

Cattle love

Saran Hardman

- She's there again.
- Who?
- That woman who sits in the cow stall. For the milking show. Look out the window.

There she was, sitting on the concrete slab in the middle of the lumpy green paddock. Wide blue skies and the wrinkled sea, beyond. The brown cow and the creamy yellow cow and the big black and white cow, her favorite, cropping and flopping big, steamy cowpats.

She wore a wrap in turquoise and coral, bright splashes of chemical color against the spring-lush green and the plastic-toy perfection of the cows and the trees and the crisp bright air. Those colours were a match for something else: what? Seen before, where?

Scotty plunked down the lamingtons on the table; pink and brown with white coconut fur. His turn to get the afternoon tea treat.

- You'd think it'd be a bit chilly, sitting out there.
- D'you talk to her?
- Dunno if she understands English. Just smiles and nods, y'know.

Yes, she knew. The first time the woman came it was with a whole bunch of others on a class trip. All sorts, Chinese, African, whatever, with a couple of teachers waving worksheets. The other students clustered and exclaimed and wrote words down on their papers. They patted the sheep and made disgusted faces at the kune kune pigs.

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This woman separated from the others and found her way into the open-fronted milking shed. Her face was deep-lined, surely old as the hills under the cowl of fabric wrapped across her forehead, but she skipped nimbly up the high steps where the primary school kids sat, shifting from one numb bum-cheek to the other on the cold concrete. She leaned on the barrier and reached out a claw-hand to the black-and-white flank that waited for the show, scraping hooves on the new-cleaned concrete.

Hand-milking took time and kids watching would get restless before the first few spurts had covered the shiny base of the bucket and started to creep more than an inch or two up the sides. The woman was motionless except for the hands that lifted and stroked, finger and thumb together, in sympathy with the demonstration.

You had to let her have a go, really. Get her to give her hands a scrub in the basin with the pink soap and then let her through the barrier. She sank down on the stool and got going without paying any attention to what you told her, but she knew what she was doing, all right. Leaning her bright-clad head on Beauty's hip and stripping away at the udder, bringing down the milk faster and better than you could do it yourself.

Scotty took the bucket and said,

- You can't drink it. Has to be sterilized. We give it to the pigs, mostly.

She was disgusted by that. Good, creamy milk going to the unclean pigs. He didn't tell her about the afternoon tea milk and the odd cup of Milo around here. And the paneer cheese experiment; got a bit stinky, that one.

But she kept on coming back, keeping close to the cows. Especially Beauty.

The public aren't really supposed to get into the paddock. They're supposed to stay on the paths. Health and Safety regulations.

- Hello. You like that one, eh.

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Her smile is broad, gap-toothed, crinkly eyes. That colour of her robe, the blue and pinky-red: Cathay Pacific uniforms, perfect-lipped hostesses smiling from behind a trolley parked in the aisle. Flying sky-high above the oceans to traverse half a world or more.

- In my country, we have many, many cow. Here..no cow. Yes, I like.

In her sad-smiling face; the haze of golden dust as the stately, long-horned herd tramples down the sandy street between the thorn-fenced yards. A barefoot boy in a filthy knee-length shirt brandishes a stick behind their knobby rumps but the cattle sway on, ignoring him. They know by heart the route of their homecoming.

Scraps of hide become leather in the blistering sun, stretched over a scaffold of whitening bones. Thirst, hunger, war, greed, the inhumanity of man to man and animal.

When the people must leave, what becomes of their livestock?

- Sorry, it's closing time now. You come back tomorrow, eh?
- Maybe. Cows very good, here.

She gathers her drapery around her and walks away across the ruts and ridges of the grassland. Beauty lifts her cud-chewing head and watches. No telling what thoughts are behind a cow's expression, really. Maybe, not much.

It's getting dark now, still early spring and early darkness. A stripe of orange across the navy-blue sky and the flicker, glitter, sparkle of city lights strung out across the far side of the harbor like Diwali lights sparkling from stall to stall.

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