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Claude Choteau and the Cows of Doom

Claude's never made good decisions, and a premature last-night celebration on the night before his actual last night is right up there with the rest of them. Bourbon, too much of it, followed by the usual: an imagined insult, a broken glass, the slap of fists and the tight hug of the wide bald man at the door. The asphalt of the San Jose street cups Claude's cheek like a woman's hand and carries him into a waking dream of hospital ER fluorescent lights, the smell of disinfectant, gruff nurses poking and prodding and bandaging. Then the sound of beeping monitors dopplers off in the distance in the taxi, and it's followed by an hour or two of sleep, a sweaty, fevered sleep filled with country music played too fast, the four-four beat hooked to a lawnmower engine, thumping in time to his hyped-up, fight or flight pulse. And the ghost of his father, dead and buried old Lenny Choteau doing that shuffling two-step dance of his with a grin on his pale face, rusted shovel in his hand, and his flannel shirt smelling of wet dirt and ashes. *Mon Tabernac!* Lenny curses him in French as he dances. *Mange d'la merde!* God damn Tabernacle! Eat shit! Lenny's teeth are the color of coffee grounds and his tongue is a blind, obscene earthworm.

Then, for a twist the next morning at dispatch, Rudy Roy Castigliano decides he wants to ride along with them. Rudy Roy-boy in the tux at this time in the morning, ruddy and immaculate and shining in the rising sun like a dancing bear. Rudy Roy with the giant smoldering stogie. Rudy who doesn't care about the schedule since the guy Claude works for works for a guy who works for Rudy Roy's dad.

Rudy Roy wants to ride along with Claude and the old guy named Alpo for no reason Claude can make out. To drink bad coffee? To get in touch with the little people? But Rudy Roy gets paged, makes a loud call—the tiny silver flip phone couched in a huge paw—comes back and says no such luck. "Getting a freighter in just a little while," Rudy Roy says. In the cold morning, smoke steams from his pores. "Some big things needin' immediate attention, you know what I'm saying? But no big deal. You guys know the routine, don't ya?"

Claude doesn't, but he isn't about to say so. Not this particular route, anyway. He's driven for Castigliano on and off for the past years, but each job is different, each company is different, and here he is, the last one, the last time he'll need to look at this teenager and say *Yes, sir, let me light that for you*. Alpo nods back at Rudy Roy and sweats in the cold Oakland fog. With a string-haired, rounded head, arms that seem just a little too long, and two small, wrinkled hands clasping an ancient, creased-smooth shopping bag before him, Alpo's a small, aged-and-graying chimp. His huge wireframe glasses reflect back circles of the etched metal bones of the Bay Bridge, the rundown docks, the guys doing crack behind the warehouse with the sign that says Bovex, the name of this new start-up venture, which Claude knows has something to do with farming. Rudy Roy gives him a locked briefcase, two hundred-dollar bills and another flip phone. "You run into any problems, you call me, hear? Number of the cell's on speed dial."

In the cab of the trailer truck, Alpo hunches over a map, folding and refolding as they pull out, tracing roads with his fingers and whispering to himself. He looks out the window for a few minutes, points the way, then looks down at the map again. He's quiet for a while, and it's hard for Claude to speak, so he doesn't. He has to breathe long and loudly through his mouth, the inside of which feels stuffed with sawdust.

Alpo's tiny, balding chimp-head condenses all the humidity out of the cab like a cold egg. He wipes his wrinkled hand across the top of it, dries it on his pants, and then unrolls a paper shopping bag he's brought with him, sorts through it and takes out a cassette. The tape clicks into place in the amped-up sound system, and the soundtrack of the movie of Claude's miserable life begins, sung by a resurrected chorus of nineteen-eighties American girl bands. Alpo comes alive as though someone hooked him up directly to the truck's battery, tapping his chimp-hands on his knees and the dash to the beat, glasses flashing reflected sunlight and looming clouds and traffic across the cab. "I know a lot of people say they're all tits and no talent," he shouts over the music. "I think they're wrong. I mean! Listen to those harmonies in there! Layered like cake. Listen to that timing—perfection! Perfectimundo! You don't think they had to work at that?"

Claude nods, noncommittal. The clouds break open and down comes three times the rain that's been dumping on them all morning. The truck shivers in the wind that's up out of nowhere in this paved-over country, arching and leaning like a cat up against the corner of a sofa. The northbound traffic is stupid, stupid, all of them changing lanes when they should just sit there, too free with the brakes. The coffee and the pain killers have moved into his hands and arms. The

nerves there flare up and his palms sweat so much they're slippery and he can't hold the wheel straight.

But then, strangely, it all passes over like the shadow of his father's hand across his troubled brow, another small reprieve. The traffic parts to either side and they shoot easily up the middle lane. He thinks about Canada, about the view from Lenny's front porch, the one he hasn't set his boots on in years; the broad stretches of the bay between Bouctouche and Prince Edward Island on a calm day, the boats working in and out of the tiny marina, the wind filled with salt and the smell of fried seafood. With that in his mind, shining like it's just on the far side of the toolbooths, even the cheery undead superpowers of the music merge with the road rhythm into a strange sort of harmony. It vibrates his teeth a little deeper back into their sockets, where they should be.

North of Medford, of Grant's Pass and Myrtle Creek, deep in to the wilds of Oregon. The first stop is a small farm off on a back road that's only recently been paved. The road lines are painted bright and shiny, tracked over with mud at the mouth of the dirt driveway. They pull up to the old house and a guy with sideburns—Lenny's age, if Lenny was still around—comes out chewing gum, dressed in dirty brown jeans and a t-shirt with the flag of Hawaii on it. Out the door behind him scurry four hairy dogs that run circles around the truck, barking and whining. Alpo takes a list out of the shopping bag, consults it, then rolls down his window and the guy comes over. "Mr. Frank?" The guy blinks a few times, looking in at the bandages on Claude's face. "Mr. Frank?"

"Charles. Frank Charles." He speaks slowly, laboring over each word as if speech is a new thing and his mouth needs some time to get used to it. "You guys do that every time, y'know. I'm an old friend of Mr. Cas. We was in together. You guys should give me some more respect, okay?"

Alpo pushes his glasses up on his slippery nose. "Any problems this month, Mr. Charles?"

The guy thinks about it for a minute, hitches up his belt with both hands. His sideburns are long, and they feather out over his ears. "Never seen them shit quite that way before. Maxie, be quiet."

"No fatalities? No illnesses?"

"Two."

"Two?"

"Yup, that's what I said."

"Two dead?"

"That's what I said, I said."

"The white cows? Or the other ones?"

Frank Charles studies his running shoes. They're white with blue swoop-marks on them, and they're caked with brown mud. "Other."

"What did you do with the bodies?"

"Left em there, like you said to." He giggles once, out of the side of his mouth—a strange, pressured sound.

"All right, we'll take care of that. Any births? Says here you had a few cows almost ready to go."

"Three a those."

"And the calves, they were all completely white?"

"Yep. I don't know how you guys did it since they was preggo before you even got started with the shots."

"How about the milk," Alpo asks. "Production stable? You tracking it like we showed you? Any changes up or down?"

"Up."

"They're producing more milk than last month?"

"Oh yeah!"

"A lot more? A little more?"

"More's what I said, isn't it? You figure the rest out. Maxie! Quit! That damn dog. She starts it. Rest of them just follow her lead."

"And you're dumping the milk, right Mr. Charles? Remember you signed those papers that said how the milk was to be disposed of?"

Frank Charles' eyes get big for a second, and then he looks around quickly—at the house, the low clouds, at the silver bulldog on the hood of the truck. "I remember. I been dumping all of it, just like you said. I'm not selling any of it, no sir."

Claude shakes his head. Alpo rolls his eyes. "How about the food intake?"

"I'm just not hungry." Frank grins at Claude. When Claude's expression doesn't change, he looks back at Alpo and points at his own face. "What'd you do to that guy, anyway?"

"Is the livestock eating more or less, Mr. Charles."

"Shit. You guys have no sense of humor. I can't get the damn things to eat much of anything anymore. Not that they seem to need it.."

"All right. I'll need to see your data, Frank."

Frank Charles wanders back towards the house, stops on the porch and giggles again, opens the screen door and goes inside. The dogs seem a little confused, and decide to settle down on the porch. Alpo takes Rudy Roy's Bovex briefcase, cups his hand over the lock and dials in a combination. Inside are rows of glass vials and a large syringe nestled into foam, some things wrapped in plastic and some sort of hand-held computer, flat and black and about the size of a slice of bread. All of it is surrounded by stacks of cash, mostly twenties. He pulls a pen off the computer and writes some notes onto the screen. The computer beeps, and then Alpo writes some more notes.

Frank Charles is taking his time. Claude pops the cassette out of the radio and turns the FM on looking for some news. Rain tomorrow, no shit. Train derailed in Texas. More and more bombing going on. The flip phone rings so he doesn't get the full gist of the newscast, but it all doesn't sound very good. Alpo answers the phone, then passes it over. "Clawed Shoo-tow," Rudy Roy Caglistino says. "My frog man? That you? Look. I know it's your last gig. I know it, my man! But look, you always been good to us, right? What say you take just a few more rides. For me. Personal. No more of this small time crap shit. I mean the real stuff! The stuff that matters. The stuff that pays you back the *right* way, know what I'm saying?" Claude knows. He just doesn't know what to answer. Frank Charles comes back with an old pencil tucked behind his right ear and a stack of paper, and Claude tells Rudy Roy he'll think about it and call him back. "Think hard, my man," Rudy Roy says. "You know I'm countin' on you."

Frank Charles smiles like a proud five-year old when he hands the materials over. Alpo takes the sheets and spreads them out on the briefcase, and even Claude can see that the last group of columns were all filled in pretty fast, in pencil. Alpo circles a few numbers for show. "Thanks, Frank. You remember that today's the pickup day? We're going to need to check all of them over and get our own livestock loaded before I can pay you. I'm going to have to bring those white calves along with me, too."

Frank Charles is still smiling. It's a smile with pressure behind it in the jaws and eyes, like the whole of his face is holding something back. He nods absently, and waves them on around back to where the barn is.

The barn had been red once, but it's gray and weathered now. They can still see an old, faded ad for chewing tobacco along the one side that faces nothing, a long stretch of fields,

mounded up with what must be hills of green cow shit. Flies rise up in great glittering clouds as they pull in and maybe twelve cows mill in and out of the structure or are lying down in the shade, chewing and swatting restlessly with their tails. Most of them are the black and white blotched ones, and they're the worst looking animals Claude has ever seen—scrawny and runny-eyed, ribs showing, with big bloated udders that swing ponderously back and forth, threatening to tip them over as they walk. Only three of them are looking all right, three smaller, dirty white cows that mill in and around the others.

Alpo takes some medical gloves out from the briefcase and passes a set to Claude, then he rummages around under the seat and pulls out two folded packages, one of which he hands over. "Be careful of a couple of things," he says, unwrapping the other. It's a blue jumpsuit of some kind, made out of a thin, pliable material almost like paper. "Don't come into full contact with any of them if you can help it. If you do, there's gas in the back of the truck you should wash yourself off with, whatever touches. The quicker the better and watch out for your eyes. We had goggles last time around, but I don't see any here now. They don't move all that fast, so it shouldn't be all that big a deal. Put this on, too." He hands Claude a thin mask to cover his face and nose, then he shakes out the suit and pulls the legs on over his shoes.

He gets out of the truck with the briefcase. Claude puts the mask on over the bandages, pulls the gloves on, and then slides into the suit and zips it up the front. It's huge and billowing—he feels inflated, like some strange sort of circus act, half blimp, half clown. Blankets of flies spring into the air, shifting and darting like flocks of birds across the sun.

"What I need to do," Alpo says, "is to isolate each of the standard animals, look it over and extract a sample of fluid from the spinal column. Then we'll round up ours, those three

whites and the calves, wherever they are, and we'll take them with us." He points out the white cows. "Bring the gas down. I'll feel better having it close."

The cow doesn't move, though its eyes track Alpo as he gets closer. He talks in a monotone as he goes, a soothing voice without any change in pitch or tone. The cow doesn't seem to react until he's right up on top of it. But then it spooks, blows steam out of its nose and swivels its head around. It lets out a low bawl and its legs start to quiver. It edges backward, farther out into the field, keeping its eyes on Alpo.

"Circle around from behind," Alpo calls.

Claude walks in a wide arc out and comes in behind the cow, hands spread wide, enough to the side so that the cow can see him, but not far enough over that it'll have a way to get by him. They back it toward the fence. The cow shivers more, lets loose a long stream of air out the back end and Claude gets a hot whiff of it right through the bandages and the clotted blood in his nose. The air is heavy and dank and foul, a soup of everything he hates about this country. He takes a step back and his eyes water up.

"Pretty fierce, huh. I wouldn't light any matches if I were you." Alpo gets up to the head of the cow, grabs it around the neck, and sets to work. He pats the cow down, feeling along its sides and up under the stomach for any sores or strange lumps, murmuring low, meaningless words to calm the animal. He rolls back its eyelids on each side and checks down in its ears. Then he cracks the briefcase again and takes out the syringe. The needle is a long, thin one, and it slides smoothly in between the thick vertebrae of the cow's heavy neck. Alpo's thumb pulls

back and the flask fills with a pale pink fluid. When it's full, he pops it out, places it carefully in the briefcase, and replaces it with an empty one.

They move on to the next, and then try for a third. It's not easy—they're a skittish bunch, prone to bolting, and the hard part is getting close enough to them to grab on. Alpo tells Claude to get Frank Charles, and they glove and mask him too. It takes Frank a few minutes to figure it all out—he puts his feet in the wrong legs of the suit, gets the mask on upside-down and in the end Claude has to dress him. But he makes a fine sheepdog, running along the perimeter and rounding in the quicker ones. "I do this every morning," he says. "Great way to get some exercise. Maxie! C'mere, girl." The dogs leap from the porch and duck under a well-worn part of the wooden fence. Frank comes up behind the cows and claps his hands low to the ground and startles them into motion, and then he jogs along behind them, head thrown back and stepping high with his toes, pumping his arms into the air, just out of their view. He makes a lot of noise, huffing and clapping his hands and shouting. "Hey!" he says. "Ho there! Supercows look out, I'm comin' atcha!" The cattle swivel their heads back and forth, trying to get a look at Claude and Alpo, Frank Charles and the dogs all at the same time. They shift as a group in and out of the shelter of the barn, now bumping together, now scattering apart back out into the field. Frank Charles keeps jerking and shouting, the dogs circle and growl and startle them at random and sometimes the cows run in the direction of Alpo and sometimes they don't.

But once they do reach him, Alpo calms the cows into a trance and they don't move at all, they just stand there with blank looks on while he does his thing. He makes notes on the small computer after each animal. When he's on the last few, and those are all corralled into a group, Claude opens the back gate of the truck and slides out a metal ramp. He climbs inside,

grabs a long length of rope and ties a loop in it. There's a bright flash from the distance and heavy thunder rolls in on the breeze. From up here he can see the long line of new thunderclouds coming in low over the endless stretch of stunted pine trees and scrub.

Back down in the field, he comes up on one of the white cows slowly, in the same way Alpo did, mumbling under his breath. He gets up next to it and lowers the rope down over its head, tightens it up and gives a tug. The cow doesn't react. He tugs again, and the cow lifts its head and looks at him straight in the eye. The cow's eye is dark brown and its iris is full and black like a person's, like his father's, and there Claude is, alone in the middle of it all, reflected from deep in that black, black pool of water.

The feeling passes. It's a cow, Claude tells himself. He gives it another tug and it starts walking with him, right up onto the back of the truck. In the cab, the flip phone is ringing. He listens to the sound of it, like some far off, monstrous insect. He waits until it's done. Then he's leaning over to untie the knot when he hears Alpo give out a kind of high pitched keening, a weird sound, like a rabbit run over. Claude hops off the truck and comes around. "Fuck me!" Alpo yells. He's standing there in the center of a silent audience of cows with a gray look, holding one wet, gloveless, chimp-hand up in front of his face and picking long slivers of a broken glass vial out of it. "The thunder spooked them," he says. "They all shifted. Goddamn it! Get me that gasoline, will you? This thing was full."

Claude brings a jug over and pours it. There are several shallow, bleeding gashes across Alpo's small palm. Alpo grimaces as he scrubs his hand with the other gloved one, and nods for Claude to pour again. "I am so entirely fucked," Alpo says. "I mean, like entirely." He has Claude bring him a towel from the truck and he wraps it around the wound.

When they're finished loading, they douse the fly-covered, maggot-ridden bodies of the few dead cows with the rest of gasoline and set them aflame. Alpo, subdued and withdrawn, has them toss in their gloves and masks and suits, and then he picks up another container of gas and spreads it across the field on the biggest piles of shit and sets them on fire too. They catch fast and burn high, and the black smoke is strong enough to make them all lightheaded as they lean up against the cab of the truck. The sky goes dark, and rain slides towards them in gray sheets across the trees.

Alpo hands Frank Charles a stack of twenties. "So you know where you've been, Frank?" he asks.

Frank nods and says "I been down to the casinos in Folsom, drivin' all night. I got lucky at the craps there just like I do every couple months or so."

Alpo says "And you're to wait four weeks before the milk is set for consumption or sale, as per your contract."

"I hear ya."

"Remember that consumption can have serious side effects, and that we're can't be held liable in any way should you choose to ignore the guidelines."

"Yeah, yeah." He scratches with his foot a few times in the dirt. First one, then the other. He says, "Hey, you guys ever think of doing chickens?"

"Chickens."

"Sure. Super chickens. Extra eggs, you know—maybe they could pop them out already hard-boiled." He cackles, sounding a lot like a bird himself. "I mean, chickens are pretty bad to start with. You seen what they eat, how they live in those big farms? Eating shit all day, then they kill you. How much worse could it get?"

"I'll pass that along."

"You should. I'd never touch 'em myself, mind you. You know those things came from snakes?"

There's a bright flash and the slap of thunder and a cow from the back lets out a startled bawl. Frank Charles waves, though they're standing right in front of him, and he wanders back toward the house with the dogs in tow. The rain sweeps in like it was dumped out of a bucket and soaks everything.

Alpo and Claude get back into the cab of the truck with the heater on. Alpo sets the briefcase full of cow-fluid behind his seat, sighs, and gestures over towards the house. Frank Charles is out on the porch. He stands there with his dogs in a half circle around him and his face tilted up towards the sky with a train of smoke blowing across him and the rain sweeping in, his arms outstretched like a preacher over his congregation.

"Guy's not right." Claude runs a hand through his hair to get it back out of his eyes. The bandages are soaked through with sweat and rain.

Alpo pushes the glasses back up his nose. "Can't say we didn't warn him." He lifts up his hand, peels off the towel and studies it.

"So you've got to tell me," Claude says. "Is this all for real?"

Alpo looks over at him. "The supercows?" Alpo says. "Remember, you've only seen part of it. If this goes like the other test groups I've seen, within two weeks all of Frank Charles livestock will be dead."

"Sure. Right." Claude looks out the window on his side. All of Frank Charles' cows have gathered under what's left of the barn. "What's that mean for you, then?" Meaning the scratches, his hand.

Alpo doesn't answer the question. "It's your last day, right?" Claude nods. "Roy-boy call you?"

"You know he did."

"He wants to make you an offer. You going to take it?"

"Should I?"

"I did." Alpo shakes his head, holds out the injured hand and gestures with it to take in the truck, the cows, the farm. "Learn from your elders. And kid, if you make the right choice? And I think you just might? Then the less you know about any of this situation, what's real, what's not, the better. Get me?"

Claude nods, feeling like he's swimming across the wicked current offshore of Bouctouche's harbor, struggling for shore. He reaches under the wheel and starts up the truck. He backs up to the barn to turn around, then pulls around the house. Frank Charles doesn't open

his eyes, but he gives them two thumbs-up as they pass by. Claude pulls one short blast out of the air horn and there's a flash of lightning at the very same time. Frank Charles cracks into one of the widest, most off-of-center grins Claude has ever seen. His teeth are so long and so piss-colored that they jump out of the twilight, and his mouth and tongue are so deep and black that all the rest of that last drive, picking up cows, burning things, all the rest of his way back across half of the world to his father's Canadian coast in a beat-up old Dodge; all the rest of his long and quiet life spent catching fish and selling them to his father's cousins and their cousins and friends that he knew once as a child and would come to know again, the expression ambushes Claude up out of sets of double-yellow road lines when he least expects it.

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