



A WATERMELON CLUB SHORT STORY

it only takes
eight



ARIA HOPPE

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Crrrraaaccckk. Red juice drips out as I sink the knife into the striped green shell. I cut deeper, turn the melon, and using both hands, force the knife through the rest of the melon. *Cruuuunch*. The halves split apart, revealing a beautiful dark red interior. Carefully, I cut myself a bite out of the middle of the watermelon, trying not to get any of the seeds. Juicy, sweet, crisp, and cold...mmmm. The screen door slams, and Granddaddy walks in behind me.

“How is it?” he asks me.

“It’s a good one!” I say.

“Which is it – Jubilee or Top Gun?”

“I think it’s actually a...” I pause and examine the shell quickly. “Klondike.”

Granddaddy gets the bowls and silverware from a bucket on the top shelf in the barn kitchen. The screen door slams again as he brings them out to the picnic table in the barn. I cut the halves in half again and deftly separate the juicy red meat from the rind. I plop the pieces of watermelon in a big stainless steel bowl. They’re huge pieces – Granddaddy and our farmhand, Richard, who also joins us, say they’re boats. I like big pieces of watermelon.

I’ve cut up the entire watermelon now, so after dropping the rind in a bucket for the chickens, I carry out the heavy bowl. I set it down in the middle of the picnic table and sit down next to Granddaddy. Across from me sits Christian, my cousin, and next to him, Richard. Out of the many people here on the farm, somehow we’re the only ones who have watermelon club. It’s sad.

Granddaddy gestures to me to start, so I use the big fork and take out a huge piece of watermelon. I take the salt grinder and grind out some pink Himalayan salt on top. I cut myself a piece. *Mmmm*. It’s so good.

By now everyone has a piece, and I think they agree with me that this is a good watermelon. The table is silent except for silverware clanking gently on the bowls as we try to get pieces of watermelon between the seeds. We haven’t tried growing seedless melons yet, but I don’t mind. Picking through the seeds allows us to savor the melon more.

I feel like reminiscing today, so after I finish my first piece, I pause before I get another one.

“Do you guys remember,” I say, “the time it took eight people to milk one cow?” I grab another piece as they finish chewing. Granddaddy chuckles and Richard shakes his head in mirth. Christian’s sandy eyebrows knit together.

“What do you mean?” he asks. “I don’t remember that.”

I glance at Granddaddy and he nods. “Well...” I say, remembering.

“Babybel was probably only a month old, and of course her mama, Florabelle, was our first cow. That first month was quite the learning curve, because we’d never had a cow before. But we had finally settled into a system – provided Granddaddy was there to help with the chart he made.

Every morning and every evening we milked the cow. Sometimes it was my Aunt and I or my Mom and I. One of them milked and I assisted. Granddaddy directed and he or Daddy would manage the cow and one of the cousins would help with the calf.

All went smoothly after we got into the routine. Until one morning.

My mom and I were milking together with Granddaddy, and we had already gotten the milking supplies early and headed down to the cow barn to wait for him. I saw the truck head to the barn and I knew he was getting the feed. We waited patiently, hooking up the milking machine and getting things ready. Ten minutes passed. Fifteen minutes passed.

What was taking him so long?

We decided to hop in Huntley, my John Deere XUV, and drive over to the barn to see why he wasn’t here yet. I opened the barn door and saw Granddaddy through the screen door to the kitchen. My mom quickly went over there and Granddaddy was leaning over the sink.

‘Dad,’ she said, ‘Are you okay?’ He didn’t look too good.

‘I did something to my back,’ he said, his voice laced with pain. ‘I need to lay down. Can you find a piece of cardboard or something, so I won’t have to lie on the cement?’

Junior was outside and I got him. We both looked for cardboard and found a piece for Granddaddy, who by now was easing himself down to the ground. Once he was settled, my mom took Huntley and raced up to their house and told Muttie, who came down with painkiller and a back brace.

Then she raced up to our house and got my dad.

Somehow we managed to milk that morning. I don’t remember what exactly happened afterwards, but I’m pretty sure that we got Granddaddy in bed and with Daddy’s help, we milked the cow. I think. Maybe we didn’t milk the cow that morning, but I’m pretty sure we did.

That evening, Granddaddy was feeling a little better. We didn’t know quite what we were doing, and Granddaddy, well, despite our protests, he decided to come down to the cow barn and sit on a hay bale. After all, he *was* the one with all the information.

Granddaddy had the chart. After my dad secured the cow in the headgate, and tied her legs and tail, Granddaddy instructed.

‘Okay, now wash and dry her udder.’

My mom looked at my aunt. ‘You wash and I’ll dry,’ she said.

‘What are we doing, dishes?’ my aunt asked, taking the microfiber clothes and dipping them in the water.

My dad stood behind the cow with his hand on the big shovel, just in case she decided to fertilize the stall. Richard stood just outside the cow barn – he’d led Florabelle in and now he hung around just in case he was needed. Junior sat on the ground, petting Babybel who was lying there, tied to the headgate where Florabelle could see she was safe. My mom was now pouring milk from the bottles on the machine into the stainless steel 2-gallon containers. I stood around awkwardly, not know what to do. I don’t think you could have gotten anyone else in that barn. At least my dad’s phone wasn’t beeping that he had a support ticket to answer.

Finally we finished milking the cow, and between the eight of us we managed to get the cow and calf settled for the night. Everyone went home, except for Aunt Kat and I – we filtered the milk and washed the supplies in the barn.

Later that night, I couldn’t help laughing over the drama and how green we were. *Eight people to milk a cow.*

Thankfully, over the next days we got away with just six people, and by the time Granddaddy’s back had completely healed, we could practically milk from memory – no need of the chart! I don’t think any of us had thought that we would get in milking experience that way.

At least it’s a good story, and I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.” I go back to eating watermelon. Funny, there isn’t much left now.

We’re all silent, thinking back to those chilly October mornings when the cow barn was crowded with people. I get up to clear, because the watermelon is gone and everyone is done.

Christian speaks up. “Remember when Babybel was born and I thought she was a dead animal?”

Granddaddy and I laugh, and now Richard is the one who looks puzzled.

“That’s a story for another day,” I say, as I take the plates into the barn kitchen. I fill the sink with hot sudsy water and as I look out the window at the garden with the mountains in the distance, I smile to myself. *Farm life is wonderful, I think. Even if it does take eight people to milk a cow.*

