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What's In A Name?

From inside the calf pen, four anxious black and white faces watched me through the whitewashed boards. "Maaaaaa!" said one. "Maaaa-AAAA-aaaaaa!" said another. "I know—I know. You're hungry. I'll be there in a minute," I said, as I finished stirring the milk replacer mixture with a paddle Dad had made from a piece of board. I set the paddle in the corner where we kept it when it wasn't being used to stir milk and turned to nudge away the barn cats with the toe of my rubber boot.

"Come on, kitties," I said, "the calves want their supper."

Most of our barn cats were tabbies. Tiger cats we called them. A couple of them were gray. One cat was black, and I had named him Midnight. My mother was superstitious about black cats and would ask me to pick up Midnight if he happened to be on the porch when she was coming out of the house. She said she had a hard enough time as it was, walking around with crutches because of the polio paralysis, and that she did not want a black cat crossing her path. Midnight was a friendly cat who enjoyed winding himself around the closest available ankles—including my mother's—so I picked him up whenever Mom asked me to.

While the calves waited impatiently for their supper, the barn cats, always ready for a quick snack, stood with their front paws on the sides of the calf pails, heads bobbing as they lapped the milk. I tried to push a young tom out of the way, and he turned to look at me but did not take his paws off the bucket.

"Meow!" he said. One eye squinted shut, as if he were winking at me. Then he went back to drinking milk.

"I wish I knew what to call you," I said to the cat.

The tom cat had been born last spring in the haymow. When the kittens were big enough to venture out of the nest, he and his brother and two sisters would chase each other around, up and over and behind the bales, stalking, pouncing, rolling and wrestling. One of their favorite games was 'chase the twine string,' so I would sit on a bale and toss a piece of baler twine, twitching it along the hay and giggling until I had tears in my eyes as the kittens leaped over each other to attack the

string. Two of the kittens were tigers and two were white, and right away, I saw that one of the tiger kittens was an expert at using his paws to swat the twine.

After the kittens grew tired of playing, they would crawl into my lap, and as I held them up to my face, I could smell the scent of clover blossoms and alfalfa blossoms in their fur. The whole haymow smelled like clover and alfalfa and made me think of hot summer days and bright blue skies and the sound of the baler working its way up and down the windrows—*ka-chink, ka-chink, ka-chink, trippa-trippa-trip, ka-chink, ka-chink, ka-chink*.

When the kittens were old enough to leave their mother, I gave the two white ones to our elderly neighbor, Hannah Paulson, because she said they reminded her of a white cat she'd had when she was a little girl. Hannah had named the white kittens Snowflake and Snowball. The other tiger kitten had two white spots, one on her chest the size of a dime and one on the tip of her toe, so I called her Tippy.

But none of the names I tried for the kitten that was good at using his paws had seemed quite right. He wasn't a Skippy or a Happy or a Lucky, and he wasn't a Frank or a Christopher or a Henry. Finally I gave in and called him Tommy, which is what Dad called all of our tom cats. No matter what I had named a boy cat, Dad would call him Tommy. Even Midnight.

"Okay, kitties, I gotta feed the calves," I said, as I leaned down to pick up two of the pails.

The young tabby tom was not going to give up that easily. When I lifted the pail, he hung on and hooked his claws over the edge. I wouldn't have thought a cat could hang onto a pail, but this one could. I set both pails on the floor, and, using two hands, one to hold the paw and the other to lift the claws off the rim, broke his grip on the bucket. The cat looked up at me with an accusing expression in his green-gold eyes, as if to say, "what did you do that for?" I picked up the cat and held him against my shoulder. "I know you like to drink out of the pail," I said, "but I have to feed the calves." The tabby tom rested his head on my arm. He was purring. I could not hear him over the sound of the milker pump and the swish-swish of the vacuum lines, but I knew he was purring because I could feel his body trembling. I had picked up enough purring cats to know purring when I felt it.

"Don't worry. You'll get more milk in your dish later," I said. I set the cat on the floor and leaned down again to pick up two of the pails.

Dad and my big brother, Ingman, were almost finished milking. Three cows were left to milk on each side of the barn, but my father said the calves should drink their milk before he finished with the cows so that by the time he was ready to feed hay, the calves would be ready to eat hay. At such a young age, the calves were not eating much hay, but it was enough to make it worthwhile to give them some. That's what Dad said, anyway.

I turned toward the calf pen, a pail in each hand. "Maaaaa-aaaaa!!" said the calves, all four at once.

Ever since I was big enough and strong enough to carry a pail of milk, it had been my job to feed the calves. Feeding the calves was easy. All you had to do was set the buckets in the mangers, and the calves would do the rest.

Except that right now, feeding the calves was not quite so easy.

Four calves lived in the pen—but I only had two hands. And I knew the calves would fight over the pails until I could bring the other two, and in the meantime, one pail, or both, might be spilled in the calf manger. Dad never said much when the calves spilled their milk, although I knew he didn't like it. For one thing, the milk was wasted, and for another thing, spilled milk made a terrible mess in the manger.

"I'll carry the other pails if you want me to," said my big brother, Ingman.

Sometimes the kids at school asked me about Ingman's name. My big brother is twenty-one years older than me. Mom said he was named after her Norwegian mother, Inga, and that the name 'Ingman' is a masculine form of the name 'Inga.' I have a big sister, too. Her name is Loretta, and she is nineteen years older than me. Our mother was stricken with polio when she was twenty-six and partially paralyzed in both legs, and after the polio, the doctors told her she would never have more children. I was born sixteen years later when Mom was forty-two.

I turned to look at my big brother, who had stepped into the center aisle and was walking toward me, his black rubber chore boots scuffling against the white barn lime Dad had sprinkled on the floor.

"Would you really carry the other two pails for me?" I asked.

"Sure," he said, giving me a sly sidelong glance. "Anything for my *baby* sister!"

To my way of thinking, it wasn't especially nice for Ingman to call me a baby. Mom thought otherwise. "He was a grown man when you were born! Of *course* you are his baby sister," she had said one time when I mentioned it.

Ingman worked at the creamery in town six miles away. This week he was working the 7-to-3 shift, so he was able to be in the barn for the evening milking. He picked up the remaining two pails, and when we approached the pen, the calves scrambled for position along the manger where we fed them. They were in such a hurry to get their supper that they kept bumping into each other.

Our barn had three calf pens, but so early in the fall, the other two were empty. Later on, after more calves were born, all three pens would be full for a while until Dad decided which calves he wanted to keep and which ones he was going to sell.

As I stepped across the gutter channel, the young brown tabby tom trotted ahead of me. Suddenly, the cat stopped, crouched and leaped from the floor to the top board of the calf pen. He landed lightly on his feet and turned to look at us.

I couldn't believe how fast he had jumped. One second he was on the floor. The next second he was on the calf pen.

"Hi-ya kitty," Ingman said.

The calves strained forward eagerly, their knees hitting the side of the pen with a dull thudding sound. We set the pails in the manger, but the calves couldn't seem to get their noses into the buckets fast enough, and two of them started drinking out of the same pail. Ingman grabbed one calf by the ear and directed her to the other pail.

The calves settled down to drinking, and while we stood there watching them, my brother patted the tom cat, who closed his eyes and rubbed his head against Ingman's hand.

The little Holsteins made quick work of the milk—with a whole lot of slurping, guzzling, and sipping noises thrown in for good measure—and soon began to rattle their buckets. Most of our cows were Holsteins, although we also had a couple of Guernseys and a Jersey.

I leaned over to hold the edge of one pail so the calf wouldn't spill the rest of the milk. A long time ago, I had learned that if someone didn't tilt the calf pails and hold them, the calves would tip the buckets over trying to lick up every last drop.

Another calf reached the bottom of the pail, so Ingman leaned over to tip it sideways for her. At the same time, the young tom cat reached down with one paw and touched the top of Ingman's head.

My brother glanced up.

The cat sat straight and still, looking as though he hadn't moved a muscle in the last five minutes.

"Did you do that?" Ingman asked, turning toward me.

"Do what?" I said.

"Touch me on the head?"

"Why would I touch you on the head?"

Ingman shrugged and reached down to tip another pail.

I put my hand over my mouth so I wouldn't laugh out loud as once again, the cat extended his paw. When the paw was about to touch my brother's head, Ingman glanced up again. "Hah!" he said. "It *was* you!"

The cat withdrew and squinted his eyes at my big brother, as if to say, "Yes, I guess you caught me, didn't you."

After the calves were finished and we had removed the pails from the manger, Ingman cleaned wet hay from the watering cup. The calves rooted around in their hay, like the cows did, and they often flipped some of it into their water. To me, the watering cups looked like upside-down army helmets.

As my brother bent over the watering cup, once again the cat stretched out his paw, and this time, it rested on top of Ingman's head.

"You like using that paw, don't you," Ingman commented, looking up at the cat.

The cat hesitated and then gently patted my brother's nose, in much the same way that my mother used her finger to pat a cake in the oven to see if it was finished baking.

"Good thing he didn't use his claws!" I said.

I knew all about the barn cats and their claws. I had watched them sharpen their claws on the posts of the calf pen, dangerous-looking white hooks extended, digging into the wood, until in places, the posts were shredded and ragged and splintered. Sometimes, too, the cats would put their paws on my leg when I was ready to carry a pail of milk to the milkhouse and they were waiting for me to dump more milk in their dish. A few of them liked to flex their claws into my chore pants—and also into my skin, which is why I often walked around with pin-prick puncture wounds on my legs.

Ingman grinned, showing his very white and very even teeth. “Yeah, good thing he didn’t use his claws,” he replied. “Otherwise, I probably wouldn’t have a nose left.”

Now that the calves had finished their supper, I stacked the four pails together and carried them to the faucet on the other side of the barn. Ingman went back to milking. As I rinsed the pails, I looked toward the calf pen and saw that the young tabby tom was washing his face by licking his front paw and swiping it over his ears, licking his paw and swiping it over his ears. He stopped, leaned down to clean his tail, and then went back to washing his face. Dad said cats liked to groom when they were happy and contented.

The next evening when I was ready to feed calves, Ingman once again helped me carry the buckets to the manger.

“Where’s our friend?” he asked.

“Friend? What friend?”

“Tiger Paw Thompson,” my brother replied.

“Tiger WHO?”

“Paw Thompson,” Ingman said.

Tiger Paw Thompson?

Just then, the young tabby tom cat from the evening before jumped on the calf pen, sat down and began grooming.

“There’s Tiger Paw Thompson!” Ingman exclaimed.

The cat paused in scrubbing his face and held out one front paw, toes spread apart as if he were reaching for something.

“Pleased to meet you,” Ingman said, grasping the small striped paw in his large, muscular hand.

I looked at the cat, sitting there on the calf pen with his paw in Ingman’s hand.

Then I looked at my big brother, who had leaned forward and was almost nose-to-nose with the cat.

Wouldn’t you just know it.

I had tried and tried and *tried* to think of something to call the cat, but then, just like that, Ingman had found the perfect name.

All at once, my stomach felt hollow. I was the one who had played with the tabby cat when he was a kitten. I was the one who picked him up and held him and petted him. And I was the one who had worried about him when he limped around for several days after a calf had stepped on his toes.

"How come I didn't get to name him?" I blurted out.

"What?" Ingman said.

"How come I didn't get to name the cat?"

"What do you mean, how come you didn't get to name the cat. What do you *want* to call him?" Ingman asked.

The hollow feeling in my stomach inched its way up into my throat.

"I tried and tried to think of a good name, but I couldn't find one," I said.

"We don't have to call him Tiger Paw Thompson, you know," Ingman replied.

I was tempted to tell my big brother that I wanted to find a name for the cat all by myself—until I remembered the names I had already tried. The truth of the matter was that none of those names had been anywhere close to as good as this one.

"But Tiger Paw Thompson is a really, really good name," I said. "How did you ever think of it?"

"Well," my brother said, "he's a tiger cat, he likes to use his paw, and he's a tom cat. Put 'em all together, and you've got…"

"Tiger Paw Thompson," I said.

I reached up and petted the top of the cat's head, tracing the tabby stripes between his ears and the stripes marking the side of his face. "Hi Tiger Paw Thompson!"

The cat stared at me with his green-gold eyes, and then his jaws snapped open in a wide yawn. "Meow!" he said.

"Hey!" I exclaimed. "I think he already knows his name!"

From the center aisle came the sound of a thump accompanied by the clinking and clanking of stainless steel milker inflations. Dad had finished milking one cow and was ready to move to the next one. He placed the cover on an empty milker bucket, latched the handle and turned toward us. Dad smiled when he saw the cat sitting on the calf pen.

"Is Tommy helping you feed the calves?" my father asked as he stepped across the gutter channel.

"His name isn't Tommy," I said.

"Well, I don't know what you've been calling him, but that's what I call him," Dad replied.

"His name," I continued, "is Tiger Paw Thompson."

Dad's sky blue eyes widened. "Tiger *what*?" he asked.

"Paw Thompson," Ingman responded.

The cat looked at Dad and then stretched out his paw.

"What's the paw for?" Dad asked as he stroked the tiger-striped head.

Tiger Paw Thompson put his paw on Dad's hand.

"It just hit me all of a sudden," Ingman explained, "that his name is Tiger Paw Thompson."

"Hmmmm," Dad replied. "I guess that *is* a good name for him. The last couple of days he's been sitting on the calf pen when I've been carrying feed. And every time I walk past, he holds out that paw of his."

Ingman caught my eye and grinned.

"So," Dad said, as he lifted off his blue-and-white pin-striped chore cap and settled it back on his head, "I guess that means you're not Tommy anymore, are you."

After that, Tiger Paw Thompson would sit on the calf pen in the morning and during the evening so he could gently pat the heads, faces or shoulders of anyone who came within his reach. As time passed, he grew to be a large, well-muscled tom and developed into a fierce hunter who killed mice, rats, pocket gophers, chipmunks and the occasional snake that ventured into the pole shed.

In spite of his reputation as a hunter, Tiger Paw Thompson often put his paws on my leg and begged to be picked up, although unlike the other cats, he never flexed his claws. He either hung over my shoulder or else I would hold him in my arms as I wandered around the buildings looking for Dad, or while I waited to carry milk, or sometimes on my way to the house. Dad said he had never seen a cat who liked to be carried around as much as Tiger Paw Thompson.

I never did quite get over it, though.

For once we had a tom cat that Dad called by his rightful name.

Why couldn't I have been the one to think of it?

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A Trip To Hawaii

When the bus finally stopped at the foot of our driveway, I jumped down the steps and ran all the way up the hill. I was in such a hurry that I barely noticed the wild plums growing next to the spring, although on any other day, I would have stopped to pick some. Every September, the twisted, crooked branches became heavy with small, round rosy-red plums. The yellow plum pulp was tart, but the juice was one of the sweetest things I had ever tasted. Even when my mother was a little girl, clumps of plum brush had been growing by the spring that ran next to the driveway.

I reached the willow tree, took a shortcut, scrambled up the bank and trotted across the lawn, up the concrete steps and into the porch.

"Mom!" I shouted, letting the door slam behind me. I threw my books on the kitchen table and rushed into the living room. "Mom!"

My mother looked up from her embroidery. For the past few months, she had been working on items for the church bazaar that would be held later this fall, and she was now working on a dresser scarf. Mom said that since she couldn't do much else because of the polio, she might as well make things the church could sell.

"What's wrong?" my mother asked, reaching for the scissors so she could snip off a piece of blue thread.

"Guess what?!" I said.

I flopped down on the couch and didn't bother waiting for my mother to politely ask "what?" before telling her my big news.

"We're studying Hawaii in school! Can I go see Mrs. Paulson?"

Hannah Paulson, our elderly next-door neighbor, was a retired kindergarten teacher who had taught in Seattle. Several years earlier, she and her husband, Bill, who had bought the farm below our driveway from a relative of Mrs. Paulson's, had taken a trip to Hawaii.

My mother frowned as she threaded the embroidery needle. "You want to visit Mrs. Paulson? Right now?"

"Yes," I said, nodding so hard that my blond bangs bounced up and down on my forehead.

"Can't it wait until this weekend?" Mom asked, using her thumb and forefinger to tie a knot in the end of the floss.

I shook my head. During the school year I was allowed to visit Hannah only on Saturdays.

"I have to go now because I want to ask her if I can borrow some of her things from Hawaii," I explained. "So I can take them to school."

My mother's frown deepened, and I knew I was coming to the tricky part. I was pretty sure Hannah would allow me to borrow a few of her keepsakes, but getting my mother to agree to let me ask was a different story all together.

"You know how I feel about borrowing," Mom began.

"Please, Mom? Pleeeeease? This will be my one and only chance—"

"For what?" my mother interrupted.

Although we did not have regular show-and-tell sessions in my elementary school class, not like we did when we were little kids in kindergarten, the teacher said we could still bring something to school if we wanted to.

"This will be my chance to bring something for show-and-tell from another state," I explained. "Some of the other kids go on trips to Florida or Disneyland. Or they visit relatives down south. But I never have things like that. And nobody's been to Hawaii…"

I also knew for certain we were never going to go to Hawaii. Our family did not go on vacations. Dad said he had too much work to do, and Mom said she couldn't get around well enough to go 'gallivanting' as she called it.

I had always thought bringing something from another state must be tremendous fun. One time a boy had brought an orange from Florida after they had gone on a trip during Christmas vacation. It was the biggest orange I had ever seen. Bigger than *any* of us had ever seen.

But, to tell the truth, the kids who brought items for show-and-tell from vacations were not farmers. Farm kids, I had noticed, were more likely to bring deer antlers they had found in the woods. Or one of those huge, gray wasp nests (without the wasps). And once a boy had brought in a cow's eye. Lightning had killed the poor animal during a fall thunderstorm, and the boy's dad figured it would be a useful item for our science class. Which it was. Even though none of the girls wanted to touch it. But I'd never had anything like that to bring to class, either, so I was not about to let go of my one and only chance to bring something from Hawaii.

"Mom?" I said. "Can't I please just *find out* if she would let me borrow something?"

My mother's face softened. "Well… maybe…I guess…"

She looked at me sternly and held up one forefinger. "But only if you promise—"

"Yes!" I broke in. "I promise to say please. And to be very careful with what I borrow. If Hannah lets me borrow anything, that is. And if she says no, I won't pester her about it. Cross my heart."

My mother sighed. "Oh, all right, then. But don't stay too long. It'll be suppertime soon."

I usually ate a snack when I came home from school, but today, I forgot all about it, and a few minutes later, I found myself standing in Mrs. Paulson's living room, clutching a folded paper grocery bag Mom said I could take with me just in case.

I told Hannah we were studying Hawaii in school. She smiled and turned to open the drawer of her china cabinet. Out came a paper bag of seashells she had collected during their vacation to Hawaii. One exceptionally large shell was white and spiny on the outside and a smooth, pale, delicate pink on the inside.

"This is called a conch shell, and if you hold it up to your ear, you can hear the sound of the ocean," she said.

I put the shell to my ear and was surprised at how cold and heavy it felt. And then, much to my amazement, I heard a faint sound like rushing water.

"You really can hear the ocean!" I exclaimed, handing the shell back to my neighbor.

Hannah put the shell up to her ear. "I had forgotten how soothing that sound is," she said as she set the conch shell on the coffee table.

In the light of late afternoon, the coffee table's dark polished surface reflected back the image of the white conch shell. We didn't have a coffee table at home. I wished we did, because then I could sit on the floor by it and have a writing table handy for doing my homework. I could also use it as a place to leave the latest book I was reading, instead of going all the way upstairs to my room to get a book if I wanted to read. And I could maybe even use a coffee table as a place to eat snacks, although that seemed rather unlikely since Mom frowned on eating in the living room.

Hannah turned to the china cabinet and reached into the drawer again. After the seashells, I wasn't sure what to expect. This time she produced a stack of postcards.

"If you look on the back," Hannah explained, "there's a little paragraph telling about the picture."

The first postcard showed a pretty young woman with long dark hair. She wore an off-the-shoulder white dress and a big necklace made of bright pink flowers. In school we had learned that a flower necklace from Hawaii was called a lei. I turned over the postcard and found out something else about the flower necklaces. "Tradition says that if a visitor tosses a lei into the ocean and it floats back to shore, then one day, the visitor will return to Hawaii," the postcard said.

Mrs. Paulson reached into the drawer again, and this time she brought out a small photo album and handed it to me. I opened the front cover, and the first picture was of Hannah and Bill standing beneath a palm tree. Hannah wore a long bright blue dress decorated with big white flowers; Bill was wearing an ordinary white button-down short-sleeved shirt. Bill, with his thick bifocal glasses and gray crew cut hair, was not the type who would wear Hawaiian shirts. Hannah and Bill were, however, each wearing a lei made of pink and white flowers.

"Did you throw your leis into the ocean?" I asked.

Hannah shook her head. "No, actually, we didn't. I thought they were much too pretty to throw them into the water."

Mrs. Paulson placed the seashells, postcards and the photo album into the paper grocery bag I had brought along and handed it to me.

I could hardly believe it. The seashells would have been enough. But all three? Seashells, postcards *and* pictures!

Hannah then opened the china cabinet door and took out a small paper sack. As she withdrew her hand from the sack, I almost forgot to take my next breath.

Mrs. Paulson was holding a long necklace made of tiny, dark brown, polished seeds strung together in intricate patterns. I had always loved that necklace. The first time Hannah showed it to me, she explained how the seeds had been sewn together by hand. "It took someone a very long time to make that necklace, so that's why I keep it in the china cabinet. I don't want it to get broken," she had said.

Hannah carefully put the necklace back into the small paper bag and folded over the top. Then she placed the little bag inside the bigger bag that I was still holding by its waxed string handles.

I opened my mouth a couple of times but no words came out.

"Are…are…you sure…you want to let me take the necklace?" I asked in a squeaky voice.

"I'm sure," Hannah said. "Finding it was one the best parts of the trip."

I drew a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I promise I will be really, *really*, REALLY careful with all of it," I said.

Mrs. Paulson smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkling behind the wire-rimmed glasses she wore.

"I know you'll be careful," Hannah said.

As if the sea shells, postcards, pictures and the necklace were not enough, Hannah went on to make another suggestion that was so astounding, I almost dropped the grocery bag.

"You know," Mrs. Paulson said, "I have a whole box of slides from that trip. Would you like me to come to class, show the slides and talk about Hawaii, too?"

I stared at Hannah, dumbfounded. My mouth popped open, but since I didn't know what to say, I shut it again.

She laughed. "I will assume that's a 'yes.' Tomorrow I will call your teacher so we can set up a time."

A little while later on the way home with the paper bag bumping against my leg, I felt like I was dreaming.

Other kids had brought in objects for show-and-tell—which I was now going to do, too—but so far, no one had brought a real, live person.

The next day, my classmates took turns holding the conch shell up to their ears and crowding around the library table at the back of the room to look at the pictures, postcards and other seashells.

The only thing missing from the library table was the seed necklace. My teacher told me to carry the necklace around to each desk so the other students could see it. Then she put the necklace back in the small paper bag and it stayed in her desk drawer until it was time to go home.

When I told my classmates that my neighbor was coming to school pretty soon so she could to tell us about Hawaii, some of them didn't believe me.

"She'll be here. You'll see," I said.

Mrs. Paulson came to class a few days later wearing a navy skirt and jacket and a pale pink blouse. Hannah wore short-sleeved shirtwaist dresses at home, and often with an apron tied around her waist, although when I saw her at church—the little white country church a half mile from our farm—Hannah wore tailored dresses and sometimes a hat to match.

Our teacher helped Mrs. Paulson set up the slide projector, and then she pulled the white screen down over the blackboard, turned off the lights, and suddenly, almost larger than life, were tall palm trees and beds filled with flowers unlike anything I had ever seen before.

As Hannah showed us the slides, she told all about where they had been and what they had seen and done, such as the luau where they had eaten roast pig. "There was so much food at the luau that we could only take a small sample of everything," she said, "and even at that, it was more food than we were used to eating."

Other slides were of the hotel overlooking the ocean where they had stayed. "We kept the sliding door open all night so we could hear the sound of the waves," Hannah told us.

And then there was the shop where she had purchased the seed necklace. "It was a tiny, little gift shop on a back street. The shop owner told me it had taken a very long time to sew those seeds together," Mrs. Paulson explained.

The last slide clicked off the screen at the front of the room, and our teacher turned on the lights. Mrs. Paulson walked to the teacher's desk and picked up a brown paper bag that she had left sitting on the floor.

"Now I have a surprise for you," she said. "Can anyone guess what it is?"

As the minutes ticked away, the guesses became more and more wild. Some of my classmates thought maybe she had brought a lei and others thought she had a real Hawaiian muumuu to show us. One boy said he had read in a book that Hawaii didn't have any snakes, except for tropical sea snakes, and that maybe she had a tropical sea snake in the bag.

"Young man, if there was a sea snake in this bag—or any other kind of snake—I would not be in the same building with it, much less the same room," Hannah declared.

The boy grinned. “My mom doesn’t like snakes, either. That’s why she won’t let me bring them in the house.”

Mrs. Paulson smiled back at him. “I think your mother must be a very wise woman.”

Hannah reached inside the brown paper bag. She pulled her hand back, and out came a pineapple. A real, fresh, whole pineapple. But it wasn’t one pineapple. It was two. And that wasn’t all she had in the shopping bag. Next came two coconuts.

“Where did you get those?” one girl asked. “Did you bring them back from Hawaii?”

Hannah shook her head. “No. They wouldn’t have kept this long. I got them at the grocery store.”

“Here?” another of my classmates asked. “In town?”

“Oh, no,” Hannah said. “I had to drive a long ways to get them.”

“Minneapolis?” asked one girl. “Sometimes my mom goes to Minneapolis to visit friends. She says they have GREAT BIG grocery stores there.”

Mrs. Paulson shook her head. “No. I didn’t have to go *that* far.”

Hannah asked us to come up by rows so we could look at the pineapple and the coconut and touch them and hold them. Sometimes we had canned pineapple at home that my mother put in pineapple upside-down cake. But I had never seen a whole pineapple before. The pineapple felt prickly—a little like a cucumber, I thought.

The oblong brown coconut felt as hard as the rocks Dad picked out of the back field when he plowed in the spring and had short, wiry fibers all over it that felt like the twine strings which held our hay bales together at home. The top of the coconut had what looked like two round eyes and a mouth. Mrs. Paulson said the round spots were where the coconut had been attached to the palm tree.

Once we’d all had a chance to touch the pineapple and the coconut, Mrs. Paulson used a knife to trim off the prickly part of the pineapples and to cut them into slices. She had also brought little white paper plates and white paper napkins for us.

While we ate the pineapple, our teacher left the room to find one of the janitors, who used a nail to poke two holes in the top of the coconuts to drain out the white liquid that Hannah said was called coconut milk. Then he took the hammer and broke the coconuts into pieces. The coconut pieces smelled like the coconut Mom bought at the store for baking. But unlike the shredded coconut, which came in a

plastic bag and was soft and easy to eat, the fresh coconut chunks were hard and very chewy.

Just as we finished our ‘Wisconsin luau,’ as Hannah called it, the bell rang for afternoon recess. While the other kids filed out of the room, I stayed behind.

“Did I do a good job?” Mrs. Paulson asked.

“It was the very, very bestest job in the whole wide world,” I said. “Oh—and I *almost* forgot. Mom said I should be sure to say thank you.”

Hannah smiled and plucked a piece of lint off the sleeve of her navy blue suit. “You already said thank you when the whole class did,” she said.

I lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug. “I know. But Mom said I should say a special one, because…”

“What?” Mrs. Paulson asked.

“Because she said the sea shells and the postcards and the pictures and the necklace were more than enough already.”

Mrs. Paulson picked up the stack of used paper plates and put them into the waste basket. “Do you know that *you* did *me* a favor?”

My eyebrows drew together in a frown. “I did?”

“Since I retired, I’ve missed teaching, and I have especially missed being around students. This was like old times,” Hannah said.

“It was?”

“Yes. So, tell your mom that you remembered the special thank you, and that I said I enjoyed it as much as the class did. All right?”

The next day, the other kids kept talking about Mrs. Paulson’s visit to school and how much fun it had been, and how nice she was, and how they had never expected to eat pineapple and coconut.

Okay, so maybe I hadn’t brought anything from a vacation that I had taken with my family. But thanks to Hannah, my most perfect show-and-tell ever was positively the next-best thing.

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~ 3 ~
Old Habits Die Hard

One October afternoon as I shifted my books to the other arm and started up the hill toward the house, cows were the farthest thing from my mind. The sky was color of the turquoise dress my mother liked to wear to church, and the air—filled with the scent of old leaves, ripe wild grapes growing in the fenceline and plums that had fallen to the ground and split open—felt so warm that if I didn't know better, I would think it was summer. Dad said at this time of year nice weather would not last long, and in another month, we might have snow on the ground. We hadn't had weather this nice in more than a week, and I wanted to ride Dusty, my plump brown pony with the white mane and tail. That is, I wanted to ride Dusty if Mom would give me permission. Sometimes my mother had chores she wanted me to do as soon as I got home from school.

At the halfway point up the hill of our driveway, just beyond the plum trees growing in the fenceline, I could see Dusty, grazing on the sidehill in her pasture. The grass was not as green as it had been in the spring and summer, but as far as Dusty was concerned, grass was grass, even if it was faded grass and not growing much anymore. My pony spent so much time nibbling grass in her pasture that in most places, except for the spots where she had left piles of manure and did not want to eat the grass there, her pasture was shorter than the grass in the lawn. My big sister said she ought to mow the lawn again before winter, but so far, she hadn't gotten around to it, although maybe that was because Dad had told her the grass would come back better next spring if it was not cut short this fall.

"Hi Dusty!" I shouted.

The pony threw her head up, stared at me, and then trotted toward the fence, ears perked, nickering. Beneath her feet, the yellow leaves of the silver maples growing along the edge of the yard, which had dropped half their leaves on the lawn and half in the pasture, made a swishing, crunching sound.

I looked toward the house and saw my mother sitting in her chair by the picture window. She was holding the newspaper up in front of her but was gazing directly back at me. She let one corner of the newspaper

drop and waved. I waved back, and then I climbed the bank and headed across the lawn toward the porch steps. Yellow leaves from the silver maple not far from the living room window covered the lawn, and while I shuffled my way through the leaves, Dusty watched me from the other side of the fence. She knew I was going into the house, so she put her nose to the ground and went back to picking grass.

"Boy, am I glad you're home," Mom called out from the living room as the screen door latched shut behind me.

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of my stomach. "Why?" I said.

Whenever my mother informed me that she was glad I was home, she usually had something she wanted me to do.

"I'm glad you're home because Dad started picking corn today, so I want you to put the cows in and feed them," she said.

I set my books on the kitchen table and went into the living room.

"Me? You want me to put the cows in? All by myself?"

Once in early spring when Dad had gone sucker fishing, my sister had helped me put the cows in the barn because, at the time, we had a bull, and Mom did not want me to put the cows in alone. The bull, a friendly yearling we called Bully-Loo, had since grown up and had been sold a while back. And during summer vacation, I had put the cows in by myself several times, but that was when we didn't have any heifers. Over the summer, three Holstein heifers had grown big enough so they could go into stanchions, and every evening for the past week, it had taken both Dad and I to get them into the barn.

All summer long, my father had fed the heifers in a feed trough he had built in the barnyard. Last spring, the heifers were not big enough to go into stanchions, but they were too big to stay in the calf pen. Well, it wasn't that they were *too* big to stay in the calf pen if one of them had gone in one pen and two in the other pen, except they were such good friends, they all three wanted to be in the same pen together. Dad figured if they stayed outside for the summer, he would not have to clean calf pens, and so, he had built the feed trough in the barnyard.

The heifers had quickly caught onto the idea that when the cows went into the barn, they should stand by the feed trough and wait for someone to bring out a pail of feed. But as Dad and I had discovered right away last week, the heifers would rather stand by the feed trough than come into the barn. My father said they did not want to come inside to eat because they were used to eating their feed outside. 'Old

habits die hard' is what he'd said. When I asked him what that meant, he said it meant habits are hard to break and it would take a while for the heifers to become accustomed to the routine of eating in the barn.

"Did Dad say I should put the cows in?" I asked.

Mom shook her head. "No, but if you put them in this time, then for as long as the weather holds, your father can stay out in the field later and still start milking when he usually does."

I knew what she was getting at. If I put the cows in, then Dad would have an extra hour every day to pick corn and would finish that much sooner.

"But what about the heifers?" I asked.

My mother pulled off her black-rimmed reading glasses and folded them up. "What about the heifers?"

"They're hard to get in," I said.

"Oh, don't be silly. Those heifers have been going into the barn for a week. They ought to be used to it by now."

Easy for Mom to think the heifers should be used to going into the barn. My mother had been paralyzed by polio before I was born and couldn't get around well enough to put cows in the barn.

"I know it's been a long time since I've been able to do chores," Mom continued, "although I don't think heifers are so very much different nowadays."

"But Mom—they don't like to come in the barn."

My mother shook her head and frowned. "Nonsense. When they see the other cows going into the stanchions, they will go in, too," she said.

I knew better than to try to change her mind.

I also knew I would probably still be chasing those heifers around the barnyard when Dad came home.

I went upstairs to change out of my school clothes and stood for a minute by the bedroom window, looking at the bright October sunshine. By the time I finished putting the cows in the barn—if I could even get the heifers in—it would be suppertime. So much for riding Dusty today. Or on any other day for the rest of the week.

A little while later, I headed to the barn to measure feed for the cows. I worked my way down one row of stanchions and back up the other side, placing two scoops of feed in front of each stanchion. I could hear the cows moving around in the barnyard on the concrete slab in front of the door. The cows knew I was measuring out feed, and each of them wanted to be the first one inside.

Even though the air was cooler here in the barn, big, fat, black flies bumped and buzzed against the windowpanes, taking advantage of the sunshine streaming through the south windows. In a few weeks, when the weather turned cold, the flies would find someplace warm to hide for the winter.

I finished dumping the feed, opened the door and moved back out of the way as one by one, the cows rushed toward their stanchions. Their hooves went clickety-clack along the barn aisle, and some of them were in such a hurry, they were practically trotting toward their stalls.

When the last cow had come into the barn, I walked out the door and saw the three heifers standing next to the feed trough on the other side of the barnyard, tails swishing back and forth to chase away the flies.

Over the past week, my father and I had invented a system for getting the heifers in the barn. Dad would take a pail of cow feed (a mixture of ground corn and oats and molasses) and coax them away from the trough while I walked along behind them, waving my arms. Bit by bit we would move them toward the barn, and when they were safely inside, I would shut the door to keep them from going back into the barnyard. Then, once the heifers were in the barn, while Dad continued to coax them forward, I stayed behind them until they went into their stalls.

I stood on the concrete slab, looking at the heifers and wondering how I was going to get them into the barn by myself, until I remembered all of a sudden that I had not yet shut the stanchions. I turned and went inside the barn where the cows were busy eating their feed. At this time of year, the summer birds were gone, and something seemed out of place without the happy chatter of the barn swallows.

I stepped across the gutter channel and walked along in front of the cows to shut each stanchion. In our barn, the cows faced the wall, although Dad said some barns were the other way, with the cows facing the center aisle and their tails toward the wall. The wood-and-metal stanchions were easy to shut on this side of the barn because the cows had only started to eat their feed and were not pushing forward, but I knew that when I reached the end of the barn on the other side, shutting the stanchions would be harder since some of the cows would be stretching to reach more of their feed or to swipe some from their next-door neighbor.

I soon saw that I was right about the cows on the other end of the barn and spent a few minutes convincing some of them to move back a step or two so I could close their stanchions. I wanted to be sure the stanchions were firmly latched because if a stanchion popped open and the cow went outside again after she was finished eating her feed, she would not want to come back in the barn. This had happened once or twice while I was helping Dad put the cows in.

Satisfied that all of the stanchions were firmly latched, I went to the feed box, put some cow feed into a pail and headed for the barnyard. As soon as I stepped out of the door onto the concrete slab, the heifers, who had been watching for me, turned toward the feed trough. I took a better grip on the handle of the feed pail and set off across the barnyard. As I made my way toward the heifers, I kept a sharp eye on the ground in front of me so I wouldn't accidentally step in a cow pie. Dry cow manure wasn't so bad, but fresh cow pies were downright soupy, and I did not want to have to stop, go to the milkhouse and clean off my shoes with the hose.

The closer I came to the heifers, the more they crowded around the feed trough. One heifer pushed another one out of her way by putting her head down and nudging the other heifer's flank.

I knew what the heifers were thinking.

"I'm not dumping this out here. You have to come in the barn," I said.

One of the heifers, the one that had pushed her companion, turned her head and looked at me with soft, friendly eyes. She was mostly black with a little white spot on her forehead and two white feet. Some of our Holsteins were jumpy and nervous, but the three heifers were used to seeing people, and they knew that a person with a pail meant they would get something good to eat.

"Come bossie," I said. "Come bossie, come bossie."

I wasn't sure why I was saying 'come bossie, come bossie.' What was I going to do after that? If I backed my way toward the barn, would the heifers follow?

Holding the pail out in front of me, I started backing toward the barn. I couldn't go very fast, since I had to keep looking down to see what was on the ground behind me, and at this rate, I knew the trip to the barn was going to take a long time.

"Come bossie, come bossie," I said, looking back at the heifers again.

I was so certain the heifers would not come away from the feed trough that I nearly dropped the pail when all three began to follow me.

I backed across the barnyard, alternating between keeping a watchful eye on the ground behind me, and a watchful eye on the heifers in front of me, and wondered what I was going to do once I reached the barn. I knew I could not circle around and shut the door, because if I did, the heifers would follow me outside. The object was to bring them *into* the barn—not to let them outside again.

Although, now that I had plenty of time to think during my slow backward walk across the barnyard, maybe I wouldn't have to shut the door. Maybe Mom was right. The heifers *had* been going into the barn for one whole week.

Many minutes later, I backed through the barn door, with the heifers still following. They reminded me of kittens following their mother when she is taking them out to teach them how to hunt. I had seen the barn cats numerous times, headed across the barnyard with their kittens following single file behind them.

After I got into the barn, I kept right on shaking the pail, and the heifers kept right on following me.

Wouldn't it be something if, after a week of Dad and I trying to get the heifers into the barn, that tonight, when I was putting them in for the first time by myself, they went into their stalls? Dad would be *so* surprised when he came home.

I still hadn't figured out one thing, though. How was I going to persuade the heifers to go into their stanchions?

I was almost to the first empty stanchion when an idea came to me. Maybe, if I backed into the stall so the heifers could still see the pail of feed, one of them would follow me, and then, I could back through the middle of the stanchion, and when the heifer put her head into the stanchion, I could close it, and then I could do the same with the other two.

I stopped to let the heifers catch up.

"Here," I said, "Look what I've got."

Dad never let the heifers eat out of the pail when he was in the barnyard, coaxing them into the barn, because he said he didn't want them to think that maybe he was going to feed them outside. But once he got into the barn, Dad often let the heifers eat a bite of feed as a reward for following him.

The heifers knew what to do when the bucket was held toward them, and each one was more than willing to put her nose into the pail and eat some cow feed.

So far—so good.

Glancing behind me to avoid stepping off the edge of the concrete, I backed over the gutter channel, chanting "come-bossie, come-bossie, come-bossie, come-bossie."

When my back was almost against the wood and metal stanchion, the mostly-black heifer took a step over the gutter and began to follow me into the stall.

I wanted to yell "yipee!" but decided I had better keep quiet. I did not want to scare the heifers.

Still, I couldn't keep from smiling to myself. This was going to work out all—

I didn't even get a chance to think the word 'right.'

With a startled "Moooo-oooo!" the heifer, standing with only her front feet in the stall, whirled around and leaped into the center aisle. She bumped into her companions and then pushed past them. One heifer, reeling from the collision, nearly fell into the gutter channel, but, fortunately, regained her footing and got back into the center aisle before the cow in the stanchion in front of her could react. Some of our cows were awfully quick with their feet. That's what Dad said—they were 'awfully quick with their feet'—and the cow in front of the heifer who had stepped into the gutter was one of those who could kick in the blink of an eye.

Before I quite knew what was happening, all three of the heifers had turned and were running toward the door at the far end, running as if they were running for their lives. Some of the other cows, surprised by the commotion in the center aisle, began to swish their tails with nervousness, and a few others pulled back against their stanchions. Instead of the quiet sound of cows licking up the last of their feed, there was now the crashing, banging, jingling and jangling of the stanchions and the rat-a-tat-tat of hooves hurrying down the barn aisle.

I could hardly believe it. I had been so close to getting one of the heifers into a stanchion. And now all three of them were gone. The sudden disappointment made my arms feel as heavy as if a bag of barn lime was strapped to my wrists.

But what in the world had frightened the heifers?

Our cows got nervous once in a while if they saw something out of the ordinary in the barn, like our dog, Needles, suddenly coming around a corner when they didn't expect to see him. But Needles, a long-haired cream-colored Cocker Spaniel and Spitz mix, could not have scared the heifers because he was with Dad, picking corn. No matter what my father was doing—plowing, disking and planting crops in the spring—cutting and baling hay during the summer—or harvesting corn or soybeans in the fall—Needles went to the field with Dad so he could keep an eye on things.

The barn cats could not have frightened the heifers, either, because the heifers saw barn cats all the time, especially Tiger Paw Thompson, who liked to parade back and forth along the edge of the barnyard feed trough while the heifers were eating. The cat followed whoever was carrying feed to the barnyard, and then he would jump up on the feed trough. Sometimes the heifers licked him with their sandpapery tongues, and he would come away from the trough with sticky wet cow feed smeared all over his tiger-striped back.

But other than Needles or the barn cats, I could not think of anything that might have scared the heifers.

I put down the bucket and stepped over the gutter channel into the center aisle. To my left, on the other end of the barn, the three heifers were trying to go through the door all at the same time. I turned in the opposite direction—toward the door on the driveway side of the barn—and could hardly believe my eyes.

There, looking over the half-door, was my mother.

"What," I said, "are you doing out here?"

At the other end of the barn, I could hear the heifers, their hooves scrambling and scraping against the concrete.

"I…ah…well," Mom said, "I came to…well…to see if I could help."

As I turned my head to look at the heifers again, they finally discovered they had to go through the door one by one. The first heifer trotted outside, then the second heifer, then the third. And then I couldn't see them anymore.

"Boy," Mom said, "they're a little jumpy, aren't they."

Before I could answer my mother, our pickup truck pulled up by the gas barrel across the driveway from the barn.

"Dad's home!" I said.

My father opened the door and waited for Needles to hop out before getting out himself. Needles headed toward us, his feathery tail going in circles, as Dad rolled up the truck window and then carefully shut the door. Sometimes Dad slammed the pickup door. Sometimes he pushed it shut so that it closed with a quiet click.

"What are you doing out here?" Dad inquired.

I could tell my father was as surprised to see Mom in the barn as I was.

My mother moved one crutch to the side and slid her foot toward it so she could turn to face Dad.

"I thought maybe I could stand by the calf pen to keep those heifers from running up in front of the cows," she said.

Often when we were putting heifers into the stanchions for the first time, or if Dad had bought some new cows at an auction, they ran up in front of the mangers because they were afraid and didn't know where to go.

Beneath the bill of his blue-and-white chore cap, my father frowned and a puzzled look came into in his eyes. "What do you mean, keep them from running up in front of the cows? The heifers don't run up in front of the cows," he said.

Now it was my mother's turn to look puzzled. "But I thought…well…all I've been hearing for the past week is how much trouble you've had getting those heifers into the barn."

Dad took his cap off and slapped it against his leg. The top of his cap and the shoulders of his blue chambray work shirt were covered with a fine layer of dust kicked up by the corn picker. He put the cap back on his head.

"We've had trouble getting the heifers *into* the barn," my father said. "Once they forget about that feed trough outside, they usually go right into their stanchions."

My mother stared at Dad, her eyes as round as the two fifty-cent pieces I kept in a little wooden box on my dresser.

"You mean to tell me that all this time when you said you had trouble getting the heifers into the barn, you meant that you literally had trouble getting them *into* the barn? That you didn't have trouble getting them into the stanchions, but *into* the barn?" Mom said.

"That's right," Dad replied.

My mother started to laugh. "Ha-ha-ha, ha-ha!"

"What's so funny?" Dad inquired.

"You should have seen them," Mom gasped.

"Yeah, you should have seen 'em, Daddy!" I said. "I got them to come in the barn, but then Mom scared them, and they ran away. They all three tried to go through the door at once."

Dad grinned. "How long did it take 'em to figure out they had to go one at a time?"

I fingered the collar of my barn shirt, an old white blouse of my sister's that she said was too short to properly tuck into the waistband of her skirts. "I don't know. Maybe a minute. They kept pulling back, going forward and getting stuck and pulling back and going forward."

"Ha-ha-ha," Mom said as she wiped her eyes again. "I was a *big* help, wasn't I."

My father rubbed his ear. "You got out here just at the right time, I'd say. Or maybe it was the wrong time."

He turned to me. "I suppose we'd better see where those heifers went to. I hope they didn't end up at the back of the farm."

"At the back of farm?" I said.

Dad nodded. "You know how some of those Holsteins are. When they're riled up, there's no telling *where* they'll go."

"Hmmmmm," Mom said, "I guess you don't need me out here anymore. I'm going back to the house."

"We'll be in for supper after we get the heifers inside," Dad said.

My father opened the half-door, stepped into the barn and latched the door behind him. We walked down the center aisle together to the other door, and as soon as we came out of the barn, we saw the heifers.

They were not at the back of the farm.

They were waiting by the feed trough.

For the next forty-five minutes, Dad and I chased the heifers around the barnyard. Every time we got them close to the door, they stood for a few seconds, staring into the barn, and then they turned around and galloped away, tails held high in the air, kicking up their heels. After a while, the heifers must have gotten tired of the game—or else they were hungry—because eventually, all three of them trotted into the barn.

"Quick," Dad said. "You go in ahead of me, and then I'll shut the door behind us before the heifers can run outside again."

Once the heifers were in the barn, it only took a few minutes to get them into their stanchions.

"Tell you what," Dad said as we headed toward the house for supper. "If you want to put the cows in tomorrow, that's fine, because it *would* save time for me, but don't worry about the heifers. Leave them out in the barnyard, and then when I come home, we can get them in. And while you're waiting for me, you can ride Dusty. You might as well take advantage of this weather while we've got it."

Dad glanced at me and his right eye closed in a wink.

"Well," Mom said when we walked into the kitchen, "did you get those heifers in?"

"Finally," Dad said as he hung up his chore cap. "And here's what we're going to do after this. The kiddo is going to put the cows in, but she's going to leave the heifers out in the barnyard. And while she's waiting for me to come home so we can put the heifers in, she's going to ride Dusty."

"Ride Dusty?" Mom said.

"Yes," Dad replied. "She's going to ride Dusty. There's no sense in those heifers getting so riled up that it takes forty-five minutes to put them in the barn."

My father glanced at the clock, an old butter-yellow Time-A-Trol on the wall by the kitchen sink. "It's later now than if I'd put the cows in myself when I got home."

Mom sighed, and I noticed she had a funny expression on her face. If I didn't know better, I would have said she looked like she was ashamed of herself.

"Yes, it's later than normal. And that's my fault. I'm sorry," my mother said. "I should have realized when she said the heifers were hard to get in that there was something to it."

I could hardly believe my ears and turned to stare at my mother.

"I can tell you one thing, though," Dad said.

"What's that?" Mom asked.

"I'm never again making the mistake of feeding heifers outside, if I can help it."

For the rest of the week, I put the cows in after I came home from school, and then, while I waited for Dad, I would go out to the pasture to get Dusty.

On Saturday morning, Dad took the feed trough down, and once the feed trough was gone, within a few days, the heifers started coming into the barn with the cows and went into their stalls as if they had been doing it all along.

"Should have taken that trough down in the first place," Dad muttered when the heifers started coming in by themselves.

My father was right, I think. Old habits do die hard. Not necessarily as far as the heifers were concerned, however—but for Dusty. For the rest of the fall, whenever I helped Dad put the cows in and then walked out of the barn afterward, Dusty would be waiting by the fence between the barnyard and corncrib, nickering, her head bobbing up and down.

I never for a minute, though, fooled myself into thinking my pony wanted to go for a ride. No, what she *really* wanted is to get out in the yard so she could pick grass. During the four days that I rode Dusty after putting the cows in, I spent half my time pulling her head up, urging her a few steps forward, pulling her head up, urging her forward…

Oh, well—at least I had a chance to spend an hour with my pony on a few warm October afternoons when I got home from school. And that was a habit I could most definitely get used to.

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