

"I don't think the cow will fit in there," I said.

"I don't think anyone asked you." And he shoved the cow's head down and into the car. It lifted one hoof and kicked at the back seat. It was a VW Beetle and pretty small. The cow was small, too, but not that small.

He stood up straight and stared at me. "Any more advice, missy?"

"I don't think I have any advice *at all*."

"Well, then, you know what to do."

I didn't know what he meant by that, but I assumed he didn't want me around. I had come by to say hi, check out the new neighbours, but hadn't expected this: a scrawny old hippy, faded corduroys falling down his hips, Adidas T-shirt so thin I could see his backbone poking through it. Yellow-grey beard, hair in braids like Willie Nelson, but no hair on top. Sweating and straining as he tried to coax, bully, tease, trick, encourage and flat-out yank and push a cow into the back seat of his rusted-out Bug. The cow was having none of it. I couldn't imagine a cow on earth that would.

I didn't know how to ask. And then I realized I didn't even know what I wanted to know.

"Did you need some sort of ... truck ... or ... something ... for the cow?"

"Huh?" He turned again and looked at me like I had snuck up on him. "Are you *simple*, kid?"

"I don't know."

I really didn't.

"Cow's sick. Needs a vet."

"Did you call the vet? Doctor Mills, I mean?"

"Call him? On what?"

"No phone?"

"Now you're getting it."

"You could use mine. My father's, I mean. Or I could call for you."

The cow lifted its tail and sprayed the ground with a hot gush of urine, hitting the old guy's boots more than anything. He didn't move. He kept on looking at me – looking like he was trying to make a decision.

*Maybe he's the one who's simple*, I thought. "What's wrong with your cow?"

"If I knew, I wouldn't need the vet."

"But what makes you think it's sick?"

"Dunno." He swatted the cow's behind, giving up the struggle. It trundled off toward the house and walked through the gate. "Just a feeling I have, you know?"

I didn't know. I wasn't a farmer and neither was my father, but I knew enough about the whole process to suspect Frank wasn't much of one either. Everyone else around here was, though, and I'd never known any of them to put livestock in a car or take a cow to the vet. I'd never seen a hippy, not for real, and wondered if they were just different.

"What name should I say, then?"

"Frank. Just tell the doctor it's Frank and Anna. I don't even know the address."

"There are no addresses out here. I'll tell him the old Charpentier place. He used to come out here for their horses." *And they didn't stick the horses in cars, either*, I thought.

Back home, my father didn't believe me when I told him about Frank and the cow. My father isn't always the nicest guy. Within a week, the story of "the hippy and the cow" had made it all over the county, but somehow *I* ended up as the butt of the

joke. It was just my wild imagination, people said, and it was a shame my father had let me run so wild for so long. I even heard one woman whisper—so loud she must've known I could hear—that it was too late for me, that I was ruined.

“Ruined and not even a teenager,” she had said. “Imagine what'll happen to her when she turns thirteen.” Until then, it hadn't occurred to me that anything would happen when I turned thirteen. I wondered how sudden it would be. I hoped it would be better than being twelve and being teased and whispered about.

After a few weeks, things settled down. No one talked about Frank and the cow and how I had made it all up. Spring was feeling more like summer and the church supper season was gearing up. Fields had been planted and city people were filling up the roads, looking for cheap farms to buy and turn into cottages. I only had a few more weeks of school.

I went by Frank's place again. Actually, I was cutting through his fields, and felt kind of rude walking through without saying hi, even though I didn't think he wanted much to do with me. *Maybe Anna's nicer*, I thought, and let myself fantasize about summer days in a hammock, shelling peas with Anna while she listened to my stories and poured me lemonade. I had always been short on friends.

The Bug was there, behind the barn and half covered with a tarp. It seemed unnecessary to me. I'd heard of city people sometimes covering their cars, their BMWs and Subarus, but I'd never understood why. In any case, Frank's Bug was no Subaru. And it was only half covered, sloppily and quick.

I scanned the fields. No cow. I checked inside the barn. It was a mess. The Charpentiers hadn't done any real farming in years, and the barn hadn't been cleaned up or organized in any real way since Frank and Anna arrived. *Maybe they didn't need it*, I thought.

The house looked all shut up, like no one was living there. Frank had struck me as fairly strange, so maybe this was just the way they lived.

I shuffled across the stony yard between the house and the barn. The gate was hanging open and I shut it behind me. The grass in the lawn was tufty, like it gets in the spring when it's new and thick, growing fast in clumps. We'd had a lot of rain lately. Good for the crops, bad for a lawn you have to keep short with a push mower. The dandelions, while pretty from a distance, looked gnarled and coarse from up close. They were thick and rough to walk through. They caught and snagged on my rubber boots. White gunk oozed out of their stems. The yellow petals smushed and smeared under my soles. *Let 'em*, I thought.

Around the house, all the blinds and curtains were drawn. The kitchen door was locked. So were the mudroom and the front room doors. I checked the windows; also locked. *Funny*, I thought. No one locks much of anything around here. There was an old cellar door, the kind that lies almost flat on the ground, half hidden by rich-smelling, blooming lilacs. I tried the door and it opened. I'll bet old Frank never knew it was there.

The cellar smelled of soil. Empty mason jars filled the shelves, laced with cobwebs, powdered with a wet smear of dust. I walked forward, hoping I'd make it to the stairway leading to the house before I could come upon something, anything else. I found the stairs and they creaked, but held. The door to the kitchen was unlocked.

The house looked and felt as if no one was living there. Not like people are simply out running errands, off to work or school. That kind of still is a dead still, heavy, unmoving. Holding its breath. This house wasn't holding its breath; it had let it out,

relaxed and stretched, at ease. No need for respectful silence. No need to move slowly as though walking among the dead. The house was alive. I stomped mud and dust and gravel and grass over the floorboards and up the stairs, into the bedrooms. Dressers, chairs, tables, beds, all covered with old sheets. I could smell the bars of soap that were, no doubt, tucked inside the beds, to keep them fresh and to keep the mice out.

Downstairs, all the furniture was likewise covered. I noticed all the lamps and radios and other electrical appliances had been unplugged. In the mudroom, the fuse box had been pulled out and set on the floor. I checked the taps: open and drained.

*Well, that's funny*, I thought. But really thought very little of it. Frank had been a poor farmer and had wisely given up. Anna couldn't have been much of one either. Why else would she let Frank try to shove that poor cow into the Bug?

Something about the Bug bothered me. *Perhaps it's broken down and worth less than the effort of fixing it*. I went back out to it, the sun falling hard in the sky behind me, the cold wet of the spring night about to fall hard, too. I pulled the tarp off and tried the handle. Locked. The passenger side was locked, too. I don't know why, but I scuffled around in the dirt and gravel with my boots and managed to hit upon the keys. It didn't surprise me much, although I guess it should have. I got in the car and started her up. A twelve-year-old shouldn't know how to drive, but this one did. I'd been practicing on neighbours' tractors for years and a car is much simpler to operate.

She ran pretty good. I eased her into gear and took her around the yard, then up and down the laneway a few times. It didn't make any sense. I parked it again behind the barn, covering it up with the tarp, properly. *Maybe they're on a long trip*, I thought. *Ordered an airport limo*. Frank didn't look like the limo type, but since I'd never been in one, I guess I didn't know what the limo type was.

I started home, across the fields like I usually did, the dark coming on quick. I didn't mind the dark, but I didn't like stumbling around in it when I couldn't see. There wasn't going to be any moon tonight, and the fields were full of stones and holes and cow patties the size of car tires.

I was just cresting the first hill when I saw it: a mound of earth piled fresh and high, not tilled and planted like the rest. It stood out, even in the near dark. I gave it a good kick, wondering what could have made it, what it could be.

That's when a hand fell out. It was Frank's. I could tell because I kicked at the rest of the pile until Frank's head and shoulders were showing. I kicked until the back of a woman's head appeared, her hair long and curly and full of soil.

They smelled. Not awful, but pretty bad. You smell a lot of things in the country and you get used to most of them. I can't say I'd ever smelled this before, but it wasn't much worse than the piggery down the road or the abattoir. Or the dump, come to think of it, with its rats and seagulls and bears. And kids tended to enjoy the dump, as bad as it was. So this wasn't such a bad smell. I thought I should cover them back up, but it was just about pitch by then and I didn't have a shovel. The best thing for them, I thought, was to let the coyotes and foxes get to them, speed things along. They were dead, sad as that was, but nothing could be done for them now.

My father was out when I got home. Not far, I was sure. Most likely at one of the neighbour's, but I was tired and decided to go to bed. I left him a note on the kitchen counter about Frank and Anna.

I thought I might dream about them. In fact, I hoped I would. I looked forward to dreams of haunted farmhouses, of axe murderers stalking their prey, marshes full to

the brim with rotting bodies, of hippies making tie-dyed outfits in vats of blood, making homemade dandelion wine laced with poison. Whatever had happened to Frank and Anna, I thought, it would never turn out to be as interesting as a really good dream.

The next morning was Sunday. My father was already out when I went down for breakfast. The note was gone from the table. I poked around the house for a while, drifted on the old tire swing, read an old book, watched some bad TV, and was finally about to face my homework when my father came home.

"Did you see the note?" I asked.

"I've been thinking about your summer," he said.

"What about it?"

"You haven't got any friends around here, do you?"

"I suppose not."

"Think you're old enough for camp?"

"Sleep-away camp? Yeah, I suppose."

"How about two months of it?"

He gave me some brochures and some forms and there didn't seem to be anything to do but fill them out.

At supper I handed them over. He said he'd mail them in the morning. "One more thing," he said. "No more cutting across the fields. Annoys the farmers, okay?"

"Okay. Makes sense."

The day before I was off for camp, I went against my father and cut through the fields to Frank and Anna's one more time. I wanted to see if the Bug would still run, see if the farm was still as I had left it. No one had been talking about Frank and Anna, not even a whisper or a look when I went to the store for an ice cream. The kids at school said nothing to me. I had been counting on the bodies to give me some kind of boost in popularity. Nothing. It was weird, but then most people were, and they don't always react the way you think they will.

I cut across the field to where I saw them, but there was nothing left. The ground was a bit higher and still bare, but then lots of patches were. It was just the way the fields grew sometimes. I kicked around a bit, looking for a patch of clothing or a ring or something, but it was all gone.

I forgot about the house and the Bug and turned to go home, to do laundry, to pack, and to go off to summer camp.