

THE COUPLE IN THE WINDOW

by Rob Sherman



2010

Morgan would take the cow's legs out, first. It would be quick; not slaughter-quick, but not calf-slow, either. We had already made a divot in the earth for her to lie into, and she would fit like luggage; that way, it might be easier to cut into her. She is nearly as tall as a supermarket shelf when on her side, a big woman who had stillborn eighteen times to the complaints of the vealers each autumn. I often wonder what she would have done with her life if she had not walked on all fours. Probably written bad long books about her dead children, about what she kept looking for down beneath the juniper by the river, and about why she perused the library of old plop left behind by the sowing pigs that lived here before her; that had lived until they were struck by chain-lightning, and the next morning we had hot bacon stuck in the brambles like red mugs on Momo's mug tree.

“Eliot, it's done.”

He would not not do anything, this doctor! He lays her down on her side all by himself. She has such creamy thighs, big knees that spend much of their days locked like Morgan's big car, the one that he will not drive past the cattle grid. I wonder if he has some local lads helping him, dossing under her tight belly until they are needed only to extend their calves into her stomach and she will be back up on her feet, pining for the calves. The big brownies of tractor churnings that run from the gate to the sheep-pens look ready to eat. I can hear the echoes of teenagers slapping at each other happily, having school parties up in that old holloway where Dodo had grown

“Eliot?”

I would have to write down later on (as Momo's magazine told me to write down everything that I did in a day, to “relevance myself”) that I liked his shirt. It is the colour of the skin behind my ear, and he knew that because he could see back there and I had shown him the contrapt that I had made to make it easier cutting my own hair. He is the sort of man who makes me wonder where Barbour is. He is not wearing a tie, but there is a plastic necklace strung with shells beneath the collar. I had asked him not to wear it on the farm, that it might get caught in something with blades and what would I do with a headless veteran, but I think he only hears the tips of what I say.

Time to take my cap off and thank him. Dodo said that is what veterans like. It might make him leave. I do that now.

“Thanks awful, Mr. Morgan.”

“I told you, Eliot, it's just Morgan. You can call me Dr. Willetts if you like.”

But I know that he is not a doctor and that he only does creatures, and he is a veteran of that.

“Yessum, Morgan. You do that now?”

“What? The cannula?”

“Yessum.”

“Yes. I've got to check for gas first. But she's big, Eliot, and she's in a lot of pain. I think I'll have to operate.”

I have known for days that the old cow would need a cannula, but I have never liked cutting my own herd. I have seen them on pigs and oxen over at the pictures; a big hole in their sides, so you can see what the food is plotting; though a stomach is a stomach is a stomach is not a stage, if you ask me. Once those big teeth get going there is not much to look at, and it might as well all be blood or static.

He thinks that she has been eating rotten vegetables, but I have told him that I do not let anything rot.

He bends down and runs a hand along her desire line, where the hair parts. She isn't lowing anymore, just looking up at me with eyes like the balls in the bottom of the oldest mice at the Library. I see her side having a spot of weather, and I want to shout at Morgan's helpers to stop kicking her underneaths or stabbing her up, but no. He starts tapping her and the tap calls up a brass band, a dense flugel near the hock and then a whole percussion over the tum, and she is bellowing on now. There are tears in her eyes. She has got a terrified throat the colour of smoked milk. He is hushing her; I know that he wants to calm her down, but she probably thinks she has sprung a leak as he is hissing plain out of sight along her side and it just makes her worse. I cannot say anything to him, though, as he is the veteran. As Dodo used to say, trust the wind on a Monday and a veteran before lunch, and Morgan has done his duty to me so far, been serviceable, apart from when I hear him in the pub being exasperated at me, sharing a bowl of madras with his stepsister who only ever wears bras far away from him. I should sell all the paint from his car.

He will step up now, and tell me that she needs a cannula. He steps up.

“There's a lot of trapped wind there, Eliot, dangerous bloat. Where's she grazing? Any alfalfa around, or clover?”

It takes me a moment to figure out the plants he means, with such language. I let the names go; I did know of some living up in the hills, but I do not know where she goes of a day. She came back with a football shirt wrapped around her snout once, another time with a pacifier on a hoof. In fact, that was the last time that I thought I saw her blood, and the last time that Morgan was up at the farm, and the last time that he was exasperated and scared of me.

“No, Dr. Morgan.”

He sighs and walks to his car. It takes him a half hour to reach the cattle grid, and from up here the vehicle looks like the spare button at the bottom of a wedding shirt. As he comes back now it gradually unfolds that he is wearing a romper, orange-yellow and making that dastardly noise of plastic, carrying what looks like a doctor's bag with steel handles poking from it. He draws a little hood over his head and looks a lot like a curried floater.

“I've got to operate, Eliot. I don't have any anaesthetic but she should be calm. Just watch her head, make sure she's comfortable, talk to her.”

Talk to a cow! I look at her; now, I hate her. I hope this kills her and she goes up like a hob in front of him.

He is now making a star with a brilliant knife right below her ribs.

“Sssh, girl.”

She is a woman. She is three years old.

He has scooped a scoop from her, and now he gets out a big silver drill, and he slings it onto his shoulder like he is a pretend American, but it slips and falls and scoops another scoop from her. I pretend not to see and I look instead at her ruddy useless head and all I want to do is cook it.

He starts to course into her properly, and at some point he must have reached inside her and there is a grand hiss and gouts of steam. He tries not to lean away and lose it but it smells of womb and one winter. She is still quiet. I want her to say “aaaaah” in a deep, long, satisfied voice, like a cartoon cow, but she looks nothing like a cow, and is silent like an animal.

He takes out a long receipt of skin, trailing a fish-grey bore of meat enclosed in an awful lot of netting. Reaching in and pulling, he brings up fistfuls of green globes. I miss the start of what he is saying.

“Please(?), Eliot. You didn't tell me that you planted peas(!).”

“Yessum, Mr. Morgan.”

“These could kill her, you know. I'll put the cannula in and you'll need to watch it and her over the next few days. See what goes on when you feed her, make a note for me. Only give her clean water and a bit of grass, mind. Anything else will just topple out.”

There is a sort of tagalong trap that he hinges open around the wound. I can see a tall wall of red inside her like a cinema curtain that moves when she breathes. It shudders as she defecates into the divot that I made for her, while he stood around finishing the breakfast that he keeps in some official pocket of his car; something advisable. I think he really wanted to be sick, then.

“Right, let's get her up.”

There is nobody underneath her, just grass pinging and shocked. She seems lighter and because he was late the day is finally ending. She can go back to the woods or wherever she wishes.

“Yessum. Dr. Morgan. Most kind. Speak soon on the tellyphone.”

I think he really hated that mixture.

“No vegetables. Just grass. Don't let her wander, either; she'll die otherwise and we'll both look very silly and sad, won't we? And watch that cannula, make sure it doesn't weep.”

The hole in her side is shunted open, wearing her blood like a beard, the purple interface around its edge straining to be usable. What would

happen if it slipped? It would certainly if she ran.

“Will you give her a name yet, Eliot?”

“Yessum, Mr. Morgan.”

It is dark night and the foxes are coming on the steps. It's dark night and I can hear raised voices from the woods. I am not sure what they are; the ground is too sloppy for tents, and no one goes roleplaying any more, not since the woodelf got her gorge caught in the storm drain and they had to dismantle it for her over a summer.

It is dark night, and I am thinking of Morgan and his stepsister, sleeping over in the gatehouse of their parent's and step-parent's grounds, him planting his crack in the divot just above hers, lying in between in each other like the snakes on the flanks of ambulances. One of them would be smiling, and neither would have any bottoms. I reach down and almost slip.

It is past lunchtime by the time I see her run out of the forest up in the top field. Something she ate, birch sap maybe, has bloomed out of the hole and looks like the rosette that she has never won. As she gets closer I hear a clitter not unlike a train on a track, getting louder as she humps towards me. The train is indistinct, and it seems to pull away from whichever station with a rising whine, but then she reaches me and it dies, and she nuzzles into my crotch with her head just like the skull of a cow. I can only hear the bowels of her fizzing through the cannula, and then a holler up where the gatehouse is some miles away. There have always been trains around, and sound does travel funny up and down from the middleground of the farm with its thin lanes and muffling hedgerows. The source of things can get a touch confusing, and so I forget about it and try to wipe the crust on her side away, but it is attached to something still working in her belly and she groans near me, eyes rolling with a splutter. I give her bottom a quick slap to move her forward and lean into her, my ear and temple sealing the wound. There is a hum, but it is probably a day-old moo playing havoc with itself throughout her intestines. Maybe she met a bull from the pedigree farm up top, and didn't clench up but let him push her against a hawthorn. Maybe she will deliver this time, instead of torpedoing out expensive, sticky envelopes full of bad news.

She pivots off like a submarine. She will be off down to the river next, where the power station wall is broken, and try to lick the big bunches of batteries. What does Morgan want me to do? Only grass! A cow should eat what she likes. Meat, even. Life is hard enough.

I'll cook something stupid, tonight, I think. Something best before. I step down into Dodo's bunker, under the old shower curtain, and take a tin from the shelf. The hot little wolf spider has eaten some of her children again, and as such there is a matricide going above the mattress in the light bracket with the horrid vibrating speed of such things. I bring the can up, pulling off the label before I can see it, and I tip it straight into the pan. Something that sounds like bolts hits the skillet.

I eat on the floor as I broke the last chair, and the saw is still hard with Saluki blood and no good for the repairs. From where I sit by the curtain I can see only the sloping roof of the stables, and when the security light

billows on the stars crinkle out. I do not worry at first; it often floods itself for absolutely nothing. But then I hear the bus, far from any road, out in the yard.

I have only been on a bus once: I had a car by the time school was needed. I remember what it sounds like now, now that it is outside, the cirrhosis of the engine at the back, the minute wobbling of every passenger, the driver coughing into the wheel. I even hear the little warble of the bell. Somebody is getting off.

It is a shadow, square and brutal and parked outside the house, rising onto the stable roof. I hear someone step down and the doors pirouette closed. I manage to stand and put the bowl to my face like a herbivore and inch out into the forecourt.

It is just her, foraging for hay. It is not the first time she has been confused for public transport. Her feet echo like corned stilettos around the brick outbuildings, and looking up she greets me with a rustle of neckhair. There's something caught around her mouth, what looks like cobweb. I step outside, kicking at the icy urine of I-do-not-know-whom, splitting it like dessert.

It is a holder for drink cans, caught around her flatter tooth. I unhook it, and notice the fresh blood running down her side. The rosette has been taken for some unladylike disqualification, and quite without meaning to I make Morgan's inspection. I find a Biro behind my ear; the last time I had seen it being a month ago when I had to sign for the guns. I write my findings of her down on my thumb, as my fingers are capped with brown, shining cauls of whatever tea was, and the only paper I keep are Morgan's bills, for some reckoning one day when she is dead.

*Coulish,
puckering,
bloom gone,
carrots,
No grass, chips and red yellow
green pallor to her throat, defecate
full of rings*

I note the date and turn for the outside tap, and when I do the orange security light catches my shadow halfway in its escape up the house, and I suppose that even I look like a looming, psychotic sort of bus in this glare. And then looking back I see it lance in and illuminate the red curtain inside her stomach wall and give a dim sense of volume to the inside.

And in that volume there are people sitting and having a drink.

I can only see their silhouettes behind the curtain, but from the space they take up and their positions they are sitting inside her tum as others might a restaurant. There are two of them, each about as tall as a cider bottle and holding a tiny wine glass which the light shows have been refilled four times and once respectively. They lift them to their lips and then together silently, and with all her beef in between there is no clink to be heard. The

animal seems unaware of what is happening inside her, and now there comes a quick succession of tiny square lights within the greater shine, persistently running along behind them from right to left and then disappearing, only to be replaced in a chain by others entering the frame of the cannula from the left. I hear the clittering again, but the animal is not stamping her feet or chewing ball bearings and I know now that these two are on a train, in what Dodo called the caboose, and they are eating dinner together.

It takes me some time to walk up to the memory of which this moment reminds me. I start by thinking of when I would come back from market with Dodo as a little boy, the market that they had held for a thousand years behind the Corn Exchange in the NCP. I used to wander under groves of Land Rovers and trestle tables towards the lifts and stairs and into the culling sheds. For the rest of the month they were public convenience, and I would be asked by the butchers to pass my hands under the dryers to keep them running while they slit the pigs open over the urinals and sinks, and it was deafening but everybody was happy because all that could be heard was hot air. Everything was bathed in a blue light, which made all of us look as if we were bars of soap. And I would later lay down across the back of the truck with everything that we used to buy in those days, and watch the street lights which shone for a quarter of the way home. And when we stopped at the first gate I knew that we had twenty-seven minutes more, and I would be bored and wish that I had a phone to play with, and instead I would bite the inside of my cheek and squint through the tears to make the lights into a winking great log of light passing over my eyes, a sort of bakery with light, and it looked exactly the same as this.

I must have been standing still, watching them talk without hearing any of their plot for some time, because the security light switches off and as I dance back and forth to summon it again my elbow catches the purple trap around her wound and she makes the worst noise. As the light comes back on, my hand is aching, and there is her blood all over me and the caboose has moved on with her, over to the stables where she slopes painfully, more saddle-backed than any horse.

I spend much of that night thinking of her as a train conductor in a blue cotton uniform with hundreds of golden buttons doing her up, collecting change from the man and woman inside of her and running their tickets through the teeth of her teeth. I envy her for knowing what goes on inside herself, what they were talking about, and what coins, with what kings and flowers on them, they handed over as their fare.

Tuesday

Brutish, bleeding
slowed but no
clotting been
towards town;
bits of
y and
u terra
c cotta
c in
a there,

small amount of tearing from the enormous
lobster they ate at six she ate well after as an argument
was had and he stomped off to the cupola to look back
into the mountains

Sunday

Hidden,
large
clot
and
gar
rotted afters
intestine, for
had or
to unknot; otherwise normal day supper
in the woods; acorns building up for
and had to remove them from or
under the mulch. Made dinner
her complain; seems to at
want some cheese,
but nobody appeared

Grim; Morgan which
hasn't made makes
left me a
the make clear
field the night
today, divot for

staying near where Still no food inside, them; the train Monday
has stopped in a meadow to let the wheels cool
and she is lying with her arm around
him pointing out the animal's
constellations. She cannot
stand light for long; eyes very dark,
tongue s
allow

I didn't want to lash her down, first; but I kept trying to hear what they were saying, and she would wander off to look for squash for the Sunday lunch. I imagine that she is tired, maybe pregnant after all.

I worry that her passengers will be cramped out of their class by any new arrivals, but for now they are comfortable, unaware. In the light of Dodo's torches mounted on the wall behind us I can finally get a good look inside and tell that they are English. The bungee cord lets her move a little, and she licks at her haunch, but the red curtain is still enough to watch uninterrupted. The purple trap looks tired, but I do not think that Morgan told me to change it. He has not been back to see if his operation worked.

I fed her grass myself, today, but I hate the feel of the big tongue, heavy and muscular and bolshy and calorific like American meat on my palm, and I am glad that I will not have to do it again. She is sweating profusely in what passes for her armpits, and I am sorry for her, but there have been developments, transfers and itineraries. They are eating somewhere different, and the foreign waiter does not jostle from side to side and so I know that they are no longer aboard transport. They eat mounds of things. The animal is mooing and burping, and the tables wobble, the diners grasping at them and laughing nervously, as if these tremors happen all the time and they were warned of such in their guidebook. I consider cutting the curtain to let out the sound, but I am not sure how much I might upset them. The chandelier still shakes for a time after she has settled down under the cord; I get the broken chair from upstairs and prop it right up against her, and peer into her like a fruit machine, her eyes tumbling like cherries or bells. I lift my hands above my head and turn on the outside tap. They take nearly an hour to eat, running out of things to say, the man pointing with his fork out into the dull world beyond the curtain to search for some topic; three tines bulge into her lining and she makes a halloo and a squelch in her stuff. She is inappropriately interested in what I am doing to her, but I am not thinking of her, or even them anymore.

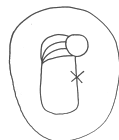
I am thinking of Morgan and his sister now. I reach down as some excitement causes the shadows of the diners to stand up and push their chairs in and for her to linger while she finishes off her glass of water and the waiter waits patiently, trying not to look at her throat proceeding. She leads the way and then they are walking past a line of heads, and as they sit down I realise that they are the backs of seats, and with a gurgle the animal's stomach begins to vibrate and the bus starts up its inadequate engine and I reach further down and feel warmth there that is painful on the fingers. I rifle through myself like Morgan's glovebox.

And the woman inside looks left and her husband looks left with her as there is nothing beautiful out of the right-hand windows of the bus. With a pulse in her anus the bus begins to move away and disappointingly they sit so separately and I can see the wife's jewellery glinting in the gizzard and the light of Dodo's torches is so fine and warrantied that I can see the individual charms on the bracelet; a duck, a dolphin, shell after shell, a fleur, a spoon, a heart, a snake, a staff, a snake, a heart.

My animal swallows something that has been in her cheek for weeks and the peristalsis, as Morgan does not know I call it, hits the wife in the face and shatters the glass of the bus window and I see that it is peas, she has been eating more peas, and like buckshot it flies the wife's head back and then the

husband himself goes down and the bus topples but she does not and I reach down even further and I find the real heat, the real heart of the matter and the husband is slumped forward his neck trespassed like a gate left open and the wife stand and staggers and the duck dolphin fleur spoon heartsnakestaffsnakeheart slides down her wrist as she steps into the quality of the light and starts to call for help. The security lamp goes out with what it thinks is my stillness but I can see from the blackness that the wife has seen something in that curtain, something suffocating that has gone unnoticed by both of them until now, the heavy cloth of the night that I sit in, past the candles on the restaurant table and the brackets in the train carriage, and she knows that she is trapped inside the purple trap and she must get out and leave her husband behind and she is coming out towards me and she is right there, right at the aperture.

And at the cannula's port now I can see something moving without the light, something as ruby as rubies or hearts or staffs or rouge on teeth, and the wife starts to slam her palm's heel into the curtain, and the animal gets more upset and her knuckles start to show in the vellum and I wonder what it is, what barrier, what curtain, what door or window she is so panicked by.



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