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# Writing Contest

Missoula Public Library Writing Contest

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## A Cow Pasture in the Middle of Ukraine

I'd been bugging Nadya for two months to take me with her to the pasture. She never took me seriously, and after raising two kids, was a master of distraction. We'd been yammering on about something else for five minutes before I would realize, and steer the conversation back toward cows. She finally gave in, telling me to meet her the next morning at seven sharp, with plenty of water. She'd pack lunch.

I awoke early, dressed in layers, packing water, snacks, sunscreen and coffee. I didn't know what to expect. The morning was impeccable, without a cloud in the sky. I rushed down the rutted village road. Nadya's mountainous figure started bellowing at me to *hurry up* when she caught sight of me. I broke into a run. She scolded me for being late, always late. Pavlo, her husband, was standing in the driveway. His eyes twinkled as he said good morning. In a serious tone which did not match his expression, he asked me if I was going to the pasture. I beamed, "Yes!" Chuckling, he handed me a long skinny stick, and went to open the stable to let the cows out. They exploded from the gate and started trotting toward the road.

Nadya beckoned and we followed the cows onto the dusty road. I lost sight of Nadya and Pavlo's cows in the masses of others plodding toward the fields. Gates were flung open and more cows emerged, one by one, until the whole road was filled as far as I could see. Men and women waved good morning to each other as they sent their cows off for the day. Pride swelled in my chest. I was part of an essential village activity, not an outsider looking in.

My decision to join the U.S. Peace Corps was riddled with uncertainty. Start with the hectic and sporadic path I had taken in my early twenties, add a horrendous heartbreak, mix in disillusionment with American culture, sprinkle on a bit of youthful idealism, and that was the recipe for my Peace Corps experiment. The organization itself was idealistic and unrealistic by nature, but I was too optimistic to realize it at the time.

The 43<sup>rd</sup> group of Peace Corps Ukraine Volunteers had taken an oath at the magnanimous freshly built American Embassy in Kyiv. Our purpose was clear-ish.

*Promote world peace and friendship by fulfilling three goals:*

*-To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women*

*-To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served*



*-To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans*

Straight from the Peace Corps manual, we knew our mission. I was in youth development track, with an emphasis on sports. I had been living in the village for just over a year and had finally learned enough of the local dialect and culture to develop meaningful relationships. This day at pasture was already a success, I'd been invited.

Nadya's round blond neighbor joined us, clucking and talking out the corner of her mouth. A sleepy looking fellow in gray joined us as well; even his skin was gray. When a cow stopped to graze along-side of the road, the gray fellow hollered, "Gee-Aww" and smacked its rump with a stick. I jumped a mile high, not expecting such a loud noise to erupt from this quiet, dreary looking man. Nadya and Blond Neighbor snickered. I was determined not to be irrelevant that day.

When we reached the end of the road, the landscape opened into a vibrant, rolling pasture. The cows slowed, stopping to eat. The sun was well above the tree line, and dew only remained in the shadows. It was going to be a scorcher. Nadya sent me around the back of the herd, to make sure no stragglers turned back towards the village. The other herders each had a section around the perimeter of the herd. Nadya and Blond Neighbor were protecting a young wheat field. Our goal was to slowly move the herd of cows across the pasture until around noon. Then, we'd steer the cows to the river for a drink. The men stayed on one side of the herd, the women on the other. Cow herding—another gendered activity.

I followed slowly behind the grazing cows, whose heavy udders swung between their back legs. The herd was a mosaic of white, brown, silver, black, gray, tan, and spotted animals. They weaved in and out of each other, butting heads, nibbling at each other's necks and backs and flicking away flies with their tails.

Nadya's shrill voice called me over to her and Blond Neighbor. We'd moved the cows away from any roads and they were slowly eating their way across the pasture. Nadya laid out a breakfast of cold boiled potatoes, black bread, pickles, hard boiled eggs and salted pig fat. To my surprise, she also produced three shot glasses and a small bottle of vodka. It wasn't even nine o'clock yet. I argued with myself about morning drinking, but decided, *what the hell, I'll do as the Ukrainians do*. We toasted to health, love, and at my request, the cows' health. Giggles rippled across our morning picnic.

I went back to my bit of the herd half an hour later, full of breakfast, stories, and vodka.

My fuzzy brain happily imagined Nadya and Blond Neighbor going to pasture in their younger days. They had caused a ruckus with their husbands; drinking, sunbathing in their swimsuits, and racing cars around. Back then, babushkas had scolded them, and now they were on their way to being babushkas themselves. Oh those restless, youthful days.

The cows naturally funneled down into a softly sloping ravine, ending at the river, giving us less herding to do. I sat with Nadya and Blond Neighbor at the edge of the ravine. The gray man from earlier approached us. Nadya called out, "Ay, Sash, how goes it?"

"Good, good, cows aren't running today," he replied, demeanor livelier than earlier, less gray.

"Glory to God," Nadya smiled back.

"Do you women want beer and ice-cream?" He asked.

"Why not?" Blond Neighbor chimed in.

As he left, Blond Neighbor's daughter, Yulia, who was a year or two younger than me and a village beauty, approached. Her head was bound in a white scarf, just like the ones Nadya had tied around my hair earlier that morning and wore on her own head. Yulia had come to relieve her mother of pasture duty. We all waved goodbye to Blond Neighbor, as her circular outline drifted away, becoming smaller and smaller in the vast green undulating landscape.

A car sped across the pasture, and stopped a few feet from us. The gray fellow hopped out, and handed us a couple of plastic liter bottles of beer and a chocolate ice cream cone each. We thanked him, and he disappeared as quickly as he'd come. The naked spring sun turned our pale winter skin neon red. Yulia, Nadya and I passed around a bottle of beer and talked aimlessly. I asked, "If you could have anything in the world what would you want? If anything was possible?"

Yulia's eyes lit up, "What an interesting question. You're a strange one aren't you?"

Nadya thought quietly, then replied: "I'd want to nice house, and nice things I guess, less work and a better kitchen."

"Yeah, and a lovely wedding," smiled Yulia, "One that my fiancé would be proud of. What would you want, if anything was possible?"

"I just want to be free and independent. I don't want someone else to determine my fate or control me." I answered slowly, carefully.

Nadya looked at me for a minute, a glint creeping into her eyes. She responded quietly, as



if she were telling a secret, "That's what everyone wants."

A quiet comfort settled in around us. We sat passing the bottle of beer, sun crisping our tender skin and wind rustling through our thoughts.

At the Food Bank  
by  
Cheryl Nguyen-Wishneski

3<sup>rd</sup> Place (tie)  
19+, Nonfiction