

Around Close

by Chris Sheehan

By the edge in your father's voice—after he stopped his truck along the oiled forest service road, and ahead you could see a cow lying in the ditch—you think he might have something in mind beyond what is framed in the headlights, when he says, How do you figure this, son?

When you came on the Klamath River, a mile back, early in the morning, and saw the bright green and yellow foam collected in the shore water, you said you wished your mother was there to see it, and he hit you, though it was more of a reaction, and you've been hit harder in fights at school. You didn't know that a train had spilled its load of concentrated pesticides in the river and he would spend the whole day taking pictures, wading in the water, with his company waders from the toxicology lab, wading deep in the pools and smoking cigarettes and saying nothing to you about it because you weren't sure when you came on the river and were excited by the colors, which was something to see, something you would never forget, you told yourself quietly.

You study the road ahead where at the fringe of the headlights there's a cattle guard, and you think you know the direction the cow came from, but you don't say it, because somehow anything you say now brings your mother here. She looks all right, you say, because that is a tough thing to say, and if he thinks of your mother it will be in a good way, since you are not surprised by anything here and don't care about the cow. He will see that you understand this is something that happens and there is no reason to get involved and pretend you can help.

Let's see what we can do, huh, he says, and sets his hands on the wheel. He laughs after a time you've been quiet and says, It's bad luck is all. A bad day. His face is red from the sun. This isn't our

business, he says. Then he cuts the engine and clicks off the lights. The road goes dark and it takes some time before the cow's shape shows in the ditch.

You have seen him work quietly at the tests he performs with the water he stays out days at a time culling from lakes and rivers in the area. Most of the tests are simple, he likes to tell you—for hardness or alkalinity. But sometimes he lets you help change the water for the minnow test, he calls it, where you check the oxygen levels, and then suck the water out of the glass jars with a turkey-baster, cleaning out the left-over food, and then fill them again with the source's water. The function of the test is to see how many minnows live, which are then, at the end of the ten days, euthanized, dried, and weighed against the control on aluminum dishes. The minnows are still so small you have to use tweezers to pull them through a screen you use to filter the chemicals through. If you try and think of the fish he does not like it and tells you they have no feelings. But this was different—he did not say anything about the big fish, floating in the water and washed up along the banks.

Out of the cab, leaning over the cow, and running a hand along its length, he says, She's wormy, and points to her stomach, which is swollen and makes her look pregnant. See the stomach and the frayed coat, he says. That's what it means most of the time. He looks concerned, but not in a serious way.

How do you know? He is not a veterinarian.

You know, he says. He steps back and stumbles on the road. He pulls his flask out of his jacket and drinks. Then he holds it out toward you. You're old enough, he says, and it seems one of those moments you will remember when you are older and are deciding if you should have another drink, when you decide to have another, on the feeling the thought gives you, of long-ago amity, the way you have seen your father stand in front of the refrigerator and look at the cans on the bottom shelf and then smile finally. A man should know how to drink, he says, and sucks in air through his nose, raising his shoulders. He takes another drink and then acts like he

didn't offer the whiskey to anyone. He stands on the road, looking off to the dark wall of trees as though it's an old friend.

The cow is not easy to lift, even getting your arms underneath it and rocking back and forth. He won't help—but that's fine. You're tired and hungry and for some reason scared on the quiet road with the night sounds and no sign of people, no lights. You stand and pretend you're not cold and hungry until he decides the moment is over and forgets why you've stopped in the first place. You know moments like these. You know how your mother ruins them.

Sheriff will see her early, call the rancher, he says. Let's get out of here.

The road drops in elevation and before long you're on the highway and heading into Willow Creek, a town famous for Bigfoot sightings. The first town.

She'll be fine, he says.

I don't care, you say.

That's it, he says. He looks to you with his brows raised, proud, then turns back to the road. He will talk to you now: Don't know why I stopped. Would've kept going, before. Now I do things without knowing. That's not something anyone should get used to. He shakes his head. How about a drink, he says. He stops at a market.

Inside a Sheriff stands by the coffee machine. He's a tall man with gray, curled hair on the sides. He straightens when he sees your father and you know the look well. You've seen your Pops with the law. You've seen how they keep their hand near their pistol, even when it's only for a fishing ticket. He watches your father walk by, to the cooler, and pull out a case of beer. He watches him set the twelve beers on the counter, and then look sad, almost, when your father adds a brown-red rose to the order, laying it on top of the case, smiling, as though his problems are over.

The woman, who sits behind the register, smiles at you. She's touched by the gesture, or, surprised there's someone waiting at home for this man. You boys coming or going? she says.

Headed out, your father says. Caught some beauties up on the Klamath. He looks to you as though it's a joke, then hands the money to her.

The woman pushes forward on the stool, and then eases off it to open the register. You boys from around close? she says, counting out the change.

No, he says.

The coast? she says, hopefully.

No, he says.

She sets the change out on the counter.

There's a cow fallen up road N9107, he says. He looks angry having to say it.

The Sheriff laughs and shakes his head. That near the spill? he says, and his eyes seem to light up with the thought of the news.

What spill? your father says.

Jim's had a hard go of it, the Sheriff says. We'll call him in the morning, he says. You know how he gets. He looks to the woman.

She eases back on her stool and moves her head to show she knows about Jim. Hasn't been the same since Arlene passed, she says.

Your father lifts the beer off the counter and places the rose between his teeth and you cringe a little. He nods to the woman and then takes the rose from his mouth. I'd wake his ass up, he says, turning toward the Sheriff.

Come again, he says.

Tell Jim he should think about worming his cattle, your father says. That might help him out. He puts an arm on your shoulder to get you moving. But outside you don't run away like you thought. He sits down on the sidewalk underneath the eaves of the market. Across the road cattle laze in a pasture. There's no sound of cars and you can see moonlight crag on the distant line of mountains. He tears at the case and cracks a beer. He hands it to you and you take the beer.

It is cold but you finish it before he finishes his. And if he offers you another, you'll take that too. You're only thirteen years old. But

you know something happened today, and you understand, maybe for the first time in your life, there's no reason to try and remember it—the day is pulling away from you: you are thinking of the pictures already, the ones your mother will frame and nail above the mantle.

