

Are You Sad About the Cow?

*When life is on auto-pilot, there's nothing like a family road trip to make everyone slow down
before they crash.*

“It’ll be fun,” I consoled my husband as we parked the van. “We won’t even tell them it’s vegan.”

“What’s a vegan?” said one of them. To mothers, even the good ones, all your children’s voices tend to blend together. The amalgam just sort of floats there, following you, a needy, hungry, vociferous set of lips. On road trips, it finds a home on your shoulder just behind your ear.

My husband protested by methodically un-clicking his seat belt and silently sliding out of the van door. *It’s okay*, I breathed to myself, *it’s been a rough day*.

Looking upon the vegan restaurant my kids were about to terrorize with pity, I imagined myself and the three children donning pantyhose on our heads and cocking our guns in perfect choreography. The results wouldn’t be much different. We were all already in black anyway.

I kicked my body into its final gear, the one where the fumes flood the engine, the one my husband doesn’t have. I opened the sliding door, and lifted our little Anton by the arm like Superman would an empty milk carton, his head almost hitting the roof. Anton squealed for joy when his feet gently met the concrete. I guffawed; my husband gasped.

“You could have hurt him,” Jonathan accused. He hates my final gear, the delusional one, he calls it. He also said something about me always being oblivious, not with actual words, but I know he did.

“Now me!” screamed Maria angrily from the van.

I obliged, taking advantage of the fleeting moment of joy with the full knowledge that the lack of chicken fingers would soon change everything. I had to turn back to get little Ludy, who was still buckled contently into his car seat. Ludy’s our gift and our curse; he’s so quiet I often forget he’s even there.

“I’m sorry; we don’t have any high chairs,” said the waitress blankly in the direction of Ludy, who was on his tip-toes, bracing the table with both arms to stay abreast of the conversation.

“I didn’t know high chairs had meat in them,” retorted my husband over his menu. He was very funny once; everyone said so.

“Do they have cheeseburgers?” said Anton innocently.

“I want a cheeseburger!” demanded Maria. The group think had set in quickly.

“Cheese-bogo,” muttered Ludy as he stood on his adult chair.

Jonathan glared at me again, somehow blaming me that Ludy was, all of a sudden, becoming like the others. He had always implied the others’ unruliness was my fault.

“Oh my gosh, you guys. Look, they have burgers!” I said, pointing at the menu, using my index finger to cover up the “black bean” part.

Both Maria and Anton jumped to look. I glanced at Jonathan to invite him into the joke, but he averted his eyes as if to ensure everyone knew he didn’t know that woman with the kids.

Why is he so ashamed of me?

“Did you see the coffin, mommy?” Maria said.

“Honey, let’s not talk about the funeral right now, okay?”

“No, I mean the one here.”

Maria pointed behind her and there it was, our second coffin of the day. This one had less dead humans in it and more dead cows. It was even tilted so everyone could see the deceased. The poor, cartoonish cow was wearing a tux and was holding flowers across its chest. Coins covered its eyes and its tongue hung limp to the side.

“Why can’t we talk about the funeral, Caroline?”

This was the first time Jonathan had spoken to me in hours.

“Babe, Maria meant that coffin there,” I said, pointing at the dead cow in an attempt to talk him off the ledge.

“Maybe the children haven’t fully dealt with it, Caroline.”

He loved to say my name when he had it out for me. I looked at the coffin again. This time I wanted to climb inside it and close the hatch. It looked quiet.

I looked around the table wide-eyed to highlight our audience. “It was their cousin who they met twice, babe. Can we talk about this later?”

“We won’t, though, will we, Caroline?”

“What are you afraid of, Jonathan?”

“Afraid?!” His volume rose. “I’m not the one —“

The waitress arrived armed to the teeth with plates of food impersonating meat dishes.

“Four black be—”

I cut her off. “Thank you!”

“And one order of sweet potato fries...”

She held it up and looked around for our fifth. I did the same.

“Oh my gosh... Ludy.”

I jumped up and thank God, so did Jonathan. I wasn’t sure if he still cared. We looked at each other and, however briefly, our minds melded again.

“I’ll stay with them. You look,” he summarized.

On my way towards the hostess, ready to put the restaurant on lockdown, I noticed something off with the coffin display. I looked down at the tragically wilted lilies held in the cow’s... hooves... There at its feet was Ludy in the fetal position, crying like the dead cow was his best friend.

“Hey, buddy,” I said stooping to coffin-level. “You want to come eat?”

His little back shivered up, up, down, down as he cried. He shook his head.

I looked back to see the other three were focused on their eating. I lifted one leg into the coffin, and then the other, and for a moment, I was standing in a coffin in the middle of a restaurant.

I laid down with Ludy and the cow, reaching up and shutting the hatch.

“Are you sad about the cow, honey?”

Ludy shook his head.

I wanted to ask if he had figured out what “vegan” meant and didn’t want to live in that world. I wanted to ask about the funeral, or watching mommy and daddy fight.

“I love you, Ludy. Life is hard, but I love you.”

And we just laid there, in the dark, the three of us.