

Patting a Calf

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I slipped out the back door while Mum was busy making dinner. My baby brother was asleep, and I was tired of playing inside. I wandered about and watched the animals around me. The sheep dogs were home for the day and back on their chains, but they'd just been fed. Never pat a dog while it's eating. Sheep dogs aren't all that interested in children anyway – unless they've been told to round you up.

The sheep were quietly grazing in their paddocks. Lambs are cute but there weren't any lambs, and sheep just ran away from you. There were plenty of birds, but they weren't doing anything interesting like pecking at bugs or digging for worms, they were flitting to their home trees for the night.

'Moo.'

'Meh.'

I turned at the unfamiliar sounds. Cows from the back blocks had been put in a close paddock to calve. It was just down the road. Off I trotted on my little four-year-old legs. The road we lived on was more like a driveway that we used to get to bigger roads to go to town. I didn't see any cars; I didn't see any people.

The cows were a novelty. We didn't have many cows, mostly sheep. We often had orphaned lambs to feed during lambing season. They drank from a bottle. Often, I patted them, and sometimes they even lay in my lap. Only occasionally we had a calf or two. They drank from a bucket of milk, and they were bigger than me. Mum or Dad would pick me up so I could pat them.

The small herd of cows was spread out, mostly quiet and grazing, some with calves at their side, and there, not too far from the fence, was a newborn calf, curled up asleep. The sweet thing. I wasn't supposed to go through the fence, but the large farm gate had a depression in the dirt near the post. The perfect spot for a little girl to crawl through. My bright red, woollen jumper got caught up, but I pulled it through and trotted off to pat the calf.

The precious thing was still sleeping, and it wouldn't mind if I patted it, if I was very gentle. Apparently, there was a mother cow standing guard. I was oblivious. A mother cow from the back of the farm, with a newborn calf. She had a

fear of humans with their noisy utes and yapping dogs. She also had horns and stout hooves.

What she thought of a tiny human antagonising her eyesight with a red jumper, I have no idea. I wasn't watching her. She lowered her horns and snorted threats. When I ignored her, she began pawing the ground ready to run me off. I nearly reached her calf...

In swooped Dad. I heard his running steps and knew I was in trouble, but before I could beg for 'just one pat,' he'd lifted me with one arm. Raising his other hand toward the cow, he made quieting motions as we walked backwards. The little calf raised its head. 'Meh?' The cow bent her head to her calf and started licking.

Dad turned quickly and took us safely through the gate. From a little distance, we turned to watch the calf and its mother. I remember a sound telling off.

This is a story, often told at social gatherings, distilled to me as a lesson of worried mothers and protective fathers, the earliest of many lessons of farm wisdom. The dinner gatherings of my childhood were in homes or the community hall, filled with buffets of homemade deliciousness, carefully guarded so that children were supervised. They were also filled with more aunties and uncles than I could count, none of them related.

There was all sorts of storytelling, from cautionary tales to 'Just yarning ya.' Time sifted true from false. I'm sure I don't really remember much about the calf; I was only four years old. But the more the story has been told, the more images and snatches of conversation have come to me.

I remember Dad's quick, angry sounding words as he carried me back to the house.

'That cow was very cross with you.' My dad had never raised his voice to me. I was mystified. His words made me teary.

'Did you see her shake her horns? Then she dug up the ground? She was worried you would hurt her baby.' Dad's tone made me afraid and I began to cry.

'That cow didn't know why you were coming close, and it's her job to protect her calf and make sure no-one hurts it.'

'I just wanted to pat the calf,' I wailed.

'But a cow doesn't know that. She's the only one who's allowed to touch her calf until it's bigger and able to look after itself. These aren't tame cows. They're half wild, they don't see people much.'

I remember many other conversations about animals. I sometimes followed Dad around the farm and, later, the dairy that he managed. As we walked, he talked, impressing upon me that animals required understanding. In my memory he loved telling me what animals were thinking. Birds collecting twigs for their nest were preparing to raise chicks. Sheep dogs watching their trainer for a command had learned they loved to work together. Every animal parent protected their young. Why? That's the way God made them.

I remember Mum waiting anxiously in the yard as I returned from my adventure. She took me in her arms.

'Thank God for your red jumper,' she said, 'otherwise we would never have seen you down the road. Don't you ever go off on your own again! Let's get you in the bath.'

A simple, hand-knitted, red jumper was my saviour. Mum knitted and handed them down to each child over the years, as a colour easily seen against the green of paddocks and bush.

Such a simple precaution passed on by the wise aunties in Mum's circle. They were the close neighbours who gathered in the mornings after jobs were done, to gossip and tell stories while doing their sewing and crafts. Young children played at their feet; older children were ordered to 'go play outside.' So the older and the younger cared for each other. Important lessons that reflect the heart of God for us. He created us in his image with an instinct to care and nurture.

Even so, the four-year-old child that is still in me is deeply disappointed she was not allowed to pat a newborn calf.