The Calf

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1.

SHORTLY after the heroine of this story was born, something happened to her mother that caused a tremendous stir in our village.

Her mother was a handsome and well-bred beast—though her breeding was not of the obvious kind that goes with a pedigree. She did not have a full face or heavy body or plump udders, and her tail did not swing behind her like the train of a matron's dress. No, her beauty consisted solely in virtuous ways: mildness, patience, and humility. Like a true Jewish cow, she did penance for being in exile. Lacking a permanent lodging, she roamed the streets and slept wherever she could lay her head. On the rare occasions when the cold became intolerable, she was admitted to the dark outhouse, where she spent the night surrounded by an overflowing swill bucket, heaps of moldy rags, blocks of rotting wood, and the fresh stench of manure.

When it came to fasting, our cow was a paragon. She could fast for days without effort. She was simply not the glutton that gentile beasts are. Through sincere piety she gradually broke herself of the habit of feeding and would accept anything at all as food, and in any quantity. To paraphrase the saying about the woman of valor: "Many were the Jewish beasts that did valiantly, but she surpassed them all."

When the former owner of the cow had sold her to my mother, he proclaimed the beast to be overflowing with milk. This turned out to be not quite true, but it would be doing the cow a great injustice to blame her. In the first place, she was not guilty of withholding what she had, since she had nothing, and secondly, she received, as far as feed went, much less than her legitimate due. Besides, such mutual deceptions are common among Jews—deceptions based not so much on what is actually said as on what is imagined or predicted. This state of self-delusion being so widespread, all sales must be final.

Nor could the cow have been said to lack dignity. She did, it is true, wander about the market place, thrusting her chin into the peasants' wagons and sticking her tongue into this and that. But what would you have a poor beast do—drop dead in the middle of the street? Canvass any Jewish town and you'll find that all the Jewish beasts support themselves in the same way. And if our cow did manage to steal a lick from some peasant's wagon she was well rewarded—with a shower of blows and lashes, a deluge of vulgar insults from the mob.

So much for good looks and breeding. As for mildness, patience, and humility—half the Jewish population in the village could testify to that. On dark nights many a Jew staggered and fell over her as she lay sprawling in the mud of the market place. Another beast would have bellowed, "What's the idea, climbing over me in the middle of the night!" and would have reared up and thrown the poor man over her head. But our beast rose meekly to her feet and ambled away, her unexpected visitor perched gingerly on her back, until he fell of his own accord.

Our cow had her share of vices too. But where is the creature free of moral blemish? Is there a nobler beast than the bull, with his great head and big belly, or the he-goat, foremost of the village herd? Yet both those imposing creatures suffer from an unmentionable urge: neither can be permitted a female's stall without the presence of a watchman.

2.

Early one winter morning, as I lay huddled beneath my comforter, snatching the last few precious winks before going to study at the *cheder,* a hand shook me. "Hurry! Hurry and get up!" I opened my eyes and saw my sister, then about nine years old, standing near my bed. Her face was glowing, her eyes were burning with a peculiar light, and a fixed smile played on her lips. She was trying to say something, but her breath would not come. She made an inarticulate sound and pointed.

I looked. And just as I was, barefoot and naked except for my shift, holding one hand over my head (I had no time to look for my skullcap), I jumped up and ran to the calf. My joy was indescribable: it was as though the world were now entirely mine and everything in it shared my jubilation. The sun shone more brightly, the dawn was less chilly, the air filled with a holiday spirit. Everything seemed to beam at me, crying, "Congratulations to you, boy, on a new calf!"

I squatted on the floor near the new arrival and studied her closely. She was a pretty beast, egg-yellow, with a white spot that resembled a silver cockade on her forehead. Gradually I became bolder and moved closer. First I touched her gingerly, and then, probing with one finger, I looked her in the eyes. Finally I became very chummy and gave her a hearty welcome with my whole hand.

The calf did not appreciate a boy's notion of a hearty welcome. Affronted, she gathered all her strength and tried to get up. She began with her backside, which she raised by cautiously rising on her rear legs, resting meanwhile on the knees of her forelegs. Then she got up on all fours, teetering like a shaky table. A cord hung from her navel. For a moment she stood this way, trembling, gawky, her calf-eyes protruding. Then she unexpectedly lifted her tail and started galloping through the room. The milking stool fell, the chickens were frightened and perched, with furious cackles, on table and bench, dishes were broken and pots upset. My mother, who was with the cow in the outhouse, rushed breathlessly into the room, and wrath descended on my head.

What a day I had of it! Slaps and blows at home, blows and slaps at *cheder*—may God preserve you from such a fate.

I left for the *cheder* with my head full of calf. Everyone I met on the way was told the glad tidings: our cow had calved! Beaming like the host at a celebration, I regaled my chums with praise of the calf and promised those lucky enough to be on close terms with me that they would be able to see it and even play with it in my company. I took as advance payment a pair of bronze buttons with eagles on them and a few pieces of cracked glass, swearing on my honor, as I held the fringes of my prayer vest, that each would be allowed the first ride on the calf. These items of business made me late for the *cheder;* I received an appropriate reward.

The Talmud lay open before me, but all I could see was the calf: small chin, tiny perked-up ears, delicate neck. The *rebbe* droned on, intoning the Talmudic singsong: I heard the cow mooing to her calf. The *rebbe* rose from his chair: the calf clambered to her feet. The *rebbe* lifted his arm: the calf lifted her rear—he to slap and she to run. The *rebbe* was furious. Wordless, I held my cheek. Suddenly the door opened and my rescuer appeared. Long life to the *rebbe*'s wife! But she stalked away empty-handed, slamming the door behind her, and the *rebbe,* completely losing his temper, took out his misery on me.

That I reached home with a whole skin was a miracle.

My first thought was for the calf. On tiptoe, like a lover spying on his beloved, I stole over to the corner where my mother had led the calf for fear of an evil eye. And the morning's episode was repeated: my approaches, the calf's flight, my mother's fury.

Yet my love for the calf grew daily, together with the sufferings it brought me. My childish heart froze with anguish at the dealings that took place over its body. They were going to slaughter the poor creature, they were casually dismembering it while it was still alive, counting on their fingers: so much for the hide, so much for the forequarters, so much for each limb. And all the while the innocent beast looked on, licking my mother's hand affectionately while she dickered over the price of its tongue.

At that time I was untutored in the world's subtleties. It never occurred to me that something might be amiss with the order of things; that the wisdom which had come down from time immemorial might be folly; philosophy, mere sophistry; conventional piety, unfeeling and cruel. So I was unhappy with my unhappiness, regarding it as the work of the Evil Spirit. I remembered how our *rebbe* had once explained the Biblical passage, "Go not after your own heart," as meaning that a boy ought not to allow himself strong desires.

I was deeply troubled. I struggled to remove all thought of the calf from my mind and told myself that it was sinful of me to feel compassion for a mere beast. Was I obliged to sacrifice my soul for her, to place myself in jeopardy of the fires of hell? But the more I strove to forget, the more her fate preyed upon me.

Unhappy and perplexed, I was ashamed to look either the calf or my mother in the eyes. God knows what might have happened to me had there not occurred something completely unexpected.

3.

It was a March night, cold and bitter. A wind raged outdoors, as though a thousand demons were celebrating their nuptials. Snowflakes danced through the air in weird, distorted shapes. Roofs shook; chimneys moaned; windowpanes crackled and buzzed. Not a soul was abroad.

Our cow, still recuperating, had spent the night in the filthy, drafty outhouse. What does a beast do in such a place? She chews her cud, regurgitating the sour stuff, and every once in a while she quietly sighs.

Early the next morning I was awakened by my mother's loud laments. The beast had died!

Everyone in the house was dejected; even the cock stood still, head downcast, neglecting his harem. A hen fluttered around, cackling, looking for a spot to set, but no one troubled to cover her with the sieve. Another hen flew out from under the bed and perched on a bench with her head high, as if to announce, "Congratulate me! I've laid an egg!" But no one noticed her. We all stood around disconsolate, including the neighbors, who had come running at my mother's outcry.

My mother launched into a funeral oration, describing the infinite virtues of our cow, her yield of cheese and butter (items I had never seen). She continued with a detailed account of how she had come in at daybreak to milk the cow; how she had found the beast covered with the snow that drifted in through the crevices in the outhouse walls; how she had set down the milk bucket, taken a broom, and swept the snow off the cow's back. Then for the first time she had seen that the beast was stark dead. At first my mother had been astonished, but now the reason was clear to her.

"Listen everyone," said my mother, piously raising her eyes to the ceiling, "this is God's handiwork. I realize it now. The beast has died as an atonement for us, she has taken our sins upon her. For there is a curious tradition in our family. My saintly forefather commanded his children and their children to commemorate the second day of the new moon of the month of Adar with a special feast, a sort of special *Purim,* in remembrance of a miraculous escape from death once granted him on that date. He pronounced a curse on any descendant who neglected this duty. Yesterday was that day, and I forgot to celebrate it. This beast, I tell you, is our atonement. Why else should a cow die so soon after having calved?"

While my mother was delivering this learned oration the calf rushed into the room, her head and tail up, crying, "Moo-moo!" The sight of the orphan broke our hearts, for the meaning of her "Moo" was plain enough. The poor thing was hungry and was lowing for her mother's teats. All the women wiped their noses, shuffled their feet, and began to move their lips. One of them, more learned than the rest, who was constantly citing the sages, particularly a certain Reb Bachya, was the first to lift her voice.

"The Eternal One, blessed be His name, which I am not worthy to mention!" She compressed her lips and wrinkled her face into a patch-

work of piety. "The Almighty, who is exalted among His angelic hosts, is righteous, and His ways are righteous. Now the sages have declared —and in particular Reb Bachya—that there are times when a beast must die in atonement for his master's evil. May this beast atone for you and your household, O Yente" (addressing my mother), "cleansing you and all Israel of impurity, like unto the Red Cow of atonement.

"And now, O Yente," continued the female oracle, "this is my counsel. Let this calf, the fruit of the dead beast's womb, serve as a living memorial, that never again may you transgress against the vow of your saintly forefather. May she be reared in your household and may He who feeds all things, from the eagle on high to the lowliest worm, provide her sustenance: at times potato skins and at times bread crumbs. Consider her as you would a yeshiva student. What does an extra spoonful of soup or a slice of bread mean to a good housekeeper? And after all, a calf turns into a cow, and a cow is always useful, particularly for Jews."

All the women nodded their agreement with this pious and practical counsel. My mother allowed herself to be persuaded; and a stone fell from my heart.

The story of the cow's unprecedented death, so contrary to the laws of nature, created a great stir in the village. People kept dropping into our house to look at the calf, which was given the name of The Special *Purim* Calf.

For three days the village was filled with a terrible howling. The dogs that had gathered in the field were bidding the cow farewell by the customary rites of laceration.

4.

During the first days of mourning the calf yearned loudly for her mother's teats. Various means were tried to silence her: mushes of corn and bran, pieces of bread, even hay. She came into the world with eight fine, white teeth—I counted them myself. The calf used these teeth to chew whatever she was given, making small unhappy noises. Everything went into her mouth—handkerchiefs, tablecloths, old socks —her taste was truly catholic. People bore with her only out of respect for her mother's memory. One Sabbath eve she almost choked to death on the rag that served as the oven damper. Luckily someone saw her—it was necessary to turn the roast—and managed to extract the rag from her gullet just in time.

I alone sincerely loved and pitied the poor orphan. I took her part and bore the blows intended for her, and I loved her all the more. For we had this in common, that we were both persecuted by those stronger than we. It was not so much our physical suffering as the injustice of it all that pained me and drew me close to our calf.

And she seemed fond of me too. She would let me stroke her head, embrace her, grab her by the ears. At such moments she would lick me and look at me with her mournful eyes, as though trying to convey her melancholy to me. For my part, I sensed the unspoken words that the dumb, licking tongue could not utter.

I was a child, and like a child thought that the whole world was a copy of my village, that all places were the same and there was only one way of doing things. Everywhere people prayed, recited psalms, studied the *Mishnah,* pored over the *Gemarah,* sat in small stores, yawned, chatted, gossiped, leaned on canes. Human beings and beasts were part of the same order. Boys were led off to *cheder,* beasts led out to pasture. The *rebbe* had his plaited whip, the shepherd his crook. The one remedy for a slap or a blow was to play with a chum, whether boy or calf it did not matter, so long as it was a living thing. Lucky the boy who could gain the favor of some mongrel, which would follow him around, bark when told, attack at command. Every boy was ready to give up not only his noonday meal but his very soul for such a dog.

But all this is beside the point.

5.

Passover came to an end. Vacation time was over. The herd was led to pasture, and tiny children were carried to the *cheder,* still sleepy, dozing on their older brothers' shoulders. Yet our calf, who was well developed and able to get about on her own feet, remained at home. She was still too tender to join the herd, the shepherd said. There was time enough for her to learn what a beast needs to know: how to graze and chew the cud. So the calf remained at home. Her life was hardly a pot of honey. One of her tutors taught her the virtue of continence by stuffing her mouth with whatever was handy; another taught her good manners and decorum by a liberal use of the rod. Despite all the pains that were taken with her education, she was always hungry and lost considerable weight after her mother's death.

Luckily for her, my *rebbe* soon reached the point where he had nothing more to teach me. I was put on my own and assigned certain hours

of individual study at the synagogue. And at the same time I was appointed guide and mentor to the calf. This was a wonderful stroke of luck for both of us.

A new world opened up for us, such as neither I in the *cheder* nor she in the outhouse had ever imagined.

"Come, my beloved," I would cry, picking up the rope that hung around her neck. "Let us go forth into the field!"

The green grass was a revelation. Everything was alive. We met God's creatures, previously unknown to us: every manner of bird and insect. They flew through the air, glided in the grass, singing and humming and buzzing. My eyes were dazzled by the bright colors of the flowers. I felt alive myself, alive inside. For once I could breathe freely. I turned somersaults in high spirits. Tired, I stretched out on the grass, belly up, and squinted into the sun, which smiled at me as though to say, "Well, young fellow, having a good time?"

Spontaneously I sang a hymn of thanksgiving in the traditional Jewish tremolo. The calf turned her head and mooed, which was her way of inquiring, "What's the matter?"

I jumped to my feet. She was right. Why this melancholy? I spat three times, to avoid an evil eye, and stopped singing.

The calf grazed zealously at my side. Watching her, I was reminded of the patriarch Jacob and how he had tended the flocks of Laban the Aramaean. I thought too of Jacob's happy encounter with Rachel at the well, how they had kissed and embraced. Suddenly my heart began to pound.

That was the work of the Evil Spirit: it was he who brought to mind the memory of a pretty girl who had been my playmate until I had suddenly grown bashful, without knowing why. But now I understood the reason for my shyness and felt miserable. The Good Spirit reproached me, crying, "See, this is where that charmer Nature leads you! She is a witch who puts lewd thoughts in a fellow's head." Nor did the Good Spirit spare the calf either. "A Jewish boy and a calf spending their time together! No good will come of this. Get back to the synagogue!"

But the Evil Spirit is far more cunning than the Good Spirit. Once a lad steps outside the synagogue walls, once he sees what God's fine world looks like, it is almost impossible to bring him back. Once drawn away from his studies and started along the downward path, he keeps to it on his own.

Where did I go? To the woods, of course, and the calf came with me.

A short distance from the village we found a wood where ancient and full-grown hardwood trees pointed to the sky, gnarled roots naked at their feet, their tangled green crowns forming a green sea roof overhead. Near the wood a thicket of short saplings lay among fragrant grasses and flowers. Beyond the thicket fields of wheat and barley stretched as far as the eye could see, and beyond that the ground sloped down to a valley where a clear stream sparkled in the sun, as lively and playful as a child, hiding momentarily among trees thick with leaves, only to reappear in the distance, where it ran downhill murmuring over small stones.

Occasionally a bird would appear, perch on a branch, look at me surreptitiously, as though wondering what manner of creature I was, suddenly bow his head, flutter his tail, move his wings, and—farewell! He was off! Or another bird would turn up on the other side of the valley and face us, standing on his long crimson feet, his silver-white throat and red maw thrust upward, motionless, for a long time. Suddenly he would clop-clop with his beak and speed away over the swamp.

At other times the wood would resound to the neighing of horses pulling the peasants' wagons and the chatter of peasant women gathering mushrooms.

And there I lay at my ease, smiling with pleasure. I looked at the calf and thought to myself, How lucky we both are! We have each other to thank for being here. If not for me, you'd still be languishing in the outhouse, and if not for you, I'd be languishing in the synagogue.

I spent many days lazily enjoying God's world and enjoying my calf, which became my closest friend. I was constantly amused by the enthusiasm that set her dancing, raising her backside in a calf's frolic. At other times she would stretch out her neck to me, exactly like a child reaching to its mother, and plead, "Scratch me right here."

That summer saw a complete change in both of us. The calf put on flesh; she shed her old hide and hair, and the new came in fresh and gleaming. I too came into my own, with a sunburned complexion and a tremendous appetite. Study had as much attraction for me as straw and potato peels for the calf when she came home at night well fed.

My mother, who was not slow to notice this transformation, was not very pleased. "As far as the calf is concerned, a beast is a beast. But as for you, my fine young man, what is to become of you? Just look at you now! You've lost all your Jewish refinement. Your face is red,

like a peasant's. And the way you gorge yourself! That's what you get from going to the woods. I tell you, nothing good will come of this." And then the invariable conclusion: "There's only one remedy. The only place that can make a 'real person' of you is the yeshiva."

6.

My life at the yeshiva, or rather my sufferings there, do not really belong to this story. After all, the calf is our subject, and my career only an appendage to hers. But since we have come this far, I may as well tell you something about it.

What my mother said was quite true: the yeshiva was a remedy. In a short time it turned me into a "real person," with a genuine pallor and ludicrous mannerisms. If I had stayed there for years, as my colleagues did, the yeshiva would have made me as real a person as any of its products. But, unfortunately, I was sinful and could not complete my education. I was badly tormented by the Evil Spirit, which assumed the shape of a calf and of grass and of trees. It was they who had spoiled me, who had turned my head, and now kept me from becoming the model of a "perfect vessel."

Looking at a brother monk—I mean, another yeshiva student—I would be reminded of the calf. When one of my fellow students would scratch himself, which happened often enough, I saw the calf scratching herself. When a student had no steady place to eat one day a week, which also happened often enough, I remembered how the calf had once roamed the house looking for her mother's teats. Wandering restlessly through the yeshiva with my fellows, sleeping on hard benches or on the ground, bitten by fleas, I would conjure up vistas of trees and crops and flowers and hillocks and valleys and a golden sun and a blue sky. When the boys snored in their sleep I heard bees droning. Their noisome breaths set me dreaming of fragrant flowers. There were times when I awoke in the middle of the night, empty with longing.

At such moments I would lose myself in grief and would silently address my unhappy companions. "Brothers, lost and far from home, woe unto us, and all the days of our years! How long shall the ground be our bed, the yeshiva our grave? The devil take us and our studies!"

But my friends slept on, dead to my cry. Regretting my bitterness, I begged their pardon. "Brothers, forgive me. I have had evil thoughts about you. Sleep on, sleep in peace, and may God have mercy on you."

"Dear Mother," I wrote one fine summer day, "yesterday we finished the Talmudical tractate of Baba Metzia. I am getting along pretty well in my studies. Still, I am very homesick for you, Mother, and for everyone at home. (I was ashamed to single out the calf.) Oh, please let me come home for a few days. There'll be no expense. I'll go on foot —all the boys do it. We go barefoot, with a stick in our hands and a pack on our shoulders. As for the few pennies for the trip, I've had them since *Purim*. Please let me come home!"

And without waiting for a reply I set out a few days later. Was there anyone in the whole world happier than I at that moment? Merchants may travel by coach, noblemen on horseback—but their comfort is nothing compared to the elation of a barefoot student fleeing the stench of the yeshiva for the fresh air. I started out very early, took the bypaths that led through fields of barley and corn, and walked all day, reaching home at the time of the late afternoon prayers, when the beasts return from the pasture.

I saw my calf, and she had grown in my absence. Her udders were firm, her horns had sprouted, and she was being courted. A pair of bucks escorted her to the edge of the garden behind our house, wooing her on the way, showing her how delightfully they could lick her, and leaping on her back. With all proper deference to the suitors, I drove them off with a stick and stationed myself in front of the prospective bride.

"Hello there," I said and tried to stroke her neck. But she turned her head away and lifted her small pointed horns like threatening spears, as though to say, "Hands off! Who are you to stroke me, fellow?"

I was more than a little taken aback, but I decided to try again.

"My, my," I said, holding a handful of grass before the beauty's nose. "Here's a present for you." She sniffed the grass, wrinkling her nose, and looked at me with wonder.

"Don't you recognize me?" I smiled somewhat bitterly.

Looking at her for a few minutes, and comparing her well-fleshed body with my own emaciated figure and sunken face, I could not help sighing for my wasted youth. "Almighty God, is it really your will that a human being be cooped up like a goose from childhood on, never to see the world, and to stuff his mind with such nonsense as mine is full of?"

But the calf had apparently recognized my voice, for now she became more friendly and put out her neck for me to scratch, as in the old days. She stood there quietly, looking at me through half-closed eyes, and mooed deep from her chest. I sensed what she meant. She was pleading,

"Scratch me, scratch me, for thy scratches are more pleasing to me than green grass." She was asking, "Where had my beloved disappeared to?" And she was condoling, "How you have changed for the worse!"

My mother, on the other hand, was quite taken with my appearance. It proved to her that I was studying diligently; my face was now that of a virtuous Jewish child, pale and refined, and, God willing, it would serve me well in securing a bride. For it turned out that two prospective fathers-in-law were already bidding for me. They kept whispering to my mother, nodding in my direction with appraising gestures and furrowed brows, like merchants haggling over a piece of cloth.

But the Evil Spirit doth not sleep and came to me early and late, urging me to go forth to my beloved Nature on the pretext that it was healthier out of doors, and that being in the fresh air would further my welfare. And then he began to question all the benefits of my newly won learning, my occupation, my purpose in life. He mocked me bitterly, calling me boor and barbarian. Things came to such a pass that the Evil Spirit began to subvert the yeshiva.

"You are nothing but a—did you think I was going to say 'beast'? Far from it! A beast is himself—he lives the life God has created him for, attends to his wants, follows his instincts, without evasions. But human beings like you are fools and distort their God-given natures. You live according to an idea of what life should be like, not what it really is. A fool, not a beast, is what you really are."

I was convinced, yet it did no good.

"Need breaks iron," goes the folk saying, and even the iron of the Evil Spirit could not withstand the need in my home. It was simply impossible for me to remain with my mother, a poor widow with many little mouths to feed. I bade farewell, farewell to the fields and the forests, farewell to the calf, to all my beloved. And I set out on foot for the yeshiva.

7.

The year that followed was much harder than the first. It was a year when householders were reluctant to give us "eating days," and I suffered hunger. The sages say that the misery of others is half a consolation. If so, I should have been consoled, at least by half, since so many of the other students at the yeshiva went hungry with me. According to the sages and ordinary common sense, that is the way it should have been, but in this case, unfortunately, theory and practice did not coincide. I not only found it difficult to bear my own suffering, I also suffered agonies over the misery of my companions.

Now, looking back, I can admit that the yeshiva life filled me with anger that year, tempting me to consign the whole business of learning to the devil. But that was only at first. After a while, when I grew used to the yeshiva, eating ceased to matter. Nor did I care about my torn shoes, ragged coat, frayed elbows. My chums and I would frequently poke fun at such inconsequential details, competing with one another in raillery. Only later did I perceive wherein the great virtue of the yeshiva lay: the paupers whom the yeshiva graduates are jolly paupers; its alumni—the *cheder* rabbis, the religious hangers-on, the general ne'er-do-wells—are unconcerned with worldly matters. And for Jews who must live in exile that is a saving virtue.

"Congratulate me, son," wrote my mother after a long silence. "Congratulate me on my cow. Don't you understand what I mean? Your calf has dropped a calf, and now she's a proper cow. There's milk at home—and after selling it in the market there's some left for us. Ah, if only you too were the cause of congratulations! It's a good cow, but she won't let me milk her—jumps and screams whenever I go near her. She is simply wasting away after her slaughtered calf. Have you ever heard of such a thing—a cow that won't forget her calf? She always was difficult; you were the only one who could handle her. Well, you brought her up properly, I see. It would be better if you had taught her less and yourself more. Study, my child, study, and, God willing, you'll become a proper man. Yes, no one can deny it, it was a really tender calf. The slaughterer paid me a good price for her. I'm sending you a few gold coins and a piece of broiled liver, by hand of Chayeh Hinde, as recompense for the trouble you once took with her mother. It seems that . . ."

I could not read on. I saw black, my head began to spin, and I fainted. My companions had to throw a bucket of water over me before they could bring me to my senses. They stood before me and asked what was the matter. Had someone become sick at home or, Heaven forbid, died? I could not answer. How could I tell them that I was sick at heart for a beast in whose company I had spent the happiest moments of my life? Tell them that my blood ran chill at the thought of a cow whose first-born calf had been slaughtered? I would have been a laughingstock!

8.

The slightest word is enough to upset a yeshiva student, to call his fantasy into play. This is particularly true of one who lacks "eating days," whose body is wasted by the strain of his studies and the stress of his hunger. My mother's few words were enough to inflame my imagination, already taxed by the mental flights of my studies, and soon my sleep was troubled with fearful hallucinations. No sooner did I lie down on the yeshiva floor than a curtain lifted before my mind's eye.

First to appear is my old playmate, the calf, now a cow, and her child, a tiny delightful thing. The calf approaches her mother, sucks at her teats, pushes against the udders, and merrily swishes her tail. The mother is ecstatic. Bending her head to her offspring, she licks it again and again, with a low murmur of love. I look at the mother with rapt attention, and she returns my gaze. As always, there is complete understanding between us. She stands there glowing, and her warmth sets the whole scene a-quiver with sympathy; my heart is so light, so happy.

Abruptly the scene changed. The stage darkened. Mother and child disappeared. Nothing remained.

I felt cold. There was an insurrection in me, whose battle cry was "Food!" I had visions of milk, sour cream, cheese, a whole loaf of bread spread with butter. Then I conjured up a roast, with chunks of meat sautéed in fat and onion. I grew faint with hunger. I could no longer bear it. I tossed about on the floor, turning from side to side. A bell rang in my ears: the second act.

A young calf, about eight days old, struggles out of the slaughterer's hands and runs off, crying bitterly, the slaughterer in hot pursuit. The calf cries desperately for her mother, but she is in the pasture and cannot help. The calf tries to hide under someone's coat tails. But the slaughterer drags her out, repeating the words of Rabbi Judah the Prince: "Go! This is what you were born for!" The slaughterer casts her to the ground, presses her down with his knees, pulls her neck taut, raises the knife, begins the benediction, "Blessed art thou, Master of the Universe," and strikes. Blood, a hoarse cry, a shudder, the death rattle.

I am blinded by colors, red and blue and purple. I wipe drops of blood from my forehead.

From that moment on I lost control of my bodily functions. I could no longer distinguish between dream and reality. Sweetmeats hung over my nose, made up of the calf's roasted liver and lungs. I was being slapped, pricked with needles. Burning coals scorched my pocket. Two gold coins sprang out. I looked at them—and a pair of blood-swollen calf's eyes stared back at me.

The same day they carried me off to the hospital, babbling incoherently, a letter arrived from my mother:

"My son, try hard to become a proper man. Devote yourself only to the yeshiva and your studies. Your poor mother is desolate, all her means of livelihood are gone. She has lost her last support, because of her sins.

"The cow, your calf, has died."

Translated by Jacob Sloan