and viruses like parainfluenza, bovine diarrheal virus, and IBR. Then the side of the chute is opened, the head gate is released, and the cow is free to go.

After one day, our arms were stiff from holding up tails, and our fingers were sore from pulling the trigger on the vaccination gun. I received the “sh!t magnet” award for being the most manure-covered student after a tall Angus hit me across the face with her brown, wet tail. It was just like old times for me, in a way. Hot, dirty and tired, I headed home for the day.

In another way it wasn’t like old times. Scott had left the actual rounding up of cattle to three student workers I didn’t know. They beat the cows with boards when a stubborn one wouldn’t move down the chute to the head gate. Had I actually done that when I worked there? One worker pulled out a dull pocket knife and stabbed a slow Hereford in the rump. The workers this year were all guys. They got angry when a cow backed up in the chute, or wouldn’t exit the head gate after she was released. They called the cows wenches, whose and bitch, and meant it.

These are words used to denigrate women, and I felt uncomfortable. Had my co-workers called the cows whores four years ago in my presence? Did these guys call their girlfriends or other women they knew these names? Did they think of me as one of those cows, just something to force against her will? Accusing words, mean faces, boards and knives filled my dreams that night.

On the second day Scott came out himself to bring the cows in. He rarely seemed to lose his temper like the other workers when he moved the cattle. He worked steadily, his presence so forceful in and of itself, that I was drawn to him like a magnet. Things went smoothly that day, and by the end we were laughing together about veterinarians,
cowboys, and cattle. Scott asked me to join him for a beer later. I said I needed a shower and he agreed. I went home for the shower, then joined him for the beer.

The next day there were four bull calves to steer. They weren’t little ones. Each weighed over three hundred pounds, calves who had been expected to grow faster, but hadn’t. Caught in the head gate, the calves made no noise as we cut off the bottom third of their scrotums and pulled the testicles out. We crushed the cord with emasculators, to stop the bleeding. They bled anyway, for awhile. It must hurt, I think to myself. Why don’t they scream?

Besides bleeding and vaccinating, Scott asked us to take a look at a Hereford bull calf that had something wrong with both hind legs. Scott held the calf, who was already eight months old and about six hundred pounds, with a rope halter, while I examined the rear feet. We were always told to check the feet first, although it seemed unlikely that the calf had stepped on two foreign objects, one for each foot. Tired of cattle with only a number on an ear tag, after having gotten to know my small animal patients and their owners intimately, I asked Scott if this bull calf had a name. "Name’s Moose," Scott replied in his characteristic sparsity with words. "He was 140 pounds."

"When he was born?" I asked.

"Yep," said Scott, "and he’s been Moose ever since."

The average Hereford bull calf is usually closer to 85 pounds at birth, rarely over 100 pounds. Moose was indeed a giant among cattle, and although he was clearly weak in the rear, we could find nothing wrong with him. Scott scratched Moose’s large white jaws and Moose stuck out his tongue and licked Scott’s arm. I had seen many "show babies" in my four years at the beef barn. These were calves that were taught early to be aware of their breed. Moose was different. He enjoyed being with people, and he followed us out of the pen as we went to get the in-hospital clinician happened to be walking by.

Scott’s condition didn’t improve. Neither did it get any worse. Scott gave me a report over the weekend when we went out to the local steakhouse for dinner. "Strangest thing is the way he holds his leg out and just shakes it sometimes," Scott informed me as I was in the middle of deciding whether to have the filet mignon, or the T-bone.

"That’s weird," I said, something suddenly clicking in my brain that wasn’t my stomach crying out for food. "You mean like this?" I stood up and straightened my back leg out behind me and off to an angle and shook it like I couldn’t quite control a muscle tick.

"Yep, that’s it," said Scott. "You sure do a good lame cattle impression."

"That’s not all I’m good at," I answered him back, forgetting for the moment what I had just discovered about Moose.

During the next week the Beef Barn called us back to look at Moose again. Over the course of three weeks we tried a regimen of intravenous phenylbutazone, a pretty good painkiller that horse people tended to dispense like candy. Nothing seemed to help. Moose could get around fine, but he was not normal.

“What do you want us to do about him?” the Field Service clinician finally asked Scott.

“I want you to fix him,” Scott answered. Moose was no ordinary bull calf. Besides his uncommonly hefty birthweight, he was also very valuable, and half ownership had been sold to a cattleman sight unseen for several thousand dollars. Getting Moose sound again was important to everyone. Economics might be the outward factor behind Scott’s concern, but I got the feeling the he had a bond with this calf on another level as well. Moose’s most promising future would be as a breeding bull.

Our field diagnostics were limited, and we recommended bringing Moose into the vet clinic for x-rays and ultrasound evaluation. Moose happily followed Scott onto the livestock trailer for the three mile ride into the clinic, and he became my in-hospital patient. Every day I was responsible for his well-being, and I felt privileged. I brought him corn cob treats and brushed his shaggy red-brown coat. Mostly I just stepped in for a minute or so. "Look at that," said Dr. Sterling. My mind flashed back to dinner with Scott, and I blurted out, "He’s got spastic syndrome."

"It sure looks like spastic syndrome."

"I thought that was only found in dairy cows."

"It’s here," Dr. Sterling said, "on the cow, and in the bull."
"It is, usually. We could check on the mother and grandmother and his sire and see if they developed it as they aged, since it's hereditary," Dr. Sterling told me.

I called Scott at the Beef Barn as soon as I returned. Scott looked through his records and made a phone call to the farm where Moose's sire was. We got together over dinner. This time I was more interested in what Scott had found out than whether I wanted roast beef or hamburger.

"Moose's grandmom has it, I watched her out in the pasture this afternoon," Scott reported. "Some of the other guys have noticed it too." The phone call to the other farm had revealed that Moose's sire also had spastic syndrome. In fact it had just been noticed in the last month.

"Moose is so young," I lamented to Scott, "this is an old cow disease. His sire is almost seven years old, and his grandmom is nine. Why is an eight-month-old calf coming down with this disease?"

In fact, I read about spastic syndrome extensively the next day, and it seemed that animals could live with mild signs for years with little trouble. The disease normally affected dairy cattle over the age of three years, perhaps because they often spent a lot of time standing around in stanchions or small dry lots. I felt that Moose's prognosis might be good, and Scott agreed. Later that day I pinned down Dr. Sterling to see if Moose could be discharged and sent back to the Beef Barn.

"Bad news," Dr. Sterling told me. "The animal science professor in charge of the Beef Barn wants to refund Moose's other owner and send him to the slaughterhouse. He won't be sound enough for breeding. He needs to carry two thousand pounds on those rear legs to mount a cow and he won't be able to." I was in shock. Moose wasn't sick enough to be written off just like that.

"We'll have to call FARAD (Food Animal Residue Avoidance Data) and get the meat withdrawal time on IV bute," Dr. Sterling's voice rang in my ear. "I really feel sorry for Scott. He seems real attached to this calf."

"Cattlemen never get emotionally attached to livestock," said another student who was with us, "they are interested in what Scott had found out than whether I wanted roast beef or hamburger.

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"Cattlemen never get emotionally attached to livestock," said another student who was with us, "they are interested in what Scott found, but a 1,000 pound bovine must be a hamburger? The doors to my heart started to squeak open. The hinges were rusty—they needed help. Was there really a difference between Moose and the other cattle on the farm? My relationship with him was different, stronger, mutual, but did they deserve to die any more than Moose did?

I tried to explain to Scott what seemed so logical to me. He told me I was impractical. There wouldn't be cattle if they didn't serve some purpose, Scott told me, and the purpose of beef cattle is to be beef. Real food for real people. We breed them, we feed them, we eat them.

People don't create life, I countered, and they have no right to take it away. It's like saying you can just carve up your eight-year-old child one day because you created, fed and nurtured him. "Besides, I'm only asking you to save Moose, not the world," I pleaded. I knew Scott was being realistic, but reality can change. One calf at a time.

Scott shook his head no for the hundredth time and started talking about the weather. Midwestern winters were mild compared to the real West, he said. There the temperatures would be below zero for weeks, and the wind was endless. It seemed bleak and empty to me somehow. Maybe that was just the reflection I felt from Scott's heart.

For the next month I visited Moose religiously. It meant as much to me as it did to him. Moose's tongue came out to lick my arm when I scratched his face, the way it had Scott's only weeks before. I needed the quiet to sort out my feelings. I was attracted to Scott in a way I had never been before. We had enough in common to start a solid relationship, and our differences seemed like things to be celebrated, not keep us apart. Scott was different, in a way.

In another way he was not. I knew how the Beef Barn was managed. I had worked there for four years. I knew Scott could keep Moose around for awhile if he wanted to. The previous manager hadn't used the cutting horses; he believed in mechanical power and did all the round ups with jeeps. The horses just ate and got fat, waiting for a new manager with an old Hereford cow who had been donated after winning some Grand Championship years ago.

Every time I suggested a future for Moose, Scott changed the subject. I could feel the door to his heart slowly closing, and his mind letting go of Moose. For me, it seemed like the opposite was happening. My mind couldn't let go. Why did this bull calf have to die? Why can a 1,000 pound equine be considered a companion, but a 1,000 pound bovine must be a hamburger? The doors to my heart started to squeak open. The hinges were rusty—they needed help. Was there really a difference between Moose and the other cattle on the farm? My relationship with him was different, stronger, mutual, but did they deserve to die any more than Moose did?

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Near the end of November Scott sent Moose to the slaughterhouse, on a truck with some other culled calves. He didn’t tell me beforehand. I had no chance to say good-bye. It’s better that way, he told me. You can’t get so attached to cattle or you’ll never be a good veterinarian.

I wondered what a good veterinarian was. Was she one who cared about animals and felt a loss when they died, or one who detached herself from the emotional reaction of another soul leaving this world in order to remain professional? I felt certain that the ones who completely detached themselves ran the risk of becoming vets who didn’t care, to whom no amount of animal suffering and exploitation was unjustifiable. I couldn’t take that risk, so I would have to live with the pain and the loss.

I thought about what Moose had gone through. The loud, cold ride for hours on the back of a truck, crowded in with the other frightened calves. The terrifying sounds and smells of the slaughterhouse, confusion everywhere, inescapable fear. I would have given anything to spare him that trip. At least a painless, fear-free death, if indeed he had to die. It hurt to lose a patient, it hurt to lose a friend. Moose had been both, and it was agonizing to know he had suffered and died for what was beginning to appear to me to be simply the whim of men.

Scott asked me to join his parents for dinner that weekend. His parents were coming from out West to visit and he wanted me to meet them. We went to the brand new Rocking K Ranch, a chain from Texas that specialized in beef, any way you like it. As I sat at the table, a large bloody chunk of purebred beef muscle on my plate, I realized I could pretend no more. My dinner could have easily been my friend. I ate the salad. I made polite conversation. I ate the baked potato. I made a commitment in my heart. For me there would be no commitment in my heart. For me there would be no relationship was ending, and that it was causing him a lot of pain. Finally I tried to help him see that I was not who I had been when we first met. I told him I wasn’t going to eat dead animals or cause their suffering anymore. I explained as logically as I could that I didn’t believe that having four stomachs or a tail, or shaggy reddish brown fur automatically made a being less than one who walked on two legs, built tall edifices, and dumped toxic waste on their poorer neighbors.

Scott tried to reason with me, but his arguments were ones I had already used on myself, and they failed. “I guess that means things are over between us,” Scott finally concluded after hours of discussion. “I think so,” I answered. I wasn’t sure why, but I think I had moved beyond Scott. I knew I still cared for him and always would, but I could no longer be restrained by the realities of his life. I had to establish my own realities and work to make them seem possible to other people.

The next week was hard for me. For weeks I had squeezed Moose into my life, and since he was in the same place as Scott, had fit Scott conveniently into my life as well. Now being at the Beef Barn wasn’t the same. The December wind blew through the barns and I shivered, but not from cold. I felt like a stranger among the Beef Barn workers. I felt like a stranger to myself. I was a stranger to Scott, and he knew it.

I wanted to explain to him what I was feeling, but I knew he wouldn’t understand. I could see that our relationship was ending, and that it was causing him a lot of pain. Finally I tried to help him see that I was not who I had been when we first met. I told him I wasn’t going to eat dead animals or cause their suffering anymore. I explained as logically as I could that I didn’t believe that having four stomachs or a tail, or shaggy reddish brown fur automatically made a being less than one who walked on two legs, built tall edifices, and dumped toxic waste on their poorer neighbors.

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I step down slowly from the fence rail, hanging on the top for too long with my right hand, and go back to my car. Yesterday I graduated and today I am going back East where I came from. I am sorry for the killing I have done. I am sorry for the lambs and calves and piglets I cut with a knife to castrate, using no anesthetic. I am sorry for Moose, and for Scott, but I am not sorry for myself. The pain I felt helped me to grow, saved me. I might never live completely free from the exploitation of animals, but I know I will always try.

I know I will be a good veterinarian. A good veterinarian still has tears to shed for her patients. As I drive away, I hear the cattle mooing behind me. Feeding time. I remember it from the perspective of the worker, throwing bales of hay off the back of the pick-up truck. Now I feel it from the point of view of the cattle. I am hungry. The hay smells delicious. I crowd around with my herd mates, pushing, grabbing huge mouthfuls and chewing. Now I am truly one with the cattle, and always will be.