

Black Molly's Baby

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As an Arkansas farmer who works in town to support himself, I'm never sure what I'll discover when I get home: the hogs in the feed room, the horses in the garden, or the goats on the neighbor's roof.

When I counted the cows one afternoon and discovered that little Black Molly was missing, I figured it was one of those times. I searched for at least twenty minutes before I spotted her standing quietly by an uprooted tree in the hinge area between the sloping pasture and the gulch. I spotted the impossible, too.

When I had brought her home from the sale barn the previous summer, I had thought that Black Molly was too young and too small to be bred anytime soon, so I hadn't been watching her. But Jolly Roger, my satyric Angus bull, evidently had a different opinion. He must've lured her out into the bosky hills some months before and bred her while I wasn't looking because there she was now, with about a yard of membrane and two hooves protruding from her birth canal.

Since I believed she'd never bear that calf by herself, I knew I had to help. As I crept toward her, I mused softly to assure her I could be trusted. She didn't buy this and trotted off into the setting sun.

With a cold March wind cutting through my barn jacket, I followed her, hoping she'd calm down and let me pull that calf. But she kept moving toward the wilderness that bordered the pasture. Running as fast as I could across the uneven ground, I circled to head her off. If she tramped off into that forty acres of jungle, the only things to find her would be the coyotes.

I turned her just before she could crash into the woods, and she fled back to the uprooted black oak. As I approached, I masqueraded as a cow again, but she shied away and I backed off.

Realizing I'd better get serious and remove that calf quickly, I hurried to the barn, picked up a rope and a pan of feed, grabbed a pair of cotton gloves that had most of the fingers worn through, and rushed back to Black Molly. She was gone.

I listened. The rustling leaves and cracking limbs told me she was moving west along the ridge toward the frontier forty where I'd just herded her from. I crunched after her across the rocky ridge, dodging grapevines and spicy cedars while carrying the feed pan and rope. A black form on the ground startled me, and I thought for a moment that Black Molly had fallen and died, but it was only a charred stump from an ancient fire. I pressed on until I found her near a dense thicket.

Fortunately, she hadn't entered the woods.

She watched warily while I placed the feed near her and stepped back to block the opening to her little nook. Eventually she began to eat, and I tried to rope her. A branch deflected my throw, and the rope wormed limply across her shoulders as she peeled out, knocking me down and throwing flint rock and dried leaves three feet into the air.

By the time I clambered to my feet, Black Molly was back at the uprooted oak, no doubt thinking she was rid of me. But I coiled the rope, retrieved the feed pan, and strode after her. I got about five yards before I tripped and fell, jamming two of the fingers on my right hand. Confident that the pain would redeem my sins for at least six months, I let it burn through me before sitting up to find that, miraculously, most of the feed was still in the pan.

The pain finally became tolerable, plus-ye, haw!-Black Molly had moved to join the rest of the herd grazing in the open pasture. Left-handed, I snatched the lasso and feed pan and walked toward her carefully squinting into the setting sun. I put the pan down close to her and encircled it with the loop of the rope. With the other end in my hand, I stepped off to the side a couple of yards to wait. She evidently wasn't worried about me, perhaps because lots of her friends were nearby. She poked her nose into the feed immediately after I moved out of the way and began to eat heartily. I yanked on the rope and snared the noose securely around her neck.

Startled, Black Molly pulled backward trying to free herself. The rope tightened, but I was able to hold on because she was so small. I began moving her down the slope toward the uprooted tree by alternately pulling the rope and taking up slack until I could tie her to a root on about a dozen feet of line. It should have been shorter, but she went spraddle-legged. She wasn't giving another inch.

I went behind Black Molly and grabbed the slick hooves of the calf. They slipped from my gloved hands once or twice before I was able to grip them securely enough to begin pulling and tugging with all my might. The effort wasn't affecting anything until her abdominal walls began to expand and contract. Almost immediately, a nose appeared in a gush of liquid and a mess of membrane. I had barely swabbed the film from the calf's nostrils (so it could breathe if alive) when it slid back, and the nose disappeared.

calf either had smothered or would do so **shortly**.

I tugged harder. I thought I was strong, but I was making no progress with this problem whatsoever. My muscles were hardly functioning. They felt dead, yet they hurt. I released the hooves for a moment and opened and closed my wooden fists, trying to revive them.

I grabbed the hooves again, and just as I began to yank on them, Black Molly's body contracted so severely her stomach caved in, and she fell down. There she was, an undersized cow with a large calf inside her trying to get out while she was lying on her side with a tether choking her.

I thought of going for my neighbor. I thought of going for the vet. Instead, I put all the strength I had into removing that calf. It moved as though it were buried in mud. It came out a bit as I pulled, but slid back as soon as I stopped. Bewildered, I paused. I didn't know what to do, but Black Molly's rasping breath inspired me to try again. I was straining on those hooves when another deep spasm surged through her body. I felt the calf clear something.

With arms barely responding and shoulders aching, but with hope still alive, I tugged weakly on the calf. My efforts accomplished nothing until another spasm hit Black Molly. I felt the calf move.

With I tugged and tugged. The calf oozed forward. . . there was its head. . . then a little more . . . there were its shoulders. . . then came its belly--come on, a little farther!--there were its hips . . . there! It emerged, flopped to the ground, and lay there as motionless as a pile of wet burlap sacks.

I tore the membrane from its body, hoping it wasn't dead, and wiped out its nose again. It wasn't breathing. Urgently, I pressed down on its rib cage. Push. . . let up. Push... let up. Don't push down so hard, I told myself. Don't break its ribs. Then when I pushed and let up again, it kicked and rolled a little bit. It was alive.

I walked in front of Black Molly, who still lay on her side, wheezing. I tried to undo the lasso from around her neck, but the rope was pulled too tight. I stepped over to the root and untied the rope, marveling that it had held. Now I undid the lasso and slipped it over her head as she raised up. Thinking that it was all over and I would see a mother-calf reunion, I stepped back to watch, but Black Molly lunged to her feet and sprinted off into the twilight.

I stared after her helplessly. Had she rejected her calf? The chances of it living without some of her milk were weak, although the calf didn't seem worried; it lay curled up among the rocks, as quiet as still water.

I took the feed pan, jiggled it loudly, and called to Black Molly. I mooed a

couple of times, too. Macho Jolly Roger, hoping I was a new concubine, approached but stopped at a distance to sniff and **stare**.

As I leaned over to put down the feed pan, I noticed the calf was shivering, and I realized I was cold too. Small wonder; my jacket and gloves and jeans were slimy and my hands and wrists were wet with afterbirth.

Maybe if I left, nature would bring Black Molly back. I started walking to the house. As I did, I saw a form in the deepening dusk moving toward the calf, mooing anxiously. I stopped to watch and saw the stubby form edge in closer to the calf. It was Black Molly. What more could I do but stay in the house for awhile, hoping she'd stay with her calf until it suckled some colostrum?

Once inside, I took a shower. The hot water soothed my swollen fingers and my aching shoulders. A meal of reheated beef stew renewed my energy.

Certainly enough time had passed to allow Black Molly to tend her calf. Using a flashlight, I returned to the fallen oak. Its roots loomed like a Medusa. I looked around fruitlessly. Inasmuch as the entire herd was still grazing on the hillside, Black Molly shouldn't be far away. But where? Had she allowed her calf to nurse? Was it still alive?

I flashed around in the trees and out on the hillside until I came upon her in the fescue, licking her calf vigorously. It was half as big as she was, and thank God, it looked swell.

Black Molly mooded nervously and moved so that she was broadside between the calf and me. I dodged around her and knelt beside it. It was a bull. Tomorrow, he would be turned into a steer.

I released his leg and looked into his face. His eyes were glittering in the moonlight. I'll just name him Diamond Dave.

AJ

Hoping my hundred and eighty pounds would disengage it, I clutched the legs and tried to sit down without giving any slack. It didn't work. Briefly, I yearned for the twenty pounds I had lost by giving up ice cream and pie every night. My hands slipped from the wet hooves and I staggered backwards as Black Molly bolted.

The rope swung her around, and she climbed over the embankment made by the uprooted tree and into the depression behind it. I followed her up, lost my footing in the crumbling dirt, and--naturally--used my jammed fingers to break my fall. White-hot tines of pain raced up my arm. Grimacing, I raised my face to the sky and worried about catching undulant fever. I pulled off my gloves, wet with blood and slime.

Despite the pain in my hand, I got up and slogged over that mound to grab the hooves and pull and tug some more. Black Molly was so narrow through the hips that nature would never push that calf out for her. I didn't know if I had any time left. If the umbilical cord had broken, the