

Michelle's Novel Excerpt: © Elizabeth Fontaine

I really don't know why I am crying. It's "hell-of-a-cold" outside, as dad likes to say. Tears burn as they slide down and then freeze to my cheeks. For whatever reason I'm just letting the snot pour too, which is weird because I'm queen of the snot bomb—I can aim and everything. I can actually feel the snot forming a bridge between my nose and my upper lip. It's gross; I know it is, but that's not why I'm crying.

I slip a little on a patch of ice-packed gravel that was uncovered when dad plowed our long driveway so I could get my four miles in before chores and school. And this makes me cry harder, not because I almost slipped, that's a regular occurrence for all-season runners, but because my dad plowed that driveway just 10 minutes ago. He does this every single day that it snows at 6am when it's still dark and hell-of-a-cold out and he'd rather be in bed, and there are lights lining our driveway, mainly so I can run in light in the winter, and I love him, and I'm...I don't know. Confused, maybe?

I pick up the pace a bit, and soon I'm no longer producing snot and tears. In fact, I think I lost the snot bridge. I don't even bother taking a physical inventory. I'm in the zone. In-in out, in-in out. I push and push until I'm in the final sprint, which is the last ¼ mile length of the driveway, marked by the second to the last light, past the house to the barn where my babies await.

Throwing open the barn door, I take a deep breath of the warm, sweet air. Despite my frozen fingers, it doesn't take me long at all to prepare the mob feeder for the tweens (that's what I call Jasper, Lindsey and Dan). The real Jasper, Lindsey and Dan are my best friends since forever, and they insisted once I started naming the calves that I use their names—it didn't seem to matter that Dan and Jasper are boy names—perhaps they don't even know cows have only one specific gender...ah well. My friends know very little about farm life even though they've lived in Eagle Peak all their lives too. They, the calves, are trained by the best, me, so once I open their pen, they shove over to the feeder and line up, each latching on to the outstretched nipple they are trained to go to. It makes me a little sad knowing the days of feeding these girls are almost over.

Sean (pronounced See-an to emulate the name of my sort-of ex-boyfriend) and Trenton (named after Sean's best friend) are next. They are my new babies, so they need to be individually bottle fed and have a hard time waiting their turn. I open the baby pen to Sean and Trenton's shuffling and grunts. They look as eager as ever, and despite being cold and stinky, they nudge into my nastiest places and smell, knowing food is on the way. I feed Sean first because Trenton is so pushy, and I am kind of trying to teach him a lesson about patience. I swear, though, that as I shove the long red nipple into Sean's gummy mouth, he looks at Trenton with, I don't know, smugness? Trenton yells his outrage, and I laugh. These guys could cheer me up any day—almost like the real guys they are named after, but without all the baggage.

With my chores done, I jog back to the house feeling much better than I had.

"Gross!" Eric screams when I bust in through the front door. This doesn't really bother me because 1) I live to upset Eric, and 2) I do probably look pretty gross. I just keep running up the stairs until my mom joins in the shrieking.

“Shoes!” is all she has to say, and I turn, run the few steps down, kick off my shoes so they hit the front door, and then sprint up the stairs to the bathroom before anyone else can get there.

But it’s too late. The door is shut and there is a sliver of light coming out the bottom of the door. It must be dad since mom and Eric are downstairs, the door opens and there he is, filling up the doorway with bulk that looks like fat and hides a lot of really strong muscles. I swallow, nervous in front of a person I have never been nervous in front of before.

He looks at me closely, quirks his head to the side, and says, “Well, don’t you look ...pretty.” This is his attempt at a joke. He’s not funny. And then he moves out of my way and waves his hands around. “Careful M, I just took a dump.”

And just like that I’m not confused anymore. It’s just my dad, whose farts really stink and dumps stink more and who can’t ever remember the names of the calves that I name and raise. I smile a little as I walk into the bathroom, into his stench, and happily flick on the fan and tell him “I’m used to it,” shutting the door in his face.

I look into the mirror and realize I’m grosser than I thought. My now very short snout bridge is greenish yellow and hanging on by a bare snout thread. I shake my head and the bridge falls with a thunk into the sink. My cheeks and my nose are Rudolf red—I can’t actually see the freckles, and my hair under my cap is a matted mess of orange curls. I hiss at myself—lots of fang, channeling the Dracula slut vampire I played last semester in the school play. “I vant your blood!” I say with my worst Transylvania accent. And then as is usually the case, the count Dracula song comes to mind, “Von, ha ha ha, Two, ha ha ha, Tree, ha ha ha.” I flap my arms. “Batty batty bat,” I sing. And I know I really am okay now. It’s Sesame Street after all.