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Breakfast in Moonlight

We had many interruptions of our scheduled home schooling classes, and it never bothered any of us. We understood that learning was not confined to classes but came from the entire process of living.

On the ranch we took care of in Northeastern Oregon's Blue Mountains, the first snow covered the grass the cattle had been eating, and it became necessary to feed the cattle hay that had been baled and left on the ranch for this time, until the owners of the ranch could organize the time, trucks, and crew to move the cattle down the river twenty miles to the owners' home ranch.

We usually started feeding the cattle at daybreak, but one morning, ice in the fuel system of the tractor kept it from getting fuel. I took fuel lines and filters off the tractor and then called Mike in Unity and told him I had to have a new filter. He said he would drive to Baker City, buy a new filter and bring it up the mountain to me.

I walked back up to our house from the hunting cabin, where the phone was, and told Laura, Juniper and Amanda, "Go ahead with classes or whatever you're doing. I have to have a new filter, and it isn't going to get here for several hours."

Amanda and Juniper stripped off their snow suits and insulated boots. Amanda said, "Well, it's too late for classes now. I'm going to work on my magazine." Laura smiled and didn't argue the point. We didn't talk about it a lot, but we all knew that the magazine Amanda was building and all the other projects our daughters came up with as they followed their own interests brought them as much education as structured classes.

As long as our general direction was toward education, Laura, head teacher and principal of our school, left plenty of room for whatever projects Juniper and Amanda invented on their own.

Most of the day, a light snow fell. Mike showed up with the filter late in the afternoon and waited while I put the fuel system back together. The clouds blew east, and the sun came out just as I tightened the last fuel line and started the tractor.

Mike climbed back in his pickup and started his journey back to Unity.

Even in the last sunshine of the day, the temperature fell rapidly after the insulating layer of clouds blew away and left us exposed to the cold winter sky. The thermometer said five degrees Fahrenheit when I walked by it on my way into the house. I said, "Hear that tractor running? Let's go. The cows are angry about late chow."

Laura drove the tractor. Amanda and Juniper helped me throw hay off the wagon. I peeled off my insulated coveralls and then my vest, working hard and sweating. The cows bellowed, crowded the wagon, and bullied each other about the hay. Snow on their backs melted and steamed in the clear air. A bull reached onto the wagon for hay and startled me as I turned and almost stepped on his face before I realized he was there. His head, with horns, was as wide as the wagon. "Whoo-ee, do be careful about those horns."

"We will be, but I'm sure he wouldn't hurt us. We want to scratch his forehead and pet his nose."

"He's probably gentle, but we don't know him well enough to be sure. Just stay up here close to me and resist friendly impulses. You have cats and a dog to pet at home."

The moon rose pale above Cottonwood Butte. The sun set, and we still had ninety steers to feed. I dropped everybody off at the house, crossed the highway, and loaded the wagon with hay again. Then I picked up my crew at the house. By then, light of the day had left us, though the full moon above our snowy valley gave us almost as much light as daylight.

On our way to the sawmill field, Amanda said, "My hands are cold. They're starting to hurt."

I said, "Your mittens are too thin. It's really cold. The thermometer was dropping below zero when I came to get you this time."

I signaled Laura, and she stopped. I boosted Amanda up onto the steps into the high cab. She caught hold of the rails and pulled herself up, and Laura shut the door of the heated cab behind her. I put my insulated vest and coveralls back on.

"Are you warm enough, Juniper?"

"Yes, I'm warm enough."

We tractored down the snow-covered road two miles to the sawmill field. I hadn't chained the big drive wheels, and the tractor slid to the side in the curve. Laura reduced the engine speed and stepped down on the differential lock, and the tractor pulled straight again. She couldn't hear me with the cabin

windows closed and the big diesel engine thundering, but I said, "That's real professional driving, Laura. We're proud of you."

Juniper said, "She does a good job."

I jumped off the wagon and opened the gate into the sawmill field. I waved at Laura, and she opened the cab door and idled the big engine down so she could hear me. "Shut the headlights off. I think there's light enough. Try it and see." She shut the lights off. The moon shining on the snow gave us plenty of light. We diesel down toward the mill, peeled flakes from the big bales, and curled them off the wagon onto the snow.

The steers bunched up close to the wagon, eager for the hay and munched their way into it before it hit the ground.

The willows along the river, the old mill building and the deteriorating buildings around it, the timber on the ridge rising above the meadow across the river from us, everything showed bright in moonlight. If I were a painter, I'd paint that scene, a full moon huge above the mountain meadow, moonlight bright on the meadow, and dark shadows of brush, trees and buildings. I'm not a painter, so I stored it in my mind under "treasured images and experiences."

I said, "Let's save the rest of this bale for the ride back." Laura saw me pointing and headed for home. Behind us, ninety steers spread out along the hay, heads down in the moonlight.

Juniper and I shook the compressed flakes we had saved into loose hay. We lay down on hay and pulled hay around us and over us for warmth. We lay on our backs and watched the moon ride above us in the sky, keeping pace. Juniper said, "The moon looks close enough to touch."

"Reach for it."

"I can almost reach it."

We felt like we were out there, past the moon, among the stars.

We left the tractor silent in the barn. An owl called from down by the river. "Hoo-hoo-hoo, hoo-hoo. Another answered it from over in the timber, the other side of the frozen river.

I looked at the thermometer as we went in. "Twenty-two below zero already." We brushed off hay, and we shed outdoor clothing. I put more wood in the stoves.

Laura said, "That was beautiful, on the meadow in the moonlight. I know the cows didn't like waiting so long, but I'm glad we did it that way once."

We all agreed with her.

Juniper sat in the back room a while, where we had lighted no lamps. The moon shone in the big south windows. After a

while, she joined us in the front room. We all read by kerosene lamps. The moonlight night lay quiet around the house and all across the meadow.