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The Adventures of Luna the Cow

By Jeff Garrity

The Huber brothers had followed their missing cow's trail up the mountain for nearly two hours when Franz, the oldest brother, decided it was time to rest. Franz brushed fresh snow from a fallen pine so he and his younger brother, Hans, could sit down. Hans pulled two pears from a deep pocket in his heavy wool coat and offered one to Franz. The two old farmers munched their pears and looked down onto the valley their family had farmed for two centuries, but they didn't notice the beauty of the glistening snow, or the silver ribbon made by the winding brook that ran through their farm, past their homes and through the little village at the other end of the valley. That evening they thought only of their missing cow.

In their many years of farming the brothers had never known such a cow and her strange new habits strengthened Franz's argument that she should be retired like all the other old cows and sent away on the truck to the slaughterhouse, especially now that she was giving them so much trouble.

Hans agreed that she wasn't giving as much milk as before, but he told his brother that she was still earning her feed and they shouldn't be so quick to send her to the slaughterhouse. During her best years she had been their best milk producer and she had also given the brothers their best calves and farmers from throughout the valley had offered to buy her. Of course, given her age, no one would buy her now, but didn't they owe her something for the good years she had given them?

Now it was something new that made the cow known throughout the valley. At church on Sundays everyone wanted to know if she had been on any more adventures and if they knew where she went when she wandered away from the farm. And why wasn't she carrying any milk when she returned? For the past few months the brothers would arrive just as the church service began and leave just as it ended because they grew tired of questions they couldn't answer.

Like all the Hubers before them, Hans and Franz were good, respectable farmers and were known throughout the valley for their hard work and honest dealings. This made the teasing and laughing at church every Sunday even worse because they knew that good, respectable farmers didn't allow their animals to take holidays or wander off and give away their milk.

One of the farmers from the other end of the valley started calling the cow Luna because of the white spot on her forehead that looked like a half moon. The name stuck

and everyone, except the Huber brothers, called her Luna. The brothers had never given their cows names and they weren't going to start now.

The brothers decided they needed to solve the mystery of their wandering cow so for a few weeks during the fall the brothers took turns spending nights in the barn, hoping to catch Luna leaving so they could follow her and bring an end to the mystery. They put a cot inside the barn door and each would try to stay awake as long as possible, listening to the radio or reading, but the brothers weren't young anymore and staying awake in the small hours of the night was very difficult. One morning Hans woke up on the cot in the barn and saw that Luna was gone.

"She must have walked right past me while I was asleep," he told Franz with a smile. "She sure is something."

Hans never told his brother, but he had begun to admire the adventurous cow. He thought about how few times he had been able to leave the farm because of all the work that needed to be done every day. If a cow can take holidays, why shouldn't he? He promised himself that after they discovered where Luna was going on her adventures, he would take some time off and go on his own adventure. He didn't tell Franz about that either.

The brothers decided to stop trying to stay awake night after night and instead wait until the snows came so they could follow her tracks and discover where she went on her mysterious adventures. Now, a couple months later, during the first snowfall of the season, Luna had escaped and the brothers would finally solve the mystery.

Franz stood from the fallen pine and took the last bite from his pear. He tossed the core into the woods and looked at his brother, still sitting on the log.

"Well," Franz said, "we won't find her sitting here." He turned and started up the trail and a moment later, Hans finished his pear and followed his brother up the mountain to wherever Luna's tracks in the snow would lead them.

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Anna had waited through the winter for spring to come so she could ride the bike her parents had given her for Christmas. When the spring sun finally melted the winter snow she rode her bike every day it didn't rain along the road that led through the valley, past the farms, through the little village, over the brook and into the foothills on the other side of the valley. Each day on Anna's ride she noticed an old cow when she rode by the Huber farm. The cow stood apart from the others, watching Anna as she passed on her bike. Anna knew it was always the same cow because of the white mark on her forehead that looked like a half moon.

After riding by the farm a few times, Anna noticed that the cow raised her nose into the air a little, as if she were saying hello. So, on her daily bike rides, Anna began to wave at the cow as she passed. This seemed to please the cow and when she saw Anna, she would raise and lower her nose several times. Each day the cow moved closer and closer to the fence by the road in anticipation of Anna's visit.

On a lovely day in the valley, when the pale green leaves had fully emerged from their winter buds, the front tire on Anna's bicycle went flat as she passed the Huber farm. She coasted to a stop near the pasture and got off her bike to take a look at the tire. It was

a Saturday and she wasn't in a hurry so Anna, a very sensible and pleasant girl, wasn't bothered too much by the flat tire. She could simply walk her bike home.

"Excuse me, miss? Miss?"

Anna turned to see who was talking but all she saw was the cow with the half moon on her forehead standing on the other side of the fence. Her nose was bobbing up and down and she was looking at Anna.

"How do you dooooo?" The voice seemed to come from the cow, but this couldn't be. "Miss, I am a cow."

Or could it?

"Miss, I have been a cow since I was born. But I'm afraid that soon I will be a cow no more."

Anna walked her bike through the ditch to the fence and stared at Luna.

"Are you ... talking?" Anna said.

"I think so," Luna said. "Does it sound like I'm talking?"

"Of course, but cows don't talk."

"Oh," Luna said. "Then what should we call it?"

"I ... I don't know. I didn't know cows could say anything."

"We do when we have a reason," Luna said. "I didn't think the others who walk on two legs would listen, so I've never wanted to talk to them. To them, I'm just a milk machine. But you seem different." Luna lowered her head and seemed a little embarrassed. "No human ever waved to me before."

"No one? Ever?"

"They've never made time to get to know me. It's too bad, really. Cows have nothing but time, so it wouldn't be difficult."

"You mean all cows can talk?" Anna said, looking at the rest of the herd grazing in the pasture.

"All the others speak Latin. I'm the only one who speaks German. I have listened very carefully to the farmers over the years and have learned to speak quite well, just in case I met someone I wanted to talk to. Oh, pardon me. I mean, someone to whom I want to talk."

"I don't think anyone will believe me if I tell them I talked to a cow today."

"Then wait until tomorrow and tell them you talked to a cow yesterday."

"That wouldn't make any difference," Anna said with a giggle.

"Then it's their fault for not believing you," Luna said. "But whether anyone believes you or not, I would like to ask you something."

"Sure," Anna said, leaning her bike against the fence.

"I am an old cow. I've heard the farmers arguing about me. The older one wants to send me away on the truck like all the other old cows. Cows even younger than me are sent away. I don't have as much milk as I used to and I'm sure the day will come very soon when they put me on the truck and take me away."

"Aren't you frightened?" Anna said.

"That's just the way things are for cows," Luna said. "I don't expect you to do anything about that."

"Then what do you want to ask me?" Anna said.

Luna hesitated.

"It's all right," Anna said. "You can ask me anything."

“There are so many things I want to do before my life is over, but ...”

“But what?” Anna said.

“I don’t know what they are,” Luna said. “You who walk on two legs do so many things, but how do you know what to do? I’ve spent my entire life in the pastures or in the barn. I don’t feel like I’ve ever really lived. But I have no experience living my life the way I want to live it, so I don’t know what it means or how to do it.”

This was a very difficult question, especially coming from a cow. Anna tried but she couldn’t think of any way to help.

“I guess I’m asking too much,” the cow said, looking down at her hooves. “I understand. I mean, I’m a cow. What should I expect?”

Anna looked at her bike and had an idea. “I could teach you to ride a bike!” she said.

“You’re too kind, but you have to remember that I have no hands and I would break a bike if I sat on it.”

“Right,” Anna said, and tried to think of something else that made her feel alive. “Sledding! We could go ...” Anna looked up at the green slopes of the Langezehen. “I guess it’s too late for that.”

“Oh, that’s too bad,” Luna said. “It was a lovely idea. Maybe if I’m still here in the Winter, but ...”

“What?”

“I don’t think I’ll still be here next winter,” Luna said, lowering her head again. “The older farmer said they would just be wasting grain if they fed me for another winter.”

“Well, there’s always singing,” Anna said a little shyly, wondering what kind of sound a singing cow might make.

“Oh, another splendid idea!” Luna said. She opened her mouth and tried to make sounds like she had heard from the church down the road on Sunday mornings but she could only make a loud “moooooo!”

Luna lowered her head and kicked at the fence post with her hoof. “Maybe cows weren’t meant to be really alive,” she said.

“Nonsense!” Anna said. “You have as much right to be alive as anyone else. I have an idea. My Aunt Katharina is very smart and very alive. She will know what to do. We’ll go see her and I’m sure she’ll have a lot of good ideas.”

Luna raised her head and her nose went up and down faster than ever. “Yes, yes! Let’s do that.” But then she lowered her head. “You have to remember that I’m a cow. I can’t ride a bicycle, or fit in a car or take a bus. I’m not sure I can go with you to see your aunt.”

“That’s no problem. She goes to her hiking hut up on the Langezehen most weekends.” Anna pointed up into the mountains. “Surely you can go for a nice walk with me on a mountain path to see her. I’m going there tomorrow and you can come with me.”

Luna raised her head and her eyes brightened. “Do you really think she can help me?”

“I am certain of it,” Anna said. “I will come here tomorrow after dinner and we will walk to my Katharina’s hiking hut.”

“Dinner? The farmers say that word when they go to their houses after they milk us in the evening. I always wondered what they do.”

“They eat dinner,” Anna said.

“Is dinner grass? Or hay? Or is it grain?”

“No,” Anna said with a giggle. “It’s whatever you make. It might be chicken or pork or ...” Anna almost said beef but thought she probably shouldn’t. “I’ll be here tomorrow after dinner, all right?”

Luna cleared her throat, held her head high and said, “I very much look forward to it.” She had always wanted to have something to look forward to.

**

The next day, while Hans and Franz ate dinner, Anna met Luna at the far side of the pasture, away from the road and near where the path followed the brook into the woods. Anna left her bike under a bush and walked to the gate where Luna stood with her head hanging low.

“What’s wrong?” Anna said.

Luna shook her head from side to side. “Maybe I shouldn’t go,” she said.

“Why not? We’re all ready. It will only be a couple hours of walking.”

“I can walk all night. That doesn’t worry me.”

“Then what is it?”

Luna rubbed her head against the wooden gatepost. “Yesterday you said that you make your own food.” She raised her head and looked at Anna. “I don’t know how to make food. What will I eat? Maybe I shouldn’t leave the farm. I eat a lot, you know.”

“Katharina’s hut is in the middle of a beautiful meadow. There will be plenty for you to eat. And there are meadows along the way. You’ll be just as fat when you get back as you are now.”

“Good,” Luna said. “I like being a fat cow.”

“Are you ready?” Anna said.

Luna still looked unsure. “What about ... wolves?” she said, looking over Anna’s shoulder and into the dark forest. “My great-grandmother used to tell me stories about wolves.”

“There aren’t any wolves around here,” Anna said.

Luna still looked worried. “Bears?”

“There’s nothing that can hurt you.” Anna opened the gate but Luna didn’t move. “Are you coming?” Anna said.

“I’ve never been outside the fence,” she said. “My hooves ... they don’t want to move. Maybe I shouldn’t ...”

“The farmers are coming!” Anna said, looking toward the small cluster of houses at the end of the pasture. “Hurry!”

Luna started to look behind her.

“Don’t look, just go! Hurry!”

Luna took a deep breath and walked through the gate. Anna pushed the gate closed and Luna trotted after her as she ran down the path, over the wooden bridge and into the woods.

“I’m outside the fence,” Luna said nervously as she trotted behind Anna. “I’m outside the fence. I’m outside the fence.” Each time she said it she became a little braver. “I’m outside the fence!” As they walked through the forest and started up the mountain, she repeated it again and again quietly to herself until they came to a small pine tree that had fallen across the path.

Anna stopped and turned back toward Luna. “Are you all right?”

“I’m feeling ... alive!” Luna said, and she did a little cow dance by leaning to her left and shaking her right hooves in the air, then leaning to her right and shaking her left hooves in the air. Then she turned and looked back through the trees toward the pasture and barn below. “Do you think they’ll miss me?”

“Of course they’ll miss you,” Anna said. “But you’ll be back. You’ll only be gone for one night.”

“I don’t want them to worry. And the young ones know so little about being cows. They need old cows like me.”

“They will see you again,” Anna said. “And you’ll have stories to tell them. You can tell them about going outside the fence.”

“I don’t see the farmers,” Luna said. “The big barn door is closed so they must still be in their own barns.”

Anna walked back down the path toward the cow. “I told you the farmers were coming so you would leave the pasture. I didn’t really see them. I hope you don’t mind.”

Luna looked at Anna and then turned back toward the pasture. “I don’t mind,” she said. “I would still be standing on the other side of the fence if you hadn’t said that.”

“Are you ready to go?” Anna said.

Luna looked at Anna with her head held high. “Yes, I’m ready.”

**

After walking for an hour, Anna and Luna came to a meadow and Luna wandered off the path to nibble on the tall grass and colorful flowers growing in the rocky soil. She looked up at Anna, sitting patiently on a rock. “Aren’t you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine,” Anna said.

“I’ll just be another minute,” Luna said. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted such delicious dinner.”

When Luna had eaten, she walked to where Anna sat on the rock. “I’m ready now. Thank you for waiting.”

Anna bowed her head and said, “You’re welcome.” She held out a hand in the direction they were traveling. “It’s your turn to lead.”

“You want me to go first?” Luna looked down the path to where it entered the forest again.

“Of course,” Anna said. “You lead and I’ll follow.”

Luna peered into the dark forest with her big cow eyes. “You won’t let me get lost, will you?”

Anna smiled. “I promise.”

Luna walked down the path and every few steps she looked back to see if Anna was still following. “Am I doing all right?” she said.

“You’re doing very well,” Anna said as they left the meadow and felt the forest’s cool, moist air.

**

As they climbed the Langezehen, Luna looked back less and less often. She was a good, strong climber and she gained confidence with every step. Anna was also a good climber, but she only had two legs. She began to wonder if it was a good idea to let Luna lead and she was glad a little later when they came to another meadow and Luna wandered off the path into a lush meadow for her second dinner.

Anna found a big, flat rock to sit on and gazed across the valley at the distant mountains. The snow on their peaks had an orange-pink glow as the evening sun began to sink below the mountains on the other side of the valley.

Anna noticed some violet flowers growing at the edge of a cliff near the path. She thought they would make a lovely centerpiece for Katharina’s table so she hopped off the rock and walked to where the flowers clung to the mountain’s edge. When she had gathered some into a bouquet, she raised the flowers to her nose and inhaled their thick sweetness.

Anna wanted to share the beautiful aroma with Luna so she walked through the meadow to where the cow was eating tall, juicy grasses. “I found some lovely flowers,” Anna said, holding out the flowers for Luna to smell.

“Oh, they look delicious,” Luna said, and pulled them from Anna’s hand with her strong lips. “Mmmmm!” she said as she chewed up the flowers. “Thank you very much.” Luna saw the surprise in Anna’s eyes and stopped chewing. “Oh, I’m sorry. You wanted to eat them, didn’t you?”

“Well, no,” Anna said. “I wasn’t going to eat them. I thought they would be nice for Katharina’s table.”

“Oh, silly me,” Luna said. “You wanted Katharina to eat them. They were a gift. I’m very sorry.”

Anna couldn’t help laughing. “No, no,” she said. “They’re just to look at. People don’t eat flowers.”

“But they’re delicious,” Luna said. “You really should try them.”

“Maybe, but I still don’t want to eat them. You keep eating, and I’ll pick some more flowers.”

“I promise not to eat them this time,” Luna said, and went back to eating the tall grasses.

Anna walked back to the edge of the cliff where she had picked the flowers and saw that the only ones left were growing between heavy roots that held a tall spruce tree to the side of the mountain. When Anna knelt down so she could reach the flowers, her knees knocked a few small rocks over the edge. As she reached for the flowers she heard the rocks clang off boulders far below.

She still couldn’t quite reach the flowers so she moved her knees a bit closer to the edge. Just as her fingers touched the flowers, the loose soil at the edge of the cliff gave way and she began to slide over the edge. She tried to grab hold of something, but there was only loose rock and dirt and nothing held. As she started to fall she reached for

the tree roots and held onto them with all her strength. Her feet hung in the air below her. She tried to reach something with her feet but there was nothing there.

“Luna!” Anna cried as loud as she could. “Help!”

Luna heard something behind her but her big teeth made a lot of noise as she chewed so she didn’t know what it was. She turned and didn’t see Anna. She looked up the path and she looked down the path but still didn’t see her. Luna began to worry but then she remembered a game she had seen children play around the farm. One child would hide and the others would try to find her.

Luna trotted toward a group of trees to see if Anna was hiding there and she heard the sound again, but she was still chewing and didn’t understand the words. Luna stopped chewing and this time she understood.

“Luna! Help!”

Anna’s voice seemed to be coming from the edge of the cliff so Luna ran there as quickly as her legs would take her and she skidded to a stop. Anna, hanging from the tree roots, had fear in her eyes as she peered up at Luna.

“You must be very good at this game, Anna,” Luna said. “I never would have found you if you hadn’t yelled. I guess you win.”

“I’m not playing! Help me!”

“This isn’t a game?” the cow said.

“No! Help me! I can’t hold on any longer.”

“Oh, dear, what do I doooo?” Luna said, edging closer to the cliff until it started to give way and sent rocks falling past Anna.

“Give me your ...” Anna was going to say “hand.”

Before Anna could think of anything, Luna turned around and sat at the very edge of the cliff so that her tail reached down to Anna. Anna grabbed Luna thick tail with one hand and then the other and yelled, “Ready!” Luna slowly stood and then walked toward the meadow, pulling Anna up and over the cliff.

When she was away from the edge, Anna let go of Luna’s tail and rolled onto her back. She was exhausted and could barely move her sore arms.

Luna’s mothering instincts overwhelmed her and she began to lick Anna’s face.

“Ughhh!” Anna said, rolling over and laughing. “I’m all right,” She said between laughs. “You don’t have to do that.”

“I don’t know what else to do,” Luna said, doing her cow dance faster than Anna had ever seen before.

“You saved my life,” Anna said.

Luna stopped dancing. “You mean you wouldn’t be alive if I ...” Luna’s mind was racing faster than any cow’s mind had ever raced. It was difficult for her to think and talk at the same time. “I’ve never ... that was ... I did?”

“You most certainly did,” Anna said, rolling onto her back again.

“Maybe this trip wasn’t a good idea,” the cow said. “If you were home you wouldn’t have needed me to save your life. What if I hadn’t thought of using my tail?” Luna looked back down the trail. “Maybe we shouldn’t do this.”

“Do you really want to go back to the farm?” Anna said, sitting up and rubbing her arms.

The sun was sinking lower in the sky and the mountains threw long shadows across the valley. The village church bells began to play a tune that Luna had heard since

she was a calf and her mind drifted back to her home. She could see the yellow light spilling from the barn's windows and she thought about her sisters and cousins and daughters and granddaughters and great-granddaughters and great-great-granddaughters. They would only know the barn and the pasture and never feel really alive.

When the church bell was silent, she turned toward Anna.

"I would like to continue up the path," Luna said. "But only if you promise not to fall off the mountain."

Anna laughed and brushed the dirt from her clothes. "I promise. Shall we go?"

**

The sun had set and the moon was slowly rising from behind the mountains. Anna and Luna were nearly at the hut but walking in the dark was difficult for Anna and she had stumbled a few times over roots and rocks. In the dim moonlight she tried to see where Luna placed her back feet so she could put hers in the same places. She was following so closely behind the cow that when Luna stopped, she nearly ran into her.

"You can ride on my back if you'd like," Luna said, turning toward Anna.

"That sounds like a good idea," Anna said.

Luna knelt down and Anna threw her leg over the cow's back and hugged her neck. "Much better," Anna said.

Cool night air flowed down from the mountain peaks so Luna's broad, warm back felt good. Anna thought she might go to sleep but she knew they were getting close to her Katharina's hut when they passed between two large rocks and the trail turned to the left. She looked through the trees and saw the hut's windows glowing with warm candlelight.

"There it is!" she said.

"Where?" Luna said. "Where?"

Anna leaned forward and pointed past Luna's head so he cow could find the hut.

"Ohhhh, there it is, but I don't see the barn." Luna stopped walking and looked through the tall pines.

"Katharina doesn't have a barn," Anna said. "Just a hut."

"Are you sure she has a place for me?"

"I'm sure we'll find a place for you. My aunt will be very happy to meet you. I don't think she's ever talked to a cow before."

Luna wasn't convinced. "Maybe I should stay here while you ask if it's all right for me to visit. If it's not, I can find a place in the trees to sleep tonight and I'll go back to the valley in the morning."

"Luna," Anna said patiently. "I'm sure you'll be very welcome." Anna slid off the cow's back and began walking down the path.

Luna didn't follow.

"Let's go," Anna said. "I'll race you. First one there gets to eat the flowers by the hut." Anna ran down the path. Luna waited a moment and then followed slowly behind.

When Luna rounded the trail's bend she saw Anna and Katharina in the doorway. Katharina gave Anna a big hug.

"You must be freezing," Katharina said to Anna. "Come in where it's warm."

“I brought a friend,” Anna said. She turned to look behind her but didn’t see Luna.

“A friend?” Katharina looked past Anna but didn’t see anyone. “One of your friend’s from school?”

“No, from the farm I ride by every day. The Huber farm.”

Katharina knew the farm but all their children were grown and had moved away. “You mean, one of their grandchildren?”

Luna rounded the bend in the trail and Katharina could see something large moving in the night.

“No, one of their cows,” Anna said. “Her name is Luna.”

Luna was close enough that Katharina could see her in the light coming from the door.

“How do you dooo?” Luna said, with her head bowed. She took a few more steps forward and Katharina looked past the cow to see who was speaking, but there was no one there.

“Anna, did that cow just ... say something?” Katharina said.

“Yes,” Anna said. “Luna is a talking cow.”

“I’m really a milking cow,” Luna said, “but I’ve learned to speak German just in case there was someone to talk to. Someone like Anna.”

Katharina looked at Anna with her jaw dropped. Anna smiled and shrugged.

Katharina put her hand on the cow’s neck and stroked it a few times. She walked around the cow, looking her over carefully. “You’re really a cow? And you can talk.”

“Really,” Luna said. “I’m not lying.”

“Even if you were lying, you’d still be a talking cow,” Katharina said.

Luna thought for a moment. “Oh, I guess you’re right.”

“She wants to do things that make her feel like she’s really alive before they send her away on the truck. I didn’t know what to tell her but I thought maybe you could help.”

Luna pawed at the ground, embarrassed to be so much trouble.

“Well, I think the first thing we need to do is go inside and get warm,” Katharina said. “I’ll make some tea and we can all talk about it.”

Katharina walked inside and pushed the door open as far as it would go. Anna followed her but Luna hesitated. “I’m afraid that I don’t quite fit.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Katharina said. “I’m not used to having cows visit. We’ll build a fire outside instead.” She picked up an armful of firewood from inside the door and walked outside to a stone circle and laid the wood next to it. “You two can gather some kindling while I make the tea.”

Anna showed Luna how to gather kindling from the dead branches low on the spruce trees near the hut. Luna grabbed the branches in her mouth and snapped them off, then carried them to the fire pit where she laid them down and went back for more.

“Am I doing this right?” she asked Anna.

“Perfectly,” Anna said. “We’ll have a nice fire in no time.”

“I’ve never, ever had so much fun,” the cow said, trotting back to the spruce trees for more kindling.

Katharina and Anna sat in wooden chairs and Luna lay in the grass next to the crackling fire that lit up the clearing in the woods. Luna had tried drinking tea but she couldn't lift the cup with her hooves, so Katharina brought her a bucket of fresh spring water, which she lapped up in no time.

"This is the most beautiful place I have ever seen," Luna said. "I am very much looking forward to my dinner tomorrow morning," she said, looking at the tall plants that grew in the clearing. She turned toward the fire and looked at it intently. "Cows are supposed to be afraid of fire, but I'm not afraid of this one at all."

"Friends make things less scary," Anna said.

"So what should we do tomorrow?" Katharina said. She looked at Luna. "Is there anything special you'd like to do?"

"I'm having so much fun just being here. It's all so new."

"We could go exploring," Anna said. "Maybe we could climb one of the peaks."

Luna laid down next to the fire. "I'm getting very sleepy," she said. "I've done so much today. Maybe I should ..."

Luna laid her head down between her hooves and closed her eyes. Her ribs rose and sank slowly with each deep breath.

"Is she asleep?" Katharina asked.

"I guess so," Anna said. "I'm not sure how to tell. Will she be all right?"

Katharina went into the hut and came back with a wool blanket that she laid over Luna's back. "I think she'll be fine."

**

The next morning at sunrise Luna was already eating her morning dinner, happily munching on the flowers and plants that grew out of the rocky soil around the hut. She nibbled at the young spruce buds just opening after the long winter but found them to be bitter. The violet flowers that grew low to the ground were her favorite but she knew how much Anna liked those so she didn't eat too many.

Katharina walked out of the hut, stretched her arms toward the clear blue sky and smiled at Luna, still munching. "Good morning!" she said.

"Oh, good morning. I hope you don't mind me eating my morning dinner without you. My stomachs like to be fed early."

Katharina laughed. "That's fine. You're welcome to eat whenever your stomachs want."

The cow walked to Katharina and bowed her head. "There's something ... something I didn't think about until now. I hope it's not a problem."

"What's that?" Katharina asked, reaching up to rub between Luna's ears.

"This is the time of day that we walk into the big barn and give the farmers our milk. They must really like milk because we give them so much of it. But the farmers aren't here so I'm not sure what to do."

"Hmmm," Katharina said. "Yes, we'll have to take care of that." She looked at Luna's udders and saw that they were very large. "I've never milked a cow but I'm sure it's not too hard. Would you like me to try?"

"That would be very nice. I can feel that I am very full."

**

When Anna crawled out of her bed in a corner of the hut, Katharina had already made pancakes and placed a large pitcher of milk at the center of the hut's wooden table. Luna had finished grazing and Katharina opened one of the windows so she could put her head inside.

"Good morning, Anna," Luna said. "It's a loooovely day."

"Good morning, Luna," Anna said. "Mmmm. Something smells good."

"It's our morning dinner," Katharina said with a smile. "Buckwheat pancakes and fresh milk."

Anna sat at the table and Katharina put a stack of pancakes in front of her and filled a glass with milk. Anna took a bite of the pancakes and then a drink of milk. Her eyes grew big after she drank the milk.

"This milk is delicious!" she said. "It's so ... creamy."

"You're welcome," Luna said, nodding her nose up and down with excitement. "I'm sooo glad you like it."

"Is this ... your milk?" Anna said.

"Yes, yes, yes," Luna said, still excited. "I always wondered what the farmers did with our milk and now I know. It's so much fun to learn things." She noticed a colorful painting across the room from her window. "What is that? Are those flowers for eating?"

Katharina's painting was of a vase of irises sitting on a table made of stone.

"No," Katharina laughed. "That's a painting. It's just to look at."

"You made something just to look at? I've never thought of doing something like that."

The cow studied the painting. "You mean, it doesn't do anything?"

"I hope that people enjoy looking at it," Katharina said. "But other than that, it just hangs on the wall."

"Do you think I could try to make something useless? I really like that it doesn't have to do anything."

The thought of a cow painting a picture made Katharina and Anna smile.

"Sure," Katharina said to Luna. "After we finish our morning dinner I'll get you a brush and some paint and you can make a picture."

"This is sooo exciting!" Luna said.

**

While Anna washed the dishes from morning dinner, Katharina stretched a canvas across a frame, picked up her easel and walked outside to where Luna waited. Katharina set up the easel and placed the empty canvas on it.

"What are your favorite colors?" Katharina asked the cow.

"I've never thought about it. I think flower colors are my favorites."

"Flower colors?" Katharina couldn't think of any color that wasn't a flower color. She picked up three paint tubes and squeezed out yellow, red and blue onto the palette she had attached to the easel and put a brush between Luna's lips.

“Just dip the brush in the paint and then put the paint on the canvas,” Katharina said.

“Any color?” Luna said. She had to speak without moving her lips, which is particularly difficult for a cow.

“Any color you like.”

“But I like them all.”

“You have to pick one, and then you can pick another. Or you can mix them together.”

Luna couldn't decide what to do first.

“Why don't you start with red,” Katharina said.

Luna dipped her brush in the red paint and then made a mark on the canvas. She was so pleased with what she had done, her nose went up and down and she made several more marks without meaning to, which made her even more delighted.

“Look what I did!” Luna shouted. “Look!” She dipped her brush into the yellow paint and made marks next to the ones she'd already made. The canvas was brown where the two colors mixed. “It's changing colors!” she said.

“You can make lots of different colors with just those three I gave you,” Katharina said.

“I've never done anything so fun.”

“You keep painting, and I'll help Anna put away the dishes. We'll come out in a little while to see your picture.”

“Should I use the other color now?”

“You should do whatever you want.”

**

When Katharina and Anna had finished the dishes, they looked out the window and saw Luna make a few brush strokes and then do a little cow dance.

“I've never seen such a happy cow,” Anna said.

“Let's go look at her painting,” Katharina said.

They walked out to the edge of the clearing to Luna's studio. The painting was a mix of short, colorful lines and she had just begun to experiment with making brushstrokes at different angles, which pleased her greatly.

“That's very pretty, Luna,” Anna said. “What is it?”

Luna stopped and turned to look at Anna. “It's paint.”

Anna laughed. “I know it's paint, but are you trying to make the paint look like something?”

“Am I supposed to?” Luna said. She seemed disappointed that she hadn't understood what to do.

“You can do whatever you want, but I thought maybe you wanted it to look like something.”

The cow examined her painting. “It's a meadow full of delicious flowers,” she said, then looked at Anna and Katharina. “Is that all right?”

“Now that you're an artist, you can paint anything you want,” Katharina said.

“That's what artists do. Artists show us what's in their hearts.”

“What’s in my heart?” Luna said. She looked at the painting again. “Then it’s ... a picture of Anna riding her bike by my pasture and waving to me.”

“That’s a beautiful picture,” Katharina said.

“It is?” Luna said. “Yes. Yes, I think so too.”

“Is it finished?” Katharina asked.

Luna looked at her painting for a moment, then looked at Katharina. “How do I know when it’s finished?”

“I usually know when something is finished when I want to start on something else.”

The cow nodded. “Then it’s finished.”

Luna finished three bright and colorful paintings and decided it was time for her midday dinner. Katharina cleaned the brush and hung the paintings next to each other on a wall in the hut. She and Anna stood looking at them while Luna grazed outside.

“You know, those are actually pretty good,” Katharina said. “The colors almost vibrate and her brush strokes seem very confident. It’s like she knew what she was doing. Do you like them?”

Anna looked at each of the paintings. “I like the one of me riding my bike best. Although I don’t see me or my bike.”

“She’s the world’s first abstract expressionist cow,” Katharina said.

They laughed and then looked out the window. Luna was still happily munching in the meadow.

“She’s a very special cow,” Katharina said.

“I know,” Anna said. “I knew that when she first said hello.”

**

By the time Anna and Luna started down the mountain later in the day, Luna had finished twelve paintings, each one full of color and life. To thank Katharina for being a wonderful host, Luna asked her if she would like to take some of the paintings with her back to her home in the valley. Katharina chose four paintings and said she would proudly display them on her living room wall. A few days later Katharina had some friends over for dinner and one of her friends brought the owner of an art gallery in a nearby town. After dinner, the gallery owner asked who had painted the four paintings hanging next to each other.

“Oh, just a friend,” Katharina said, not knowing what to say. “She’s hasn’t been painting for long but she seems to have talent.”

“I’ll say,” the gallery owner said, stepping forward to get a closer look at one of the paintings, a canvas filled with short, bright, vibrating lines. “Do you think your friend would let me put some of her work in my gallery? There are lots of people looking for paintings like these. They’re very unusual. The repetition is almost childlike, but the paintings show a very complex use of color and form. I like them very much.”

Katharina still wasn’t sure what to say. “I’ll have to ask,” she said. “I’m not sure when I’ll see her again, but I’ll let her know you’re interested.”

The gallery owner stepped back to get a good look at all four paintings. “Abstract works sell very well. These are different than anything I’ve ever seen. I could have these sold in a couple days.”

**

The next day Anna went for her usual bike ride and stopped to see Luna, who waited near the fence.

"I talked to Katharina this morning and she said that everybody likes your paintings," Anna said, leaning her bike against a fence post. "I like them too."

"I'm so glad we went to see Katharina," Luna said. "It's all I think about."

"She'll be at her hut again in a couple weekends. We can visit her then."

Luna looked around the pasture at the grazing cows. "Do you think it would be all right?"

"Of course it would be all right," Anna said.

"I heard the farmers talking," Luna said. "The older one keeps saying they should send me on the next truck otherwise they will have to wait until spring." She looked down and pawed at the ground. "I don't have as much milk as I used to."

"They can't send you on the truck!" Anna said, almost shouting. Some of the cows in the pasture looked her way. "I won't let them. It's not right."

"Maybe not, but that's what all cows have to do when they get old. I don't know exactly what happens when they send us away, but we never see those cows again."

"I'll go talk to the farmers right now," Anna said, reaching for her bike handles.

"No!" Luna said, surprised at how forceful she sounded. "I shouldn't get any special treatment. That wouldn't be right. I'm a cow and I accept that. But ..."

"But what?"

"But I would very much like to go to the hut again. At least one more time. I have some ideas I'd like to try on my next painting. But when it's my time to go on the truck, I must go. It's the way it has always been and the way it must be."

Anna felt like crying when she thought about Luna walking up the metal plank and onto the truck, but she tried to control herself. "Then we'll definitely go to the hut in two weeks," she said, and rode off on her bike. She sped down the road so Luna wouldn't see her cry.

**

Two weeks later, on the day Anna and Luna planned to go to the hut, Anna walked around the big pasture to the far-side gate and she saw Luna trot across the field, her nose going up and down with excitement.

"Ready?" Anna asked when Luna arrived at the gate.

"Yes, yes. I'm very ready."

Anna held the gate open for Luna and closed it after she walked through. When Anna turned to follow Luna she saw that she had already started down the path into the woods. Anna smiled when she remembered the first time they walked the path and how Luna was so unsure of herself. "Not so fast!" she cried out. "Wait for me!"

Luna turned back. "I'm sorry. I'm sooooo excited."

"That's all right. Remember, I've only got two legs and you have four," Anna said with a laugh.

"I'll try to remember that," Luna said, turning to head up the mountain.

**

When they arrived at the hut, Katharina was hammering the last nails into a lean-to attached to the hut. It was just the right size for Luna. The lean-to sloped from the hut's roof nearly to the ground and Katharina had covered it with spruce boughs. At one end of the lean-to there was a tall, cow-sized easel she had made by tying together fallen branches she found in the woods.

Luna stood at the edge of the clearing staring at the lean-to. "Is that ... for me?" she said.

Katharina stepped out from underneath the spruce bows. "Do you like it?" she said.

"I'd cry but I don't know how," Luna said.

"I have something else for you," Katharina said. "Come over here."

Katharina went inside the little hut and came back with a beret that fit between Luna's ears. "There," Katharina said. "Now you even look like an artist."

By the next evening Luna had finished fifteen paintings. While Katharina and Anna stood admiring the new works, Katharina asked her if it was all right to take some of the paintings to the art gallery in the valley. Sensing that Luna didn't know what a gallery was, Katharina explained that it was a place people go to look at paintings and other works of art.

"If people want to," Katharina said, "they buy the paintings and take them home to put on their walls."

"I don't understand why people I don't know would want to put my paintings on their walls," Luna said. "Maybe I should go to their barns and introduce myself and thank them for being so kind."

"I don't think that's necessary," Katharina said with a smile. "But if people buy your paintings you'll make some money, so you should think about how you want to spend it. The gallery owner thinks they'll sell very well."

"I've heard the farmers talking about how much money cows are worth." Luna looked down and pawed the ground with her hoof. "And they talk about how much money it takes to keep an old cow like me through the winter because they have to buy a lot of grain. But I've never understood what they mean. What do you do with money?"

"You can buy things," Anna said. "Just about anything you want."

"But I can't think of anything I want," Luna said. She thought about it for a moment. "I know! I'll buy enough flowers to feed the whole herd at my farm. Enough so we can all have a delicious flower dinner every morning."

**

Later that night, while Luna slept in her lean-to, Anna talked to Katharina about an idea she had.

"If her paintings sell," Anna said, "maybe we could use the money to buy Luna from the farmers so she won't have to go on the truck."

Katharina thought about Anna's idea and nodded. "That might work. But where would she live?"

“Maybe if we give the farmers enough money to pay for her feed, plus whatever they would get if they sold her to the slaughterhouse, she could keep living there with her friends and family.” Anna looked away toward one of Luna’s new paintings drying in the corner, trying to erase from her mind the thought of Luna walking up the metal plank and onto the truck.

“For enough money, I think they would agree,” Katharina said. “But I don’t know how much is enough. And we don’t know if the paintings will sell.”

Anna looked at Katharina. “We have to do something. We have to.” Tears welled in Anna’s eyes. “Luna said she heard the farmers talking again about putting her on the truck.”

“Well,” Katharina said, choosing her words carefully. “Luna belongs to the Huber brothers. We can try to help her but it will be their decision.”

“I don’t know how someone like Luna could belong to anyone,” Anna said. “That’s not right.”

**

It was late autumn and the leaves on the trees lining the road that led to the Huber farm had turned color and fallen to the ground, giving Anna a good view of the mountains and their fresh snow caps as she rode her bike toward the farm on her daily ride. She was in a good mood and looked forward to talking to Luna because she’d been away for a few days visiting her mother’s aunt in another valley. It had been nearly a month since they had visited Katharina’s hut and Anna was anxious to plan another trip up the mountain. Six of Luna’s paintings had sold and, as soon as two more sold, Anna was going to make the farmers an offer to buy Luna and pay for her food so she could live the rest of her life at the farm.

It began to snow, but Anna didn’t mind. She was dressed for the cold and it didn’t bother her that she might have to walk her bike if the roads became slippery. She was excited to tell Luna about her paintings and to plan their next trip to Katharina’s hut.

But when Anna came around the bend in the road just before the Huber farm, she saw something that made her heart stop.

There was a livestock truck parked on the side of the road and a dozen cows were being led single file out the pasture gate and toward the truck by two men Anna didn’t recognize. She pedaled her bike as fast as she could with her eyes glued to the cows being led toward the truck’s metal ramp. Was Luna one of them? The snow was getting heavier so Anna couldn’t see well enough to know.

When she was close enough she saw that Luna was the last cow in line. The first cow had reached the truck and one of the men led her up the ramp.

Anna rode past the men and they didn’t notice her. She pushed her bike into the ditch and kept low as she ran to the front of the truck and tried to think of a plan. Suddenly she knew what to do. She remembered how to let air out of her bike tire if she pumped it up too much by pushing on the metal pin inside the tire’s valve stem. She crept around the truck to the passenger door and carefully stood up enough to see inside the truck’s cab. She saw a screwdriver lying on the seat and quietly opened the door to grab it. She could hear the drumbeat of hooves on the metal plank leading up into the truck. She unscrewed the cap on the tire stem and pushed on the metal pin with the

screwdriver. There was a loud hissssss! She was worried that the men would hear but the cows hooves on the metal plank made so much noise that no one heard. Anna had to push hard on the stem and her arms began to ache but she let enough air out of the tire that it was flat and the wheel rim rested on the pavement.

When the two men finished loading the cows, they each picked up one side of the metal ramp and together pushed it under the truck's bed. Anna hid by the front bumper as both men walked to the truck's cab and got in. Anna crouched low so they couldn't see her and crept past the passenger side door to the back of the truck. The truck started to move forward but it only went a few feet before it lurched to a stop.

Anna heard the man in the passenger side ask the driver what was wrong.

"I think we have a flat," the driver said, and both men got out to look at the front tire.

"It was fine when we got here," the driver said. He wore an orange baseball cap, and bent down to run his hand over the tire. "How could it go flat so fast?"

"How should I know?" the other man said. "C'mon, let's get the spare."

Anna heard them coming toward the back of the truck but didn't know where to go. She crawled under the truck and watched their feet as they opened the big door in the back and pulled the spare tire out, letting it drop and bounce on the road. The men closed the big door but didn't latch it before they went to the front of the truck to change the tire.

Anna crawled out from underneath the truck and quietly slid the big door open enough to climb into the bed. It was dark and she couldn't see anything.

"Luna?" she whispered.

"Yes, Anna? Over here!"

Anna still couldn't see. "We don't have much time. We have to go now."

Anna could feel the front of the truck rising as the men used a jack to raise it high enough to remove the flat tire. And she could hear Luna's feet dancing nervously on the metal floor.

Anna raised the rear door as quietly as she could and jumped onto the road. Luna stood at the edge of the truck's bed but didn't jump.

"Now, Luna!" Anna whispered. "Now!"

"I've never jumped that far before," Luna said, in her deep cow whisper.

One glance at Anna gave her the courage she needed and Luna jumped onto the road. She stumbled but stayed on her feet and trotted behind Anna to the pasture gate.

"Run!" Anna said, holding the gate open. "I'll meet you on the other side of the field at the gate."

"Hey! What are you doing?" The man with the orange cap had started to fasten the spare tire to the wheel when he saw Luna and Anna. He stood and walked toward where Anna held the gate open.

"Go, Luna!" Anna said. "Go!"

Luna ran faster than she knew she could and soon looked like a ghost as she crossed the pasture in the heavy snowfall, and then disappeared completely from view.

"I asked you what you're doing," said the man with the orange cap, still walking toward Anna.

Anna didn't know what to say so she didn't say anything.

The man took a few steps into the ditch but his feet slipped out from under him and he slid on the wet snow to the bottom of the ditch.

Anna ran through the ditch to her bike and hopped on.

The other man noticed that the back door of the truck was wide open and several cows were staring at him. "I thought you closed the door," he said, watching the man with the orange cap struggle to climb the ditch's slippery slope.

"I did close it," the man in the orange cap said, finally reaching the top of the slope by crawling on his hands and knees. He stood and pointed at Anna, almost out of view in the falling snow and pedaling her bike as hard as she could. "I think that girl opened it and let one of the cows out. I guess I forgot to lock it. Good thing the cow went right back into the pasture."

"Why'd she do that?"

The men looked into the pasture but the snow was so heavy they couldn't see Luna running across to the other side.

"I have no idea," the man with the orange cap said, on his feet again and brushing the snow from his pants and jacket. "But you better go tell the Huber brothers they need to bring her to the truck again. I'll finish changing the tire. We need to hurry. We're already behind schedule."

**

The Huber brothers were in the workshop attached to the barn making their tractor ready for the winter when the man from the truck found them and told them one of their cows had escaped. The brothers looked at each other and without saying a word they knew which cow. They put down their tools, walked out of the workshop and headed toward the truck.

"Do you see her?" Franz said, after he and Hans had climbed into the back of the truck.

"No," Hans said. "I don't see her. That cow sure is something."

The brothers climbed down from the truck and looked at the two men who had lost their cow. They had had their hands stuffed into their coat pockets and looked embarrassed.

"We're really sorry," said the man with the orange cap. "We've never lost one before. We closed the door but then we saw this girl. She must have opened the door."

"Girl?" Franz said. "Who is she?"

The man with the orange cap shrugged. "We didn't get a good look at her. She had a bike and rode off."

"This isn't the first time that cow has escaped," Hans said with a smile. "We've let that one get away a few times too."

"But you should have been more careful," Franz said to the two men. "Especially with that one." He pointed toward the pasture but there was nothing to see but the heavy snowfall.

"The funny thing is, the cow went right back inside the pasture," the man with the orange cap said. "I guess that's the only place she wants to be."

"I'm not so sure about that," Hans said with a smile.

**

The snow was still coming down as Anna ran along the pasture fence on the far side of the Huber farm. She had left her bike by the road behind a tree and didn't worry about the men seeing her because the snow hid her from view.

"Luna!" Anna said, nearly out of breath, when she finally reached the other side of the pasture. "I'm so glad to see you. I was afraid they might catch you."

"I've never run so far," Luna said. "Or so fast."

"Me too," Anna said, trying to catch her breath.

Anna opened the gate and she and Luna started up the path.

"We should hurry," Anna said. "They'll probably come looking for us." Anna noticed the tracks they were making and hoped they would be covered by the falling snow.

**

Hans and Franz walked across the pasture, following Luna's faint hoofprints in the snow.

When they reached the other side of the pasture, Franz pointed past the gate.

"It's just as I thought," Franz said. "The tracks go up the path into the mountain. Whoever let her out is with her. See the footprints?"

"Strange isn't it?" Hans said, smiling. "I don't understand what this is all about."

"I do," Franz said. "Who has the best dairy farm in the valley?"

Hans looked at his brother. "We do, but I don't like to brag."

"Why?"

"Because it's not polite to brag."

"No, why do we have the best dairy farm in the valley?"

"Because we have the best cows."

"Exactly," Franz said. "Someone is trying to steal what they think is our best cow so they can have the best dairy farm in the valley."

"Now, Franz," Hans said. "At her age I don't think anyone would want to steal her. And why would thieves keep letting her come back to the farm?"

"Because she escapes, and finds her way back," Franz said. "They may be thieves but they're not good thieves. I'm going to get my gun and we're going to settle this."

"Franz, I really don't think we need a gun," Hans said. But Franz was already on his way to the house to get his rifle.

**

Luna walked quickly up the mountain and Anna struggled to stay close. She was already tired from running around the pasture and the wet snow made the path slippery.

"Luna! I can't keep up!"

The cow stopped and turned back to see Anna well behind her. "How thoughtless of me! Why don't you ride on my back? It would be so much easier for you. Remember, I have four legs and you only have two."

"Yes," Anna said. "I think that's a good idea."

Luna knelt down and Anna climbed aboard and hugged her big neck.” Before long Anna was fast asleep on the cow’s warm back.

**

After Hans and Franz had walked for a couple hours, Franz brushed the snow from a fallen pine tree and the brothers sat down to rest and eat the pears Hans had brought. The snow had stopped and as they munched their pears, they sat in silence looking out over the valley and the brook’s silver ribbon winding through the glistening snow and past the little village. Despite the beauty of the valley, their thoughts were only of their wandering cow.

“Well,” Franz said, after he finished his pear, “we won’t find her sitting here.” He stood, grabbed his rifle and started up the trail.

Hans finished his pear and followed his brother. When he caught up with Franz a few minutes later, an owl swooped silently over their heads and landed on a branch hanging over the path. She swiveled her head and stared at the brothers, then pushed off and flew up the trail and out of sight. In the valley below a dog howled and another answered.

“Franz?” Hans said.

Without stopping, his brother said, “Yes?”

“Do you think this is worth it?” Hans said. “I’m sure she’ll be back in a day or two. She always comes back. Maybe it’s all right to let the mystery be a mystery.”

Franz stopped and turned to face his brother. “What do you think our father would have said if he knew a thief stole one of our cows and we did nothing about it? We’re responsible for our cows and we must take our responsibilities seriously.”

Franz turned and continued up the mountain, following the prints in the snow. But he stopped when the boot prints disappeared and only the cow’s hoof prints remained.

Hans and Franz stood next to each other on the trail looking all around but couldn’t find any boot prints.

“What do you think?” Franz said.

Hans thought for a moment. “Well, maybe our cow gave her friend a ride,” he said with a smile. “That cow sure is something.”

“That’s crazy,” Franz said, still looking for boot prints in the snow.

“Everything about this is crazy,” Hans said with a big grin. “To tell the truth, I’m starting to enjoy the mystery. That cow sure is something.”

Franz walked a few steps into the woods on one side of the trail looking for boot prints, and then did the same on the other side of the trail. He took a deep breath, shook his head and continued up the mountain following the hoof prints.

**

The brothers hiked up the mountain for another hour and stopped again for a rest. This time their bench was a large rock blown free of snow by the wind.

“What’s the worst that could happen, Franz?” Hans said, after they both sat down. “What’s the harm in leaving it a mystery?”

“There’s nothing mysterious about it,” Franz said.

The brothers sat in silence for a moment.

“You still think someone stole her?” Hans said. “Did you see the size of the boot prints? Looks like whoever’s with her is a kid, probably the girl who let her out of the truck.”

“I know plenty of adults with small feet,” Franz said. “And so what if it’s a kid? Our cow is gone and someone took her. The person who stole her is in serious trouble.”

“Why don’t we wait to see where she’s gone before we decide what to do about it? Maybe there’s an explanation that neither one of us can even imagine. Maybe there’s something ...”

“Do you know what happens to people who steal cows?” Franz said. “They go to jail.”

“No one’s going to jail, Franz,” Hans said. “C’mon. Let’s keep going.” Hans stood and started up the trail without waiting for his brother.

**

The sun had started to dip below the mountains on the other side of the valley by the time Hans and Franz came to where the trail passed between two boulders and turned toward Katharina’s hut. Neither of the brothers noticed the hut but Franz saw that there were boot prints in the snow again. He pointed at them so his brother would see.

“I told you,” Hans said. “Our cow gave somebody a ride up the mountain. That cow sure is something.”

“Look!” Franz said, pointing ahead. “There!”

Hans looked through the trees and saw light coming from two windows. “I think that’s the old Stiegl hunting hut. Who owns it now?”

“The family sold it after Arnold died a few years ago,” Hans said. “I don’t know who bought it.”

Franz reached into his coat pocket for his binoculars and Hans did the same.

“I’ll bet that’s where the thieves are hiding,” Franz said, focusing the binoculars. “There’s the cow!” Franz said. “It’s her. I can see the mark on her nose. What’s she got on her head?”

The brothers could see Luna in her lean-to working on a new painting and wearing a garland of dried flowers that Anna had made for her.

“Looks like she’s wearing flowers on her head and she’s ...” Hans was afraid to say what he saw. “Is that a paintbrush in her mouth?”

“Of course not,” Franz said. “She’s chewing on something. She’s a cow.”

“She’s painting a picture!” Hans said. “I can’t believe I’m seeing what I’m seeing”

“We need a better look,” Franz said, stuffing his binoculars back into his coat pocket. He looked around for a good climbing tree and chose a pine with closely spaced limbs. He leaned his rifle against the tree before he started climbing.

Hans walked a little ways into the woods to get a better angle so he could see what Luna was painting in her lean-to. When he raised his binoculars he saw a painting full of swirling colors that nearly jumped off the canvas.

“Brother,” Hans said, looking up into the tree Franz was climbing. “I think there’s something going on here that we’ll never understand. Maybe we should just turn around and walk back down the mountain.”

“Nonsense,” Franz said, climbing steadily up the tree. “We’ve got thieves to deal with.”

“Listen,” Hans said patiently. “I’ve never asked for much from you. When you wanted to try raising goats along with our cows I didn’t complain when we lost a lot of money. I didn’t complain when I helped you build a new room on your house and you didn’t help me when I did the same at my house. But now, I’m asking you, please, let’s just go back down the mountain and leave this alone.”

Franz was halfway up the large pine tree and he wasn’t interested in giving up. Just as he grabbed hold of a limb above his head to steady himself so he could get a look at the hut, the branch under him broke and tumbled through the lower branches to the ground, leaving him hanging in the air. In his hurry and in the growing darkness Franz hadn’t noticed that the tree he climbed was dead.

“Hans!” Franz yelled. “Help!”

“Franz!” Hans yelled. “Hang on!” He began to climb the tree after his brother but the weight of both men was too much for the dead tree and it began to crack at its base.

Hans climbed down to the ground and began yelling toward the hut. “Help! Help us!”

“Hans! What are you doing? They’ll know we’re here.” Franz had reached out with his foot and worked his way around the tree to stand on a limb on the other side of the trunk. “I’m okay.” The tree trunk cracked again near the ground and leaned a little farther.

“This tree is dead Franz,” Hans said. “It’s going to fall. It’s already leaning.”

Franz saw something moving by the hut. He pulled his binoculars from his coat pocket and saw two people followed by the cow coming toward them down the trail from the cabin.

“It’s the thieves!” he said just loud enough for Hans to hear. “They’re coming and they’ve got the cow.”

Hans started walking toward the hut. “I’ll see if they have a rope.”

“No,” Franz said. “We’ve caught them. “Hide! They won’t see me up here.”

Throughout his life Hans had almost always done as his older brother asked in order to keep peace between them. But now he knew what he must do.

“Franz, if this tree falls, you could die. You’re my brother and I love you, and I have to do what I know is right. Maybe the people in the hut have ropes and we can keep the tree from falling. The tree lurched a little farther and Franz barely held on, swinging so hard to one side he had to step onto another branch.

“Hello!” Hans called out to the flashlight coming toward him. “My brother is stuck in a dead tree and I’m afraid it’s going to fall! He’s quite far up and can’t get down!”

There was a loud crack! that came from the tree’s trunk and it leaned a few feet farther but rested on branches of the trees next to it.

“I have some ropes!” Katharina said. She handed the flashlight to Anna and ran back toward the hut.

Without a word, Luna ran past Anna and Hans toward the dead tree. There was another loud crack! and the dead pine tree leaned a little farther and crashed into an oak tree's large limb, breaking off the branch Franz stood on and leaving his feet dangling in the air again. Franz reached for another branch with his feet but there was nothing to stand on.

"Help!" Franz cried.

Luna put her head against the tree and pushed as hard as she could with all four of her mighty legs. More loud cracks came from the dead tree's trunk, but Luna kept the tree from falling.

"Hold on, brother!" Hans cried out. "We'll get you down!"

Luna pushed with all her strength but she could feel the tree pushing even harder against her. "I think this tree really wants to fall down," she said. "I don't know if I can stop it."

Katharina ran toward the tree with a coil of climbing rope over her shoulder. "We better move fast," she said. "That tree's going to fall any minute."

"I have an idea," Anna said. "We need to get a rope over that big limb up there," Anna pointed to the oak tree's branch that reached within a few feet of Franz. "If he can grab onto it, we can lower him down to the ground."

"Excellent idea," Katharina said. She quickly tied a rock to one end of the rope and ran past the falling tree so she stood under the big oak. She swung the rock in circles and let out a few inches of rope with each swing until there were a couple feet of rope swinging and she let go of the rope and the rock took it up into the trees, but fell back to the ground when it hit the big oak branch instead of flying over it. Katharina's next try worked perfectly and sailed over the oak tree's limb. Franz grabbed the rope with one hand, and then the other.

Just then the dead tree finally gave way. Anna yelled for Luna to get away but it was too late and the tree fell onto her back, collapsing one of her legs beneath her. Anna ran to Luna's side as Katharina and Hans held the rope and lowered Franz to the ground.

"Luna!" Anna cried. She ran to where Luna was trapped under the tree and tried to push it off her back but it was far too heavy.

"Is the farmer all right?" Luna said. "I really hope he's okay."

Anna looked behind her and saw Hans helping Franz to his feet. When he was sure Franz was all right, Hans ran into the woods with his flashlight swinging from side to side as if he was looking for something.

"He's fine," Anna said. "You saved his life."

"I think you did that," Luna said. "You're a very clever girl to figure out how to use the rope like that."

"We did it together," Anna said through her tears. "We'll get this tree off you and you'll be fine."

Anna turned around and saw Hans dragging a small tree that had broken off at the ground when the dead pine came crashing down. Franz and Katharina helped him break off the tree's branches, turning it into a pole.

Hans put one end of the pole under the fallen tree, just past Luna's nose. All four pushed up on the other end with all their strength until the tree began to roll off the Luna's back. Hans moved the limb a little farther under the tree and they all pushed again. This time the tree rolled off Luna and onto the ground.

“Oh, that feels a lot better,” Luna said, coughing a bit. “But I don’t think one of my legs is working. And it’s ... a little bit hard to breathe.” She tried to take a breath but only coughed again.

Hans and Franz looked at each other and frowned. They could see that one of her back legs was bent under her body. Hans knelt next to Luna and carefully ran his hand along her ribs on both sides, then stroked her long snout, which made her nose go up and down just a little.

“I’m sorry.” Hans looked up at Anna. “I’m very sorry.”

“Luna,” Anna said, fighting back tears.

Hans took off his hat and held it in his hand. “Luna, I’m afraid your leg is broken.” He looked at Anna, then Katharina and finally Franz. All of them, even Franz, had tears in their eyes. Hans looked at Luna again. “And I’m afraid she has some broken ribs too.”

“It’s not fair,” Anna said. She could no longer hold back her tears. Katharina put her arm around Anna and pulled her close.

“Oh, a broken leg,” Luna said. “That’s not good. Well, not good for me but I think ... Well, I’m not sure, but I think I did something good.” She looked at Anna. “Didn’t I?”

Anna ran to Luna and wrapped her arms around her enormous neck and gave her the biggest hug she had ever given anyone.

“Luna, you did something better than good. You are amazing and wonderful and full of life. That’s just what you wanted and you did it! I’m so very proud of you.”

Luna blinked a few times and licked her dry lips. “I couldn’t have done anything without you, Anna. You’re the most special person ever. And you gave this old cow a chance to live for the first time in her life.”

Anna tried to stop crying but she couldn’t.

“Now, Anna,” Luna said. “You mustn’t cry. I’ll always remember you and how strong and brave you are. That’s how I want to remember you.”

Luna lifted her head and reached out with her big tongue and gave Anna a giant kiss on her cheek, and Anna, just for a moment, forgot her sorrow and dried her eyes.

“I’m sorry Luna,” she said. “I guess I’m not as strong and brave as you. I will always remember you too and all the things we did.”

Luna’s eyes lit up when Anna called her strong and brave. She even tried to stand up, forgetting about her leg, but soon gave up. “I never thought I’d ever be strong and brave and really alive. It’s a very good feeling.”

Luna’s eyes blinked a few times and she lay her head down on the ground. She lifted her head one last time and her nose went up and down just enough for Anna to notice. She coughed once more, laid her head down again and closed her eyes.

“Is ... she ...” Anna said.

“I’m afraid so,” Hans said, putting his hand on Anna’s shoulder. “She was a special cow. Too bad we never understood how special she was. Until now.”

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Even though Anna and Luna were friends for only a short time, Anna thought of her often for the rest of her life. When she needed courage to do what was right, or when she needed to smile, Luna was there for her.

Years later, Anna had children of her own. When they were old enough to ride bikes, she would take Hans and Katharina for rides on nice weekend days. They would follow the same route Anna followed when she was young, and they would often stop at the Huber farm, now run by Hans's niece, and they would lean their bikes against the pasture fence and watch the cows munching on grasses and wildflowers. Each time they stopped at the farm, Anna would tell her children a story about her adventures with Luna. Even though it had a sad ending, they always liked the exciting story of what happened on Luna's final day. And every time she told that story Anna made sure they understood that Luna did what she thought was right and that's all anyone who is really alive can ever do.

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