

*1947: A Glimpse*

Ida Bickler awoke and lazily half opened her eyes. She yawned and attempted to piece together the scattered fragments of her recent dream, remembering only the image of a dark horse and its tired rider frantically streaking across an uncultivated field. She gave up as her head throbbed to the rhythm of the hoofbeats from her dream. Listlessly, she gazed at the faded wallpaper across the room. Harvey had said that he would replace it when they moved into town, then the Depression had shut down suppliers, and afterward they had put all their efforts into raising their children. It had remained. Anyhow, their oldest was grown now – grown well, too, Ida thought smugly. She slowly raised herself on the feather pillows and winced as a tingling, sharp sensation shot through her head.

Sighing, Ida lay back down and curled her legs under the heavy, hand-stitched quilt, emblazoned with tulips. Where had Harvey gone? Oh yes, over to Uncle John's farm with their chicken manure, she recollected. Seth would be over at the schoolhouse, tidying it up with some other students. She supposed that it would be nice to have a schoolteacher, his occupation of choice, in the family, but Harvey would be better off with an almost grown boy to assist with the unending obligations he had, even in later life. Lizzie should be cleaning over at the barbershop and would get home soon enough.

"Mother!" her daughter called out, as she appeared at the doorway. "There's a cow out there, and I don't know what to do." Ida squinted up at the vivacious Lizzie and coughed.

"What are you saying? Jesse Ebersole keeps his cows pastured right outside of town. Of course you saw a cow." Ida knew that Lizzie habitually got off the ten-of-eleven bus, grasped her flat, wide-brimmed hat, and walked briskly to the front door after finishing her morning work. It couldn't possibly be that late in the morning.

"And what time is it?"

"Eleven-fifteen, Mother. The doctor said to let you rest when he was here yesterday morning – you have a really bad cold. Yes, I finished cleaning the barbershop, and I wish the problem of getting rid of the cow was over too."

"Eleven!" Ida echoed faintly, as her thoughts drifted back to when she was a girl and her mother would shake her awake, saying firmly yet sympathetically,

"Get up! It's near seven. If breakfast ever saved itself for latecomers, it wasn't during my lifetime." She had always shot out of bed and dressed hastily, pulling her hair into a tight bun while the savory scent of scrapple and toasted bread drifted through the air. Ida savored the memory for a fraction of a second, then rose slowly to prevent the ripples of sharpness that would flash through her head if she jerked herself upwards. She reached for her brush and assured Lizzie that she would come downstairs "in a few minutes."

Lizzie nodded, darted down the stairs, and began humming. Ida slipped into her simple print dress and made her way down the narrow, creaky stairs. Lizzie was now singing one of the hymns from last Sunday in her soft, low voice to the rhythmic strokes of her sweeping. Warily crossing the kitchen, Ida swung the side door open and looked into the scraggly strip of grass between her house and the wall of her neighbor's house. A steer was standing there, placidly eating their long grass. Ida gaped at it and then gently teased the screen door back towards herself. It slid in place with no more than a slight thud against its frame. She turned to face Lizzie.

"That was a steer," Ida stated flatly, rubbing her warm-feeling forehead. Lizzie looked up from near the sink, bemused.

"Yes?" she asked innocently. Ida let out a breath that was fractionally louder than usual, and out of habit, sank into a chair to rest. That was what came from moving into this town, she thought, ironically. Not only were livestock roaming into her backyard, but her daughter had listened to the girls who came from nearby cities to work in the factory so much that she thought cows and steers were synonymous. A cup of steaming coffee, which Lizzie had prepared for her, sat on the table. Ida smiled as the liquid's rising vapor soothed her sore nostrils. The strong liquid stung her throat, and she swallowed it quickly. She gazed at the quivering surface of the coffee thoughtfully for a moment and then rose and walked tentatively to the door. Lizzie glanced at her.

"Where are you going?" she asked, quickly. Ida did not reply. Deliberately, she again pushed the raspy screen door open and hurled the remains of the coffee at the steer. It looked up in surprise and lumbered away. By the time Ida had crossed the kitchen and looked out of its large windows, the steer had almost reached the railroad tracks across the street from their house in its ungainly haste.

"Well, good afternoon, Mother!" said a familiar voice, as Seth entered the kitchen. He twisted his cap off of his head and nodded. Grinning at Ida, he began to chant: "When combatants met on the open field, strange weapons had they to wield. One with large sinewy limbs, the other with eyes spectacle-rimmed – I can think of more later. Could I write about this incident for the poem that I am supposed to recite next month?"

"Oh, you'll be a poet real soon at this rate," Lizzie said with conviction. If every ambition that she had for their family came true, Ida thought, they would have been the most celebrated family in Lebanon County.

"If you really want to tell everyone about this," Ida said, brushing aside the thought that she felt rather wilted standing in the heat of a warm May day, "ask the teacher straight out if you can write your own poem. If he lets you, very well. Don't tell everyone that it is about us, though." She again fell into the low-backed chair at the kitchen table. However, after gazing at Lizzie and Seth as they exchanged observations about the day, Ida felt less weary than she had before. She was sure that a little bit of work might do her some good. It would at least decrease the monotony that always came from being treated like an invalid. She stood suddenly.

“Lizzie, I’m going to take my sewing box and head upstairs. Don’t bother bringing dinner up today; just holler and I’ll come down.” Lizzie frowned at her.

“Are you sure that you will be all right? The doctor insisted that you get some rest.” Ida narrowed her eyes.

“Lizzie! I already herded a cow today.” She strode purposefully upstairs. Lizzie smirked and Seth looked up from the lines he was scrawling on a piece of newsprint.

“What is so funny?” he demanded.

“Nothing. Only . . .” Lizzie paused. “She said that it was a cow.”

Ida heard them chattering as she reached into the chest at the end of her bed for her mending. Looking up, she glanced out of the window at the robin egg-blue sky and let her gaze drift across the street. There the steer stood by the railway depot, which was then deserted in the middle of the day. Ida bit back a groan. She had been silly to think they would have been rid of the animal so easily. Ida focused on the ripped cuff of Seth’s jeans, wishing that it would wander away. Her head had begun to ache again slightly.

Ida opened her mouth to call Lizzie, stubbornly convinced that her daughter would benefit from seeing how to manage a steer. She called her daughter and clomped down the stairs. Lizzie followed her as the front door thudded shut, and they walked over to the depot. Thankfully, Ida thought, the young station master that was currently inside was not curious. She hesitantly asked him for a rope, which he absentmindedly searched for before handing to her. Ida quickly slipped the rope around the steer’s neck and gingerly led it to the corral, which was across the railroad tracks from the depot. She deftly untied the rope and handed it to Lizzie, who carried it back to the depot.

As she returned to her house, Harvey’s steel grey Plymouth rounded the corner, and he stepped out as Ida smiled and waved. She greeted him at the corner where the house met the driveway, and they entered the house together. Ida sighed in contentment. Her health was returning, her family was home, and the only intruders in her garden were mile-a-minute weeds. What could be more satisfying than that?

1458 words. I would like to thank my mom for her editing prowess, my dad for his encouraging feedback, and my great grandmother, who gave me an old journal, which included the words: “There was a steer in the alley. It ran off.”