

The Great Cow Chase

by Cammie Corlas Quinn

Once in a while a story comes along that smacks of a tall tale. My tall tale occurred on my grandparents' farm in the late 60s when I was twelve years old.



It happened on one of those shimmering summer days when parents gravitate to the shade while children scamper into blinding rays that could fry an egg on the road. After visiting with Grandma and Grandpa in the farmhouse for a minute, my two younger brothers and I raced out to the cow pasture.

The pasture opened before us like an enormous children's storybook. It had a pond with minnows and tadpoles, a waist-high dam, a creek that ran all the way up to Lake Springfield, four-leaf clovers, giant oaks with trunks big enough for fairy-tale doorways, and cows. Today we decided to play on a rock pile at the far end of the pasture down a long, level runway of grass marked with tractor-tire prints.

I cannot recall our game that day. Possibly we played king-of-the-mountain, or maybe we hunted for valuable gold specks in the rocks, or perhaps we relished the power of climbing above the landscape as lookouts. I remember carrying a new pair of children's plastic field glasses, which may account for our preference for high ground that day.

As we played, I noticed that the cows were grazing in an adjoining field. Whether I liked it or not, Grandpa's Black Angus cattle were as much a part of the farm as the crops or the barns. Darth Vader hadn't been invented yet, but to me, each of the broad-shouldered, midnight-black cows could turn into an evil powerhouse at the slightest scowl.

Today, the cattle seemed particularly restless. I peered along the barbed-wire fence and noticed that the gate was open. I continued playing, keeping a wary eye on the cattle.

Suddenly, my youngest brother, Pat (age 8), decided he needed to run to the house to use the bathroom. With one eye on the cows, I ordered him to walk. Running would attract attention. In typical sibling fashion, he ignored me and shot up the runway towards the house.

I knew that my dad was inside the house, along with my grandparents. Grandma and Grandpa were practical people who'd risen above poverty by wit and elbow grease. Grandma chopped the heads off chickens and plucked them clean for the frying pan. She walked two miles to town (and back again), carrying a long stick to ward off the mean farm dogs on the hill by Moose's farm. If there was any doubt about the lessons they learned during the Depression, all

one had to do was ascend the long, winding stairs to the attic, where piles of notebook paper and other supplies awaited the next period of want. Though Grandpa sometimes abandoned his chores to take us sledding behind his truck or swimming in the pond, Grandma inclined further towards the no-nonsense category. She appreciated her grandchildren, but the make-believe world of a child had long vacated the chambers of her mind.

By the time Pat arrived at the bathroom, my brother Mike (age 11) and I were mesmerized by the activity in the field behind us. Intermittent “moos” rose into the air; the sound reminded me of my dad’s lawn mower, puffing and smoking at first, then gathering momentum. The whole pack of cows began to mill round and round in a tight circle. Clouds of dust drifted into the tree line along the creek. Suddenly, the pack broke and galloped pell-mell towards the open gate.

Terror rearranged every cell in my body. I knew we couldn’t remain on the rock pile. Cows could probably climb. And besides, they were annoyed by Pat’s offensive sprint to the bathroom. They were out for human blood.

Mike shot off somewhere. Where, I didn’t know. All I can remember is a blur on both sides of me as trees and old tractor parts and weeds whizzed past. My feet pounded the ground in rhythm with my heart, and to this day I have no idea how my body kept from outrunning my feet. All I knew was that if I fell, I’d be trampled. I dared not look behind me for fear that twisting my neck would slow my pace. At that moment in my life, and no other moment since then, I was an Olympic, gold-medallist runner.



When I reached the white picket fence at the house, I burst through the gate and finally turned to look. The cows had fanned out in different directions. None were on my heels as I’d feared. Their prey lost, they were running off steam, lowering their heads like sprinters who’d lost a race.

Meanwhile, my grandparents, my dad, and my Uncle Bud (who’d dropped in for a visit) had congregated at the picket fence to investigate the commotion. I expected an embrace. I had nearly died. But they were focused on the cows.

Grandma shooed Uncle Bud into action. “Go shut the gate before the cows get out! Git! Git!” she cried sharply. She motioned him to the gate that led to the road to town. No one asked me, but I could’ve told them that the cows weren’t thinking about going to town.

Out of nowhere, Mike reappeared on the scene. In my haste to preserve my own life, I’d forgotten about my brother. He’d hopped a fence, avoiding the mad dash to the house. Pat missed the whole thing in the bathroom.

The dust settled. Uncle Bud managed to shut the all-important gate, I caught my breath, and finally my grandma gave me her attention.

“They tried to trample me,” I said. I was still breathing hard, probably for effect. It was the first time in my life I’d ever nearly been killed.

She looked at me as if I were a steamy dishrag that needed a good twist. “They were thirsty for a drink from the pond,” she said matter-of-factly.

I stared at her, dumbfounded. “*All* at the same time?”

She shrugged. It made perfect sense to her.

That afternoon I tried to explain the magnitude of my trauma to my grandma, my grandpa, and my dad. No one hugged me, though I may have finally received a placating pat on the hand, though I don’t remember even that. But it didn’t matter. I knew the truth, and deep down I was taking secret pride in the run of a lifetime. I’d saved my own life, and I knew it. I know it to this day.

The “chase” didn’t end that day. Traumas rarely end at the finish line. For decades those cows have chased me in my dreams. They have adapted as a result of their past failures, assimilating a gathered intelligence of the hunting-mentality sort. They’ve discovered ways to enter the farmhouse. Over the years, they’ve chased me down the cement steps into the old coal bin in Grandpa’s cobwebby cellar. They’ve chased me up the long, narrow steps to the attic, where Grandma stored the notebook paper. For many years, they’ve trampled through my dreams. Even today—almost forty-five years later—I am not entirely “out of the woods” when it comes to cow nightmares.

My grandmother no doubt forgot the big chase a week or two after it happened. To her, it was a practical matter of salvaging valuable livestock and keeping everything in its proper place. The cows had to be corralled just as surely as the chickens had to be plucked for the frying pan. That was that.

Today, whenever someone trivializes my lofty adventures, I remember my grandma. She observed the same set of circumstances I observed, but with a different set of glasses. I didn’t like her glasses, and I still don’t like them, but they were legitimate. The truth is, if it hadn’t been for Grandma’s hard work, there might not have been a farm. And if there’d not been a farm, there’d be no tall tale.

My tall tale—true down to the tiniest detail—is the adventure of a lifetime, an icebreaker at parties, and one of the most dreadful, beloved stories of my life.