

The Calf
By Jacob Butlett
Fiction

Gray farmlands lie on either side of the road. Clouds cross the sun and shadow the landscape. Trees line the horizon like prison bars. Mrs. Bishop sighs to herself, gazing out the passenger side window. With protruding bones and vacant eyes, a lonely calf sways on rawboned legs in one of the fields. She pets the glass with delicate fingers, as though she is petting the young cow’s loose hide.

The car passes the malnourished animal. Mrs. Bishop looks into the rearview mirror. With every second, the calf fades further from view. The creature starts to trudge across its dead field. And it soon collapses onto its side. Mrs. Bishop’s mouth gapes, and once the calf vanishes in the mirror, her fingers begin to slide away from the window.

Moments later, the clouds disperse. Sunlight passes into the car and lands on Mrs. Bishop’s face. Her husband pulls into a gas station and turns off the car. She turns towards him.

“Almost there,” he says. “One more hour. Feeling okay now?”

“Yeah, I’m okay,” she says. “Just okay.”

He exits the car and returns minutes later. She stares out the window.

“Ready?” he says.

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“Huh?”

“Sorry,” she says, turning towards him. “I was thinking about that calf.”

“What calf?”

“The one I saw just a little while ago. It fell. Just dropped onto the ground.”

“A stupid little cow, huh?” he says, turning on the car. “Well, try to forget about it. Thinking about a retarded animal isn’t going to help anyone. Especially the calf.” He chuckles and puts the car into Drive.

She smiles and averts her eyes away from his.

At the back of the hotel, the surface of the lake glitters. Gnats and mosquitos buzz like vibrating dust under the late evening sun. Two cardinals fly from a nearby tree and hover above the water. Mrs. Bishop turns to the birds. They then flutter off toward the sun. She sits on the bench next to her husband.

“A great day, huh?” he says. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Not really. Sorry, sweetie.”

“Well, try to cheer up.” He wraps an arm around her shoulder and starts to massage her legs. She fidgets. “You know,” he continues, “we should try again. The setting’s just right. The timing’s just right, too.”

She takes his hands in hers, stroking his knuckles with her thumbs.

“Not yet. I still need time.”

“For what?” he says. “It’s already been a month. You don’t have to continue blaming yourself.”

“I don’t blame myself for anything,” she insists. “I just don’t want to try again. Losing a child is hard.” She glances at the lake, her eyes a swirl of soft tawny light. “You’re not a woman. You can never really understand my pain. All I want is sympathy. *We* lost Aiden, not just me.”

“Well, technically, I didn’t lose him. You did.”

Her brow crinkles. She moves her hands back. “What are you implying?” she snaps.

He strokes her hair. Tears almost stream down her face. She grits her teeth. His hands slide up her thighs. She trembles. “I imply nothing,” he answers. “I only want to be honest with you. Please understand my feelings. My needs count for something. Yes?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“Good,” he says. “At least you understand my side.”

“That’s not the point,” she insists. “What I need you to understand is—”

“Let’s not argue,” he grumbles, withdrawing his hands. “Let’s just enjoy our time without quarreling. Okay?”

She nods, concealing a snarl behind her long blond hair.

They turn towards the lake. Dark orange light continues to hop on the surface of the water. Black birds soar and evanesce into the twilight sky. A chilly breeze brushes against the nape of Mrs. Bishop’s neck like a stranger’s caress. She hugs her stomach and leans back in her chair, glancing at her husband. A grin relaxes on his face. His glare devours the horizon.

“You can’t ignore my feelings,” she mutters at last. She crosses her legs at the ankles and lays her arms across her bosom. As the breeze passes through her hair, her husband glances at her moue. She shivers. “You know that, right?” she mumbles. “You can’t ignore what happened.”

He wraps an arm around her shoulders. She twists back in her seat. “I’m not ignoring what happened,” he assures. “I’m just choosing to forget. You should, too. Just move on. Just forget about it and start fresh, you know? That’s why I brought you to the hotel. To forget and relax. And to let whatever happens happen. What do you say?” He squeezes her right knee and rubs her left shoulder. Then he kisses her on the temple, breathing in her hair. Her moue squirms.

“I’m not ready,” she retorts, shrugging him off. He slips back to his side of the bench. “I don’t want to be touched right now. I just want to relax. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

Crossing his arms, he grumbles again and turns back to the sky. Violet clouds are converging with the horizon. Vermillion light glistens off of the disappearing sun. The lake undulates like crystalized fire. The sun shines in Mrs. Bishop’s eyes as she lowers her hands to her sides. Sighing, she clutches the seat of the bench. As her arms bend towards her stomach, her fingers start to redden.

After a brief silence, she murmurs, “We should just . . . talk and get it over with.”

He shifts his eyes onto hers. “I thought you didn’t want to talk about it,” he scolds.

“Now I do.” She pauses and turns her eyes away from her husband’s. Sparkling like liquid glass cutting into her skin, tears claw down her face. “I don’t blame myself for what happened,” she says. “I guess my body wasn’t ready for Aiden, but losing him was still beyond my control. I wanted the three of us to be a family. But he’s gone. And I still need time. I hope that you can understand my pain, because I live with it every day. And I don’t need you telling me that I need to move on.”

She lets go of the bench. Color seeps from her pores. Her moue bends into a sad smile.

Her husband’s eyes survey her face for several moments. Then he says, “I love you. I really do. And you’re right. I can never really understand how losing Aiden has affected you. But it’s all still stupid, if you think about. Just really stupid.”

“What is?” she snaps. “My feelings aren’t stupid, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I’m not implying anything!” He stands starts to pace, his fingers interlocked behind his head. Moments later, he stops and directs his glare onto her once more. “What’s stupid is your inability to accept the truth and move on.”

“I can’t!” She stands and rushes to his side. He turns his eyes away from hers. “You know what?” she says. “I’m angry with you. In fact, I’m pissed off at *your* inability to push your feelings aside long enough to realize that I will not fuck you tonight. Or tomorrow night. Or the next night. If you really love me, then you will not call any part of me stupid. Because if you do, I swear I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” he mutters, cocking his head towards her. A grin starts to materialize across his face. “Leave me? That threat has meant nothing to me.”

“It should mean something to you now,” she says. “I’ll leave you if you don’t change. And if that happens, I won’t be afraid to tell everyone how horrible you truly are.”

His grin warps into a grimace. Mrs. Bishop flinches in panic.

She starts to circumvent him, but he shoves her onto the bench. His body towers over her. She trembles again, trying to push him away. Before she can scream for help, he covers her mouth with his left hand. Flicking tears onto the back of her husband’s hands and arms, her strained scarlet eyes are orbs of liquid embers. She kicks him. His legs then pin hers to the bench. Her chest heaves and her body writhes.

Several birds return to sing to the fallen sun.

“Now you listen to me,” he hisses. “You will never leave me because I’m the best guy you’re ever going to be with. Why? Because you’re a stupid cow and an oversensitive brat who just needs to move on. Miscarriages happen every day. You’re not that special.” She pants and sobs louder. “Just move on for fuck’s sakes. I have. I buried it, as you told me to do. I would’ve flushed it down the toilet or thrown it into the goddamn trash.”

She shakes her mouth free and bites his hand. He jolts back several feet, grunting. Then he steps forward, fist drawn.

But she screams.

Her shriek reverberates across the lake and inundates the landscape. The birds flee. Startled, he stumbles back and trips over his own feet. She shoots up and glares down into her husband's eyes. He freezes under her indignant gaze. She clenches her jaw. Her trembling has ceased. Thunderstruck, he pants and blanches. His bottom lip quivers.

“Fuck off!” she roars. “I don't want to see you ever again! Do you understand me *now*?”

He nods and scrambles to his feet. As she returns to the bench, he strides away, cursing under his breath.

Minutes later, he collects his suitcase from their hotel room and speeds off down the highway, leaving Mrs. Bishop by the lake.

She sobs and snivels, crumpling into a ball in her seat. A single cardinal returns to chirp above the water. She shivers, blinking rapidly. And soon, dusk descends upon the lake.

Night throws cold breezes across the landscape.

Mrs. Bishop sits on the bench. She closes her eyes, covers her head, and weeps. But she soon rises, stumbles back, and slumps back onto the bench. An owl hoots against the dark. Mrs. Bishop moans and brushes tears from her face with her thumbs. Panting, she clamors to her feet, picks up her suitcase, and starts to amble to the highway.

The dark conceals her as she traverses the farmlands. Her feet grow languorous. She drags the suitcase onto the ground. Shivering, she lumbers deeper into the night, but she stops minutes later to grab her sweater from her suitcase. She puts it on, whimpers to the darkness, and trudges on, abandoning the case.

She halts minutes later, standing above the calf with protruding bones and vacant eyes. The creature lies still against the breeze. Kneeling, she caresses the calf. Then she lies down and cradles it.

“You’re not stupid. Don’t worry,” she whispers. “I came. Someone’s got to be by your side, my poor little thing.” Her face crumples, so she hugs the calf tighter. “Everything’ll be okay again. Everything’ll be just perfect.”

She closes her eyes to rest, the calf still bundled in her embrace.