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The High Price of Butter

In my house we have butter and margarine. The butter is for cooking. The margarine is for macaroni and cheese. I swear that it's the butter that makes everything taste so good. My favorite foods that remind me of my mother and my own childhood. In the grocery store aisle, I stand under the harsh white lights of the dairy case, margarine in one hand and butter in the other. I weigh them in my hand and compare the price; I weigh them in my mind, thinking of the high cost of butter. No matter how long I stand and weigh, I always put the butter in my cart. I remember the times when I was a girl—the taste of sweet, fresh butter melting on my tongue. I remember the work it took, and I know the price is more than fair.

For my fourteenth birthday, I got a cow. I did not ask for a cow. I had very clearly asked for a horse. While every girl-child wants a horse, I felt that I had earned mine. I had worked at a farm down the road for the last two summers. I rode my bike to the stables. I would shovel the manure, feed the horses, ride for hours, and then pedal home exhausted. I knew how to take care of a horse. The life my family had worked and sweated for, clearing our own little spot in the Maine woods, was as well suited to horse-raising as any of our other pursuits. Even more, my father had dropped hints here and there. While he would not definitively

say it was a horse, he did say I could ride it. The fact was, I didn't know beans about cows.

We had a small farm in rural Maine. We cleared the land to put our trailer there. We hauled the brush and burned it. We pulled stumps, sometimes with the help of a tractor or a friendly neighbor with access to dynamite. We had a well and a septic tank dug. Onto the trailer we built a two-room addition with clean lumber and tongue-and-groove walls. My father's handmade bookshelves separated it into halves, one half being my parents' bedroom. A door led into the trailer, where my sisters and I slept.

We had to apply to the town office to put up new cedar poles for the power lines to our lot. On our two acres we raised chickens, rabbits, and sometimes a pig. We had room for so many animals that turned into dinner, but in all the years I'd begged, we had never had room for a horse.

Down the hill from our house sat our barn. Like everything else we'd worked so hard on during the summer leading up to my fourteenth birthday, it was a sure sign of horses to come. The barn had one stall. It was built so that the back door opened into the rabbits' shed, and as soon as you entered, you could see their red eyes through the black doorway in the rear. It smelled like clean hay and fresh ammonia, and when the days were cold (as they were in September), the smells seemed to bite my cheeks with the cold.

The barn was built around a huge cedar tree with white-ringed wounds where my father's chainsaw had slid through thick branches. Nailed to its furry brown bark were sections of

two-by-four, rising parallel to the loft. Its roots gripped the floor tightly, still growing. One side of the square hole that framed the loft entrance was nailed to the tree with thick spikes. We avoided picturing the consequences of its either growing or dying, but it was sure to do both eventually.

The main door into the barn was aligned diagonally with the door to the rabbits' shed on the opposite wall. To the right was the stall, and to the left a large open window of the kind that horses stick their heads through. On the floor below it was a massive water tank, more than bathtub size; above it was a recently installed spigot. In a corner were a stack of green poles and pegs, and loops of wire to install an electric fence. These were all signs of impending horses.

The cow actually arrived about a week before my birthday. She was small, brown cow—a Guernsey. She was a heifer that would soon birth a calf, and we would get to milk her. My father had gotten her from a farmers' co-operative program. After the calf was weaned, we would donate it back to them. We would have butter and cheese and fresh milk from my cow.

School had just started. Despite the farm, my parents both had day jobs, like everyone else I knew. This was making ends meet. It was another reason to get up early in the morning, and another chore to be done when I got home. The most bitter part though, was that the heifer was still not a horse.

This is not the butter I knew as a girl. I hear the crinkle as I pull it from its plastic shopping bag and place it, still in its perfect slick cardboard packaging, on the counter to soften. I bang through the kitchen,

leaving a trail of open cabinets in my wake as I thrust goodies onto shelves. I pull out my cutting board before I twirl around to twist the knobs on my stove. I set my oven to 425°, and bend low to grab my casserole dish from under the sink. I plunk it on the cutting board before whirling again to dig through the cupboards for filling.

I think to myself, it's a shame to use canned filling with the real butter, but even my mother couldn't do scratch every time. The oven is not yet heated, and I am thinking of my cobbler. I pull out a mixing bowl and measuring cup. I think of my mother and how she prepared everything in advance so she could just add and mix when the right time came. I break the seal on the butter's box, setting two sticks inside the blue Pyrex dish. The remaining two are sent to the fridge.

I named her Francis Mary. It suited her. She had large brown eyes that always seemed sadly pensive, with soft cream-colored hair rimming them. The fur around her eyes ended abruptly in the deep reddish-brown of her fur. For spite *and* for pretend, I decided I would ride her. I sat on her after milking-time one day. My sneakers bumped the rough wood planks on either side of the stall when she shifted. Our breaths blew mightily, visibly—twin streams in autumn air. The milk steamed quietly in its bucket. On a shelf sat my tape player. I sang "Faith" with George Michael and whispered encouragement to Francis Mary while I tugged on the rope I'd tied to her halter. When the tape ended, I picked up the milk and headed up to our house.

The back steps crossed over a muddy trench. Our main trailer sat up on a little ledge. The steps were wooden and rickety, with sticky, abrasive tar paper stapled to the wooden planks; the

handrails were sturdy two-by-fours and there were no fronts or sides. Between the holes, you saw the muddy gully, unless you saw cold white snow and muddy footprints.

Dirty barn clothes meant using these steps. We left our dirty boots outside the door. Here were windows of plastic sheeting, empty seed pots and trays, old watering dishes, and big plastic outdoor toys, outgrown and overused, left dirty in various corners. It was a greenhouse in the spring, and a den for hairy spiders all year long.

After dinner, usually twilight—sometimes in the dark—I'd lift heavy buckets of milk up the stairs into the warmth of the kitchen. A wooden sign says "Willkommen" above the stove. I step outside to take off my rubber-toed boots; jacket and gloves were hung in the barn. My cheeks pink, I step back inside in wool socks and hang my hat on the peg.

My father is standing by the sink. He takes the aluminum buckets and pours them through a large metal sieve into pre-cooled pitchers, waiting in the sink. In the clear plastic we can see the cream as it cools and separates from the milk. My father covers the pitchers and puts them in the fridge. My mother watches the news as I start my homework. My sisters disappear, whispering about Barbies and coloring books. I draw pictures of princesses and half-heartedly pretend to do my algebra. If we weren't making butter, I could disappear into my room. I could wrap myself in jackets and blankets, and put on thick gloves. I could pull curls from the kitchen phone-chord and run it under the back door, huddling and whispering to girlfriends, or worse even, boys.

Thanks to my mother, I don't need a recipe for anything. But for cobbler, one must measure. I pull the waxy paper off the butter, letting the sticks fall whole into my pan. Sturdy long rectangles of solidified cream bounce sullenly as they hit. They leave a mark as they tumble, a visible trail of clean grease and flavor. These go into the oven. I melt them whole and let them bubble and simmer until the butter turns brown.

"No matter how long you cook it, margarine will never brown," my mother said while preparing some supper or other. "That's how you know the difference." It seemed awfully silly to me at the time. I couldn't imagine why I would want butter brown, or even how brown was any different from burnt. I remember the words, and wonder if anyone else gets such a thrill from waiting for their butter to bubble.

Hours later, the milk is cold. It is quiet as we gather around the kitchen table, a last task before bedtime—not every day, but often. Washcloths lie on warm wood, wet and ready for the occasional drop. My parents have put the pitchers of milk back on the table and are skimming with clean, cold, metal ladles. They are large and gleaming. They look medicinal against the whiteness of the milk. They are cold next to the pictures of fruit in happy bowls, the small glories hanging from refrigerator magnets, and the homey dark wood of the table.

The cream sings and tinkles as it rushes into waiting Ball jars. It is thick and deep-sounding for a liquid. A white line runs around the top of each pitcher, a line of fat where the cream has bubbled up from the depths of the comparatively thin milk. Each jar is filled about halfway before being topped with a rubber ring, copper top, and screw ring by my mother.

She hands me a jar. I feel the coldness as the milk sloshes inside the glass, cooling the tips of my fingers and palms. I raise it about level with my head and begin shaking. My arms and shoulders warm as I shake the jar. Time seems to slow down, and it's no time before my arms start to burn. By this time, a second jar is ready, handed to the next eldest, Emily. Her hair is brown like mine, but thicker. Sometimes there is a third jar—often not.

As my arms tire, I alter the motion. Instead of shaking the jar up and down, I go side to side. My youngest sister has the darkest hair, in long braids. She asks for the jar. My mother, setting the milk back in the fridge, tells her to wait her turn.

I shake, and I shake. My face feels red and there is always a greasy strand of hair in my eyes. Everything is stupid and embarrassing, especially cows and shit-kicker boots. I don't want to make my own butter or weed gardens. I don't want meat from little white packages, made of the animals I fed all last year. I want some food with a price tag. I feel self-conscious; my fat shakes with the jar. I worry about my bra. I know that soon I will sweat, and I feel like that would make me shrivel and die. My father is heading down to the barn one more time, to check on the water and the rabbits. He tells us to switch jars.

I give mine to my mother, and Emily passes hers to Angela, the youngest. I link my fingers, stretch out my arms and push. We giggle and talk as the constant sloshing grows thicker, audible lumps under the warm yellow lightbulbs in the kitchen. In the mirror, we are reflected, dark heads bent as we shake and talk. When the second team tires, we alternate rolling and shaking the

jars. Emily rolls her jar back and forth across the table to my mother. A yellow lump rolls in whitish liquid, slowly growing larger; waxen and heavy, it thuds and rolls inside the Ball jar, one beat behind.

I shake, slower now. A dull golden lump is heavy in my jar too. Up and down three times: Shake, shake, shake. Side to side again. I pass it to my sister. Soon we will roll our jar, too. My mother rolls the jar to Emily who picks it up and shakes. Now the table is empty; Angela and I begin to roll our jar automatically to each other over the smooth wood. We see brown whirls of wood flash by under the speeding, tumbling butter.

My mother is putting store-bought rolls into the preheated oven. She takes the jar from Emily, after washing her hands, and scrapes the butter with a spatula into cold, heavy, cast-iron molds from the fridge. They are cold even on the counter in the daytime. The molds are shaped like ripened ears of corn with their husks spread out behind them. We will sell this butter.

She puts the molds back into the refrigerator and takes the last jar from me. She scrapes that into a large ball with her hands on a cutting board, and cuts it square with a knife. She collects the scraps into a longer oval with her hands again, and cuts away a stick. She cuts the larger block in pieces twice as my sisters and I wipe the table. Finally, my mother wraps the butter in white wax paper.

Now the kitchen is quiet, without the rolling and thudding. I silently fantasize about flaky biscuits melting on my tongue. My sisters and I are yawning, but our stomachs growl at the smell. On

the cutting board are the scraps from the last block of butter. They are not grocery-store squares, but long strips, thick and round on one side. The image of a delightfully buttery slug comes to mind, slithering onto a hot roll before leaving a slick buttery trail down my throat. The best part of the butter is that there was plenty.

The butter melts, forming first a slowly oozing lump, then a golden liquid coating, bubbling delicately inside the stove. I know this because my nose tells me. I could look inside the oven, but there is no need. I open the lids on my counter bins: Two cups flour (into the measuring cup out to the bowl), two cups sugar; I get two cups of milk, which I pour before closing the door. Last I grab a spoon, and dip it twice into the baking powder. Now I whisk, smoothing the lumpy ooze into a thick, creamy batter.

I run my can opener across two cans of filling and smile.

"It's two of everything, so you can't ever forget!" I can see my mother smiling through the phone as she guides me.

By this time the butter is bubbling quicker, brown crispy bunches collecting on the top of the hot yellow liquid. I pull it out of the oven and put it on the stovetop. I turn back to the counter to take off my oven mitts and pour half of the batter from the bowl, straight into the boiling butter. It sizzles, and the batter rises immediately. The butter rushes up around the edges of the pan, and rises over the batter, to settle in yellow pools in its center.

I spoon out the filling, amber apples smelling of cinnamon, sitting on a fluffy bed of clouds and sweet molten butter. The other half of the batter goes on top, and quickly I put the pan back into the oven. I smile, leaning on the counter, and wait. Soon I will have my cobbler. My tongue

prepares for the first bite of sweet dough and apple, and the little rush of butter in every bite, that will drip, softly onto its buds. Like every time before and every time to come, I will pull it from the oven and proudly say to my son,

“Look Cy, I made it from scratch. And I used real butter, too.”

To me the cost of butter is more than a price tag. The cost of butter reminds me of my childhood, and how my family struggled to be pioneers in the twentieth century. The cost of butter reminds me of the value of hard work, and how that work brought my family together. I always think of Francis Mary, who never was a horse, but allowed me to ride her anyway. I think of cold fingers, frozen noses, and sloshing warm milk on my pants. Yet the cost of butter is more than a symbol of hard work and quality. The fact that I buy it is an affirmation of my own choices in life. Because of my childhood, I know the cost in sweat of butter. As an adult, I chose to pay that price in cash.

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