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JOHN COYNE

Violations in the Morning

It was the first Saturday after his eighth birthday. He was leaning over the lower section of the cowbarn door, shooting his new pumpgun at tin cans in the barnyard, and watching the sun clear the rows of corn stubs on the horizon of the hill—when the first cry of the cow came down to him on the morning air.

At first he was not sure of the sound; there was no other noise except the occasional shuffling of animals in their stalls and the sporadic clatter of the milking machine as his father moved it from cow to cow. But then the cry came again, low and bleating, each utterance complete and final, shattering the silence. He turned to his father, who had heard the cry and paused waiting for the recoil of the sound.

"It's old man Fisher's cow," he said to the boy, anticipating his question. "She must be calving."

The boy looked out over the half door in the direction of the cries. He could see the dark roof of Fisher's barn protruding on the horizon of corn stubs. He watched the roof-top as if waiting for a sign, and listened closely to the constant cries of the cow; then he abruptly turned away from the door and walked back to where his father was finishing the milking.

They took the milk cans over to the milk house. The wind was stronger now; it blew down on the boy, cutting his thin face, bringing tears to his eyes.

"She really seems in trouble," his father said, coming out of the milk house and looking in the direction of Fisher's farm. "Maybe we'll drive up there a little later. What do think, boy?" He rubbed his hand roughly, playfully, across the top of the boy's head, and walked passed him toward the house.

The boy watched his father walk slowly up the hill, then cradling the pump gun in his arms, he turned and headed toward the small creek behind the barn. It wasn't much of a creek. Just a dried up hollow that cut across the lower section of their land. Most of the year it was dry, but in April, when the snow melted and the spring rains started, it caught and carried off the water that washed down the hill. Now, in November, the creek was dry, filled only with matted leaves and driftwood.

The boy moved up the creek to a clump of tall pines which grew along the bank. He could see small sparrows cluttered in the branches, looking, from that distance, like tiny balls of dark cotton. When he began to shoot at the birds he couldn't hit them at first; they flew off in crazy circles as the pellets whizzed past them. He was just growing
tired of his game when a pellet caught a bird, sending it tumbling through the bare branches onto the bank of the creek, among the dry leaves.

Holding his gun majestically, glorying in his kill, he walked over to it. The bird flipped convulsively in the brown leaves as its life drained out. Then it lay still, panting, blood trickling from its beak. It stretched its ruffled neck once, gasped for air, and died, freezing into a numb form. The boy felt nauseated at the sight. Straightening up quickly, he glanced around to see if anyone was watching. With his left foot he kicked leaves up over the bird; he did it swiftly, and turning, walked back up the hollow to the barn.

His father was waiting for him at the barn door and the boy wondered if he had seen him kill the sparrow.

"I'm going up to see Fisher's cow," his father said. "If you want to come, put your gun in the house. I'll wait for you in the truck."

The boy ran to the house and put his gun inside the back door; then he went down to where the truck was parked next to the chicken coop and climbed up beside his father.

Fisher's farm was two miles from their house. A group of wooden buildings isolated in the center of flat corn land. When his father turned the truck off the highway and up the dirt road, the boy could see the cars and trucks of other farmers parked in the yard between the house and the barn.

His dad parked the truck, and, climbing out, walked across to the farmers, grouped around the cow by the barn door. The boy hurried after his father, grabbing him by the trouser pocket.

The farmers turned away from the cow as the two approached, and clearing apart, let them pass inside the circle. It was a big brown Swiss, secure in a stanchion and with its four legs tied together with rope. The boy could see Bill Jerkins' oldest son, Clifford, standing directly behind the cow. It was when the boy followed his father around the circle that he noticed Clifford had his hand and arm stuck up inside the cow.

"Do you feel anything?" a small, stout man asked.

The boy suddenly felt sick, and he clutched his stomach, breathing deeply to ward off the squeamish feeling.

"Can you feel the head?" the stout man asked. He was a huge faced man with heavy layers of skin rolled down his short neck. He looked from the cow to the farmers who formed the circle. "My hands are just too damn big," he said, almost in apology. "I can't get in there."

"Old Clifford's doing all right, Doc," one of the men said, "but then, he has lots of practice." The men laughed, and the man who had said it looked at their faces and grinned widely with tobacco stained teeth.
"Well, it ain’t never felt like this before," Clifford answered, picking the cigarette from between his thick lips. They laughed again and the boy glanced curiously at their faces, then at his father, who was staring at the cow.

“What’s the matter with the cow, Doc?” his father asked.

“It’s the calf, Mr. Warren; he’s setting wrong. She won’t drop him.”

The cow cried again, pulling at the ropes and swinging her head around to look at Clifford. Her eyes were brown and wild. The hurt inside her, it seemed to the boy, balanced itself in her eyes. She cried again, extending her neck in the stanchion, pushing the pain out as far as she could.

“Where’s Fisher?” his father asked.

“He’s up in the house,” the veterinarian answered. “He doesn’t want me to do anything Mr. Warren. When he called me over this morning he told me I couldn’t touch her; he just wanted me to tell him what was the matter. Maybe you might go talk with him and see if he’ll let me work on her. She’ll die, otherwise.” He watched the boy’s father through small, sorry eyes that hid in the heavy dark skin of his face.

“Maybe Fisher is scared you’ll do the same thing to the cow as that doctor did to his wife,” one of the farmers said. “He ain’t never got over that.”

“Well, I’ll go talk with him anyway, Doc. Maybe I can reason with him.”

His father, turning straight around, dropped his hand gently on the boy’s shoulder and directed him to follow. They walked silently up the slight hill toward the barren farmhouse that stood frozen against the November winds. The boy listened attentively to the sound of their feet on the hard ground, and when they stepped up onto the porch, the hollow noise their shoes made, walking to the door. His dad knocked on the broken screen door and stood back, patiently waiting for it to open.

The boy drew his coat tightly around him and faced away from the wind, which whipped around the corner of the house. It was colder now. The sun had slid behind snow clouds and as he looked back across the yard he saw the shadow descend on the cow and men. It came first across the corn fields, then the trees and the yard, engulfing them, and then ran up the side of the barn out of sight.

The door of the house opened slightly and his father spoke friendly to two white flashes of eyes which appeared in the small opening.

“Morning, Sadie, I’d like to see Mr. Fisher, if he isn’t busy.”

The door opened slowly, cautiously, and his father pulled back the broken screen door and stepped into the house.

It was dark in the room and the boy caught the strong animal odors as he stepped inside. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he noticed
that they were in the kitchen and that it had been a colored woman
who had opened the door.

"The old man is in the front room." She said walking away from
them. Her voice flowed like music and the boy was startled by the
sound of it. He had never heard a Negro's voice sound so lovely.

A chicken flew up from the floor and landed on the table. It walked
gallantly across piles of dirty dishes until the woman grabbed a broom
and slapped the bird off the table.

"Place full of damn animals," she muttered, kicking out at a small
dog lying under the sink. She turned around and looked at the boy
and his father. "I told you he's in the front room." She tried to snap
out the words, but they came through her thick lips mellowed and
lyric.

"Thanks, Sadie," his dad answered, nodding and smiling, "we'll be
out of your way in a minute."

His father, holding his hand, crossed behind the kitchen table, and
walked down a long dark hall toward the front room.

Unlike the kitchen, the front room was large and well lighted by
two windows which looked out on the barn. There were a few pieces of
furniture scattered around. In the center of the room sat Fisher, in an
old rocking chair. He was a small man with a tiny head resting un-
certainly on a long neck. The blue working overalls which he wore
hung loosely on his body.

"Morning, Mr. Fisher," his father said when they came into the
room.

Fisher glanced up quizzically and studied them, then he motioned
toward two chairs.

"Morning, Warren," he said, after they had settled themselves. His
voice was brittle and bird-like. They were quiet again. The boy, sitting
close to his father, watched the hollow cheeks of the old man move
slowly in and out like a shrunked bellows.

"How about a drink?" Fisher asked his dad, not looking at him,
but moving back and forth in the rocker.

"Oh, no sir," his father answered, waving off the suggestion.
Fisher nodded and then tilting his head back shouted.

"Sadie... Sadie... come here." He settled back then into the
rocker. "That damn woman," he muttered. "Ain't worth the money
I give her."

Heavy shuffling footsteps came down the hall and the bulky form
of Sadie appeared in the doorway.

"What the hell you want?"

"Bring me a bottle of whisky, the good stuff, and some cups." He
pulled up in the chair and glared at the woman. "And hurry about it!"

She stood regarding him with white, flashing eyes, then, turning,
she said softly, as if only to reassure herself, "I ain't no nigger slave."
"The veterinarian wants to know about the cow, Mr. Fisher," his father said, after the woman had left.

"The veterinarian knows what I want done," Fisher snapped back. "I ain't going to be telling him all day."

"What's that?"

"Nothing." He jerked the word out.

"She'll die. Have you heard her out there?" His dad's voice rose as he pointed toward the barn.

Fisher pulled himself painfully from the chair and walked crippled up over to the window which looked out across the yard.

"That cow has been giving me nothing but trouble since I got her. Now she has got a calf stuck up inside her all wrong. Well, let her die; let her die." He turned around and looked at the boy and his father. "Look at them," he said, spitting out the words and pointing toward the barn, "all of them out there waiting to violate that goddamn cow. Well, let them wait till they freeze up like corn stubs; they won't touch her." He walked slowly back from the window and sank exhaustedly into the rocking chair.

Sadie came back into the room carrying the bottle and two cups.

"Do you want one for the boy?" she asked.

"No," Fisher answered quickly. "The boy's too young; he'll have enough time for that without my encouragement."

The woman handed his father the cup, filled it half way with whiskey, and then walked over to the old man. Holding the cup herself, she filled it full with whiskey and then gave it to him.

"You're going to lose both the cow and calf," his father said again to Fisher, "If you don't let the vet . . ."

"That fat old slop," the old man said. "Him and his dirty hands. I'd rather have it die than let him at her." He pulled himself up in the chair. "She wouldn't die, anyway," he added with conviction.

"All right; I'll tell the vet." His Dad stood up and set the cup of whiskey down on the chair.

"I'll tell him myself," Fisher interjected, starting to rise.

"No, you ain't," Sadie called from the hallway entrance. "You ain't leaving that chair." She pointed at him to remain seated.

"I'll do what I damn please," he shouted back, his weak voice betraying him.

"I ain't having you go out there and die of cold. As long as I'm working for you and trying to keep you alive, you'll listen to me." She stood big and motionless in the entrance of the hall.

Fisher watched her for a moment.

"Is this the way you'll beat me? . . . waiting till I'm too crippled to fight back? After all these years of living off me. I should have thrown you out with that bastard son long ago." He turned away from the woman and said to himself, "But you live to regret those weak
moments... take pity on someone and they'll stay around long enough to humiliate you for it.” Fisher stopped then, cutting off his rage and turning looking at the boy. “Remember that, boy! Don’t take pity on any of the sons-of-bitches.” He sat quiet in the chair, his small hands grabbing the arms of the rocker in desperate determination.

The boy and his father followed the colored woman down the hall and back into the kitchen. When his father went to open the back door the woman spoke to him.

“You mustn’t mind the old man; he ain’t feeling well.”

His father nodded and said he understood, then opened the door. It was still cold and the cry of the cow hit the boy again.

They walked down to the grouped men in silence and when they reached them his father slackened off his pace and stopped.

“Fisher said to leave the cow alone,” his father told them, raising his voice so that they all could hear. “He said he doesn’t want the cow violated.”

“She’ll die,” the veterinarian stated flatly, and the boy noticed the corners of his small eyes sparkle with tears.

“The old man’s crazy,” Clifford butted in. He had his arm out of the cow and the boy saw traces of blood dried up on the elbow of his right arm which he had missed when cleaning himself. “Let’s go ahead and turn the calf around.”

“No,” the vet answered, turning slowly and gathering his equipment. “We’ll leave her alone. It’s Fisher’s cow; let her die.”

“Come on, son,” his father touched the boy’s head, “there isn’t anything we can do here.”

The boy followed his father up to the truck, looking back only once at the cow. She was standing quietly in the stanchion with swelling pregnancy, let alone to die.

When they reached home the boy left his father and ran across the yard to the barn where he picked up a shovel, then he walked down to the hollow where he had hidden the sparrow under the leaves. He had forgotten exactly where he had buried the bird and it took a few minutes of shifting the leaves carefully before he found it again. He dug a hole in the ground, and lifting the still bird with the shovel, dropped it into the hole. Then he filled the hole and covered it over with leaves. He wanted to do it throughly, completely, so that tomorrow he would not know where the hole was located.

When he had finished he ran back to the barn and replaced the shovel, wiping the dirt off it so there would be no trace of digging. He suddenly felt very relieved, and sighing deeply, started to walk back up to the house. It was then that he noticed the cow had stopped crying. The crying was there in the wind, strong and constant as it had been since he first heard it, and now it had stopped. He glanced around, looking over the horizon at the black roof for a sign, an
explanation, but there was only silence and the cold November wind.

He started again to walk slowly toward the house, trying to reason out what had happened that morning. He did not understand. He did not understand old man Fisher sitting crippled in his rocker, nor Sadie, big and motionless, with a voice like music standing in the dark hallway. He did not understand what it was to violate the cow or anyone else, nor why the veterinarian with his fat hands cried because he could not help the cow. He did not understand any of these things, nor did he understand why it hurt him so to see the small sparrow lying still in the dry brown leaves.

He stepped slowly up onto the back porch of his house as the sun broke through the clouds. It was high in the sky now, and brighter than it had been that morning. He wished, standing alone on the porch and remembering the morning, that he had not begun the day.

DIANA SCHELLENBERG

Terminus

Where have I walked? In a fearsome wood
Where briared, gnarled giants stood
In dreary twilight solitude,
   Dying without the sun;

A mountain wasteland, blackened, scarred,
A land so desolate and marred
It offered not the scant reward
   Of even a sweet bird song.

Unearthly cries in the deadened air
Rode each chill wind that touched me there
And tangled round me like a snare:
   “Come, die with us here!”