

The Other Side

There was one aspect of my new job that I knew I was never going to find easy. Healing wounds, figuring out what's gone wrong with a once-healthy animal, helping to bring a new creature into this world – those were all tremendously exciting and gratifying challenges. But ending a life ...

It was very early on a Friday morning. The mare's last morning. I was glad she didn't know it. It was late August and just coming dawn, with a stillness in the air and already that sort of shimmer that promises unrelenting, sweltering heat for the day ahead. There was no one out yet on this wide, dusty Montana country road. That was just as well, because I was still trying to master the ways of my used Chevy pickup. I'd never driven stick shift in my life, let alone anything as big as this, before moving here in June. I struggled to change gear, pulling the heavy lever with both hands. But, I reminded myself, I was getting better at it all the time.

My previous life had been so pampered. It was easy to see that now. Academic work, city life – I had no idea how far removed I'd become from manual labour, and from the natural world. My decision to leave my urban existence behind wasn't thought through. I could see that now as well. Impulsively, I'd run away, run from a life that just wasn't working. I was propelled, blindly, by one thought and one thought alone. I had to escape. Never mind where I was going.

Fortunately, a whole new way of life was possible for me. I'd kept up my practicing certificate as a vet, so the shift from research in genetics to clinical practice didn't pose much of a problem. My sister, who'd stayed in Montana where we grew up, had contacted me out of the blue to say that

there was an established veterinary practice going for sale about sixty miles south of Missoula. I'd always loved large animal work, and I'd always had a hankering to return to my roots. A move to the other side – the other side of my training, and the other side of the country – seemed like the way out of my unhappy, restricted life.

I no longer loved Mark. Indifference was a better word for my feelings towards him. But at the same time, I hadn't wanted to hurt him unnecessarily. I figured that if I gave him a reason for ending the marriage that had nothing to do with him, it would be easier for him to take it. Easier on me, too. No sulking, no defensive arguments. So I told him that I could no longer stand the stultifying atmosphere of both city life and academic life. I had to get back to the open spaces, to live a rural life and to do some physical work. I knew that would end our marriage for sure. Mark would never offer to come with me to the country. City born and bred, he'd always teased me about my love of a rural existence, always told me it was an idyll, a romantic and totally unrealistic picture of my childhood. Perhaps, I thought ruefully, in that way maybe he had been right.

We'd been married twelve years when I left him – twelve argumentative, competitive years. We were both first-borns, children of parents who'd seen harder times and wanted to live the successful life they'd never had themselves through their children. As a result of that insidious message, we'd both become over-achievers. We both got into top New England universities, and we both went on to do graduate work. We'd met in England where we were both spending a year abroad as part of our PhD studies.

Reflecting on our brief courtship, I've since vowed that I would never commit to anyone before I lived with him on my own soil. Mark and I had been attracted to one another as two foreigners in unfamiliar territory. The alien environment had made us feel more like soul mates than we were. We had decided to marry after knowing one another for only two months, long before we'd taken the time to see how compatible we might be under more normal circumstances back home. Since our return to Boston eleven long years ago, I don't think a day had passed without an argument, without some snide comment or vicious comparison.

We had competed for everything, for academic jobs (Mark got the coveted post at Harvard; I had to make do with Boston University), for the

number of papers published (at last count in May I was ahead by two). Good heavens, we had even argued about who made the best spaghetti bolognese! It had reached the point where we'd decided – more or less simultaneously, and without any discussion – to keep totally different schedules so we'd not have to meet up. Otherwise, we knew we were bound to start comparing, competing, arguing. Gradually, we grew farther and farther apart.

Then suddenly this last May, I could stand it no longer. Why then? I still don't know. Perhaps it was the email from my sister about the veterinary practice. I saw my chance to cross to the other side, and I took it.

And now as I struggled with my Chevy on the way to this dreaded task, I was reminded that no job is perfect.

Arthur Fellows, a well-known local rancher, had rung me yesterday afternoon. He explained that he had a twenty-seven-year-old mare who was failing. She'd been one of his best brood mares, he'd explained, but now she was crippled with arthritis. Judging by her skittish and ungainly behaviour over the past few days, he reckoned that she'd now become blind as well. It was time, he said, to call it quits, to end her suffering. How soon could I come out and put her out of her misery? I explained that I still had two more ops scheduled that afternoon. I had proposed to come out early the next morning.

I glanced down at the crumpled paper lying on the seat beside me, covered in my roughly scribbled directions. No satnavs here. Less than a mile, and I should see Arthur Fellows' side road on my left. The sun was in full glare by this time. I had slowed down so I could put on my sunglasses, but even then I had to squint against the fierce Montana morning light. Half a mile later, I spotted the battered sign marking the entrance to the side road I was looking for. 'Fellows Farm. Horse breeders.' No fuss, no hard sell. The man knew his reputation. I turned left onto the thin dusty track and followed the road as it wound through the scrub, stirring up clouds of dry red dust under my wheels.

Just around a further bend I saw the ranch house. It was large and rambling, built of pine like all the houses around here. The yard was neat and well maintained, with a welcoming bed of sunflowers and zinnias just to the left of the front door, and a bed of rosemary and sage to the right of it. Beside the house, on the right and just behind it, was the corral, marked

out by a white picket fence. I could see the mare from where I sat in my Chevy. She was alone, pacing restlessly and uncertainly, occasionally knocking against the rough-hewn fence posts. She was a tall gray, and even in her old age, it was easy to see what a proud and beautiful creature she had been. Despite the heat, my hands suddenly felt clammy on the wheel.

Briefly, I considered turning around. How pointless. I was here now, and there was a job needed doing. So instead, I parked the Chevy in front of the corral and jumped down from the tall cab. The rancher must have heard me drive up, because he was already on the way out of his front door, carrying a halter and a lariat. We met in front of the corral gate. He began without any introduction.

‘Can I ask you to go out there and get her? She must sense something, because normally I can walk right up to her. But I can’t get near her this morning.’

I nodded wordlessly, took the halter and lariat from him, and unhitched the gate.

The mare had backed herself into a corner of the corral. She’d sensed my presence, and raised her head defensively, trying to work out who or what was approaching her. Clearly blind. I began speaking softly, a steady stream of vacuous but friendly conversation so that she could locate me. I let my voice take the place of the visible form. The mare began to relax. Her ears twitched forward. Carefully, ever so carefully, I brought the halter up in front of me and extended it in her direction, intending to slip it over her head.

Mistake. She heard the clink of the metal ring holding the leather straps in place, and trotted off stiffly. Her pronounced limp told me that she must be in pain from arthritis. She knocked into the fencing and stopped, trembling and blowing nervously.

I began speaking to her again, softly, non-stop, all the while moving slowly in her direction. I raised the halter, ready for action, but this time I didn’t extend it towards her.

Better. She let me come right up to her. I stopped walking but kept talking. Her soft gray nose guided her to the breast pocket of my jacket, the place where I always keep horse treats. I patted her gently on the neck with my free hand as she nosed. Slowly, I drew out a treat. Her soft lips lifted it

delicately from my outstretched hand. I told her what a good mare she was, and still talking, slipped on the halter. She accepted me. I continued my monologue.

‘I’m here to help you. I want to help you cross over to the other side, to the place where the grass is soft and green and belly deep. The sun is warm there, always warm. You’ll find your old pasture mates already there. They’ve been waiting for you, and when they call to you you’ll turn towards them. It will be easy for you to find them. When you cross over, you’ll be able to see again, clear as clear. It’ll be easy for you to run, too. You’ll run to join your old friends. Then you’ll all gallop together, running free, running easy. No more pain in your beautiful hips ...’

My voice faltered. Tears welled in my eyes. I cleared my throat, willing myself to go on. Her ears twitched forward expectantly. She wanted more of my soothing flow, and that gave me the strength to continue.

As I began talking to her once more, I sensed that Arthur had come up behind me quietly. He knew he was needed now. Without breaking my patter, my flow of promises, I handed him the halter lead. Slowly, gently, my hand guiding me back along her body, I moved towards the mare’s flank. My fingers found the centre of powerful muscle there. I slipped in the needle and began injecting the sedative, talking to her all the while. She sighed, and dropped on her front knees, leaning into me. Still speaking softly, I watched her sink down further, knowing that my voice was becoming more and more like white noise now, like a cool breeze flowing down from the mountains, the call of her old friends.