

“Bully”

by Jenn Sroka

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It was Thanksgiving, a “Canadian” Thanksgiving in Ontario, yet the young steer in the back of our small aluminum trailer had little to be thankful for at the present. He was born on our farm, raised the right way in the open air on a large pasture with grass and hay, no bulking of grain to painfully puff him up or growth hormones to sour his personality. Yet something was not quite right in his temperament. Some kink in his personality made me nervous around this one, and kept my guard up when I was around him. His father was a Highland, one of the gentlest of cattle, descended from Scottish breeding. His mother was a Black Angus, a breed known to be temperamental, yet she would lick grain from my hand. It was just this small, black, hairy steer that seemed to be a throwback to his mother’s unpredictable pedigree.

We made the appointment to drop him off at the packers, yet could find no one at the office or the house in front when we arrived. My husband knew how the doors operated, and found one on the side was open. He opened the one way door to the cement shoot inside the front of the building, and propped the door open with a garbage bin. Next, he backed the trailer into the unloading area, and hooked a metal gate to block access to the road. The gate was just a visual deterrent; it leaned on the side of the building and would push over easily should the steer go that direction. Beyond the gate was a major roadway with constant vehicular traffic on the snowy road and lots of open fields. If a cow went loose in that direction, the dangers were unthinkable.

We opened the back ramp of the trailer. Thinking the steer would be relieved to sniff freedom, we were surprised to find him glued to the nose of the small box. While we pondered what to do next, a heavy duty truck and long trailer pulled into the yard. I recognized the livestock man who climbed out of the cab, and graciously accepted his assistance in unloading our calf. My husband went into the side door that went to the smaller chute beyond the first concrete room, and we concentrated on getting the steer out of the trailer. The concrete room was about 8 feet long by 6 feet wide, completely cemented from ceiling to floor in shiny concrete. On our side was a solid metal door with the handle on the outside. At the end of the chute was another, smaller door that was open for the steer to go through. We managed to shoo the steer out of the trailer, and he even went into the concrete room without a hesitation. I went after him to shut the inner door once he was through it.

Something startled the steer, and he abruptly turned back the way he came toward the open outer metal door and his freedom. I was pushed to the side against a wall as he made a mad dash back toward the light. The man assisting us tried to fend off the steer without closing the door, but it was impossible. The door slammed shut, trapping me and the crazed steer together in a cement box with no light, no exit. I shared a dark cell with a dangerous horned and hooved animal,

and unlike him, I was unarmed.

It was cold against the wall. The smell of dried blood and old meat mixed with my own sweat and the steer's dirty coat of hair. He sniffed the door, taking long inhalations of where he knew freedom had disappeared. I moved to a rounded corner, and flattened my body into it. My husband, in another room and out of view, called to the steer in hopes of luring him into the next room. But the door to that was small, and the chute in there had no exit for me. I tried to be quiet, breathe quiet.

The steer's nose continued down from the door to the wall, and then pressed against me in the corner. He pushed his wet nose into my stomach, and I turned my body around to protect my soft stomach as best I could. The steer, his mouth smelling like soured milk, pushed into my back, against my ribs. And then he dropped his head.

He lowered his head, and the first horn raked down my right shoulder blade. I muffled my pain, but I wanted to scream. The steer felt I was something soft and pliable in his concrete tomb and pressed his horns into me harder. Each rake of the horn down my ribs was like a slow slide of a blade across a xylophone. I struggled to get as high up the wall as I could to stop the pain of the points against my back. Somewhere in the background my husband was making noise further in the chute, desperately trying to call the steer off, but it was another world away from the beast and me.

I shifted to where I was nearly between his horns, but had to sacrifice a side of my body. He lowered his attack, and pommelled my right butt cheek. Finding something softer there, he continued to pound, ripping my pants with the tip of one horn and molesting the bare flesh he uncovered even harder. I muffled screams, I felt the tears stream down my face, I tried to push my body off his horn with my hand. This bent my arm back, hurting worse than his pounding my posterior so I sacrificed the cheek to put my arm across my lower back and save my kidney. He was beating my body, lifting me right off my feet with each thrust, but I had to stay on my feet. If I slipped, if I went under 800 lbs of angry hooves and horns, I would be lucky to end up with just a battered body. This was potential death. My heart raced, my breathing fast and short, as I took punch after punch. Nothing crossed my mind but survival.

The metal door to the outside world cracked open, shedding a beam of light into the dark vault. A strong arm dived in, and the cattle man's quick hand grabbed my arm. He pulled me through the metal door, and slammed his weight against it to lock the raging steer away from me. I collapsed, falling to my knees to avoid landing on my rear. My husband raced around and out the side entrance, grabbing me up in his arms. I tried to put weight on my right leg, faltering at first, and then slowly the numbness left it as it returned to function. I half-hovered over the passenger seat the long hour ride home, tattooed by a massive purple hematoma under the triangular tear in my pants. I silently gave thanks for my life. So thankful. Thanks giving.