

Sometimes you catch a break and then don't

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I'm a sucker for happy endings.

I root for Cinderella. (Actually, I root for her to snag someone better than a prince with a hinky thing about see-through women's footwear.)

I always hope the underdog prevails against impossible odds, and that lovers live happily ever after, even after they've stopped having sex.

Farms are a hard place to find happy endings. The rule out here is simple and clad in iron: If something can go wrong, it will. Be patient.

Instances often arise when farmers are blameless for the misfortune that befalls them. A late frost whacks your crop or a foreign critter appears out of nowhere and kills your hemlocks.

More often than not, however, I find that I am complicit in my own unhappy endings. This is discouraging.

On Sunday evening just before dark, a neighbor pulled in and asked whether I knew that I had a "steer down by the fence line just below the big locust." I'd just come in from sawing and hauling firewood, had just taken off my boots, had just sprawled on the couch and had just decided that I would not move an eyelash for the next three hours.

Cattle always get in trouble on Sundays in the dark. If it's raining, so much the better. They choose places that are inaccessible save by four-hoof-drive vehicles. This timing device is passed to them in their mother's milk. It's the bump that sticks out from the top of their head, between their ears.

An animal that's lying on its side and not moving is almost always dead. Only twice in almost three decades have I been able to save a near-goner.

Given these odds, I was tempted to resume my semi-catatonic position on the couch. But, at the least, I owed a look to both the steer and its owner who grazes our place. So, on with the boots and out with the ATV.

At a distance, I saw no life.

But at its side, I saw that the 700-pound Angus was breathing. Its eyes were open and clear enough. Some white mucus dripped from its nose—a sign of pneumonia.

A camel-like hump rose from its left side, behind the rib cage. This indicates ruminal bloat, which is gas produced by microbial fermentation that can't escape either frontwise or backwise.

I'd crossed swords with bloat years before. We'd had a heavy growth of clover one spring. A truckload of steers had arrived Saturday afternoon from the Friday-night sale. This is a high-stress, vulnerable time for young cattle, so I penned them in the front pasture where they would be right in front of my nose for a day or two.

At 10 p.m. Saturday, they were fine; at 6:30 a.m. Sunday, seven were dead. Four more followed over the next couple of days. Grass bloat.

These steers, I later guessed, had not been transitioned to grass before being sold. The fresh clover did them in. I saved the other 50 by flushing gallons of mineral oil down their throats and feeding them hay.

Bloat can kill within a few hours. I looked again at the Angus.

I could have tried a trocar and cannula—had I had them, which I didn't. A cannula is a tube that's inserted into the animal's rumen inside a trocar, a very large hollow needle that looks like a jumbo dagger. You puncture the hump, then extract the trocar, leaving the cannula in place as a vent.

The closest medical instrument I had to a trocar and cannula was a shish kebab spit.

Even were I crazy enough to stab this steer with a Lebanese skewer, I couldn't think of anything to use as an exhaust pipe, except a piece of garden hose. Or, maybe, I could make the wound big enough so that it wouldn't close for a while. How big would that need to be?

I also considered putting a tube down its throat and into its rumen to give the gas an escape path. Or I could have tried to spill mineral oil down its throat using the same long-necked beer bottle that I'd saved from years ago. Neither front-end strategy seemed likely to work, given how the Angus was positioned on the slope.

In the end, I scratched its ears and offered my best wishes. He would either survive or not.

What would cause bloat in October's third week? It certainly wasn't spring clover.

And then I realized that Thanksgiving had come early. The steer had stuffed itself with the orchard's fallen apples and pears. They had fermented in his tummy, causing the gas. This result of overeating in celebration of the Indians helping the Pilgrims is not unknown in other local circles.

I've run about 2,000 cattle through the farm over the years, and this was the first one to have about eaten itself to death on windfalls.

But I was not off the hook. I knew that a cow can strangle on a large apple. The tiniest of voices had been whispering to me over the last month that, maybe, for *that* reason, I should pen the cattle out of the orchards, which are their favorite places to loaf and exchange gasses on the upcoming Presidential election.

I shared some blame for not keeping this Angus safe from itself.

The next morning, the steer was both alive and a little better. The hump was down, which meant that it had contributed to atmospheric greenhouse pollution. But it was still unable to rise.

We mixed three packages of Scours & Pneumonia Treatment with three gallons of water in a plastic jug. I poured. Jimmy held the funnel high. William and Jake got the tube into the steer and held it down. Melissa supervised.

Then we dragged the steer onto a trailer, which she drove to a pen where we hoped it would triumph over self-inflicted adversity.

As life-and-death matters go, this was not a win-win since this steer was destined for a feedlot in a week if he got well.

Still, the five of us felt that we had pulled off a pretty good ending, though I wouldn't call it happy.

I well remember chaining 11 bloat-dead cattle to the tractor and dragging them one by one to the far corner of the farm where the foxes and vultures picked them clean. I was not looking forward to another drag job.

This ending seemed to be about as good as they get this side of Hollywood.

That is, until I discovered that the steer died two days later by merciful gunshot.

Things are what things are on the farm.

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