

GAMEBOARDS IS JUST GAMEBOARDS

BY NEWALL GILCHRIST

Harley came in from the barn, interrupting Sally's breakfast dishes.

"The cows don't look to me no more, Sally. Don't know if it's the machinery, or everything so shiny, but they don't look to me no more."

"Could be the cows. Cows could be wrong these days. Remember? Cows back East started getting touchy some time back. Pennsylvania. Acting up."

"Well, sure. The newspaper told about the fella's farm near the Three Island power plant."

"Three Mile Island, Harley." Sally adjusted her apron, slid the final saucer into the drainer.

"All right. Three Mile."

Harley frowned, pulled a wooden stool from behind the pantry door, and staged it into the center of the kitchen.

Sally sighed, walked slowly to the kitchen table, and sat down heavily. Harley surely had something to say when he hoisted wooden stools from the pantry. If the pipe were to appear from his coveralls, she never knew from which pocket it would emerge, it was going to be a long talfest.

A long talkfest put a soul behind in her chores but then long talkfests were not so bad — considering Harley and her and their accumulation of 123 years. One had pitched in 62 years, the other 61, and Sally could never remember whose was the longer pull except on birthdays, when they would remind one another.

Harley produced his pipe from an upper pocket and shoved it into his mouth, unlit. He'd not lit a pipe since the heart trouble fifteen years before.

He began, "Three Mile Pond..."

"Island."

"...Island was gases — your gases and your isotopes and all. Cleaned out the flies and the bees first before them cows acted up. Cows weren't wrong before that. Sure, they had to put knickers on 'em when they milked 'em, those farmers that stayed on there in the milking business, but that was after the flies and bees dried up. That was Pennsylvania. This is Tillamook County. We got no nuclears, and we got plenty of bees and flies."

"Westward screen is split on the back porch."

"Westward?"

"Mm-hmmm."

"Well, you see plenty of bees and plenty of flies here, and still the cows don't look you in the eye no more. That's peculiar. Cows that won't look at you. Just stare straight ahead. It's like they don't care."

Sally pushed herself out of the chair, crossed the kitchen, and climbed onto Harley's lap. The two teetered atop the stool and in giggling union balanced and stabilized.

"Maybe they are just moody," she said, looking at the ceiling. "I'll go out to the barn later and tell them the mini-mook cow stories, about how we are going to get them little, tiny Tillamook cows to play with while they are hooked up to the milkers. That always seems to cheer them up. Or maybe it just cheers me up."

"Come with me to the barn," he said. "The cows need a good mini-mook story, as only you can tell 'em."

"Dinner will be late. Remember that."

Sally followed Harley onto the back porch and out the screen door. The two joined arm in arm and walked toward the barn, proud in the midday gray light. Harley turned his head



WILLIAM MICHAEL SCHUSTER

to view the westward wall of the screened porch. His fondly combed white beard wiggled in the breeze as he bent low and whispered something in Sally's ear. She laughed.

An hour later, Harley and Sally returned from the barn, walking slowly. Their arms wound about one another, as before, but more tightly.

The mini-mooking had not gone well. All thirteen cows had been regaled with storied descriptions on tiny cows, mini-mook giddy with life beyond stanchions and manure gutters. Sally used every delivery system she could muster — from arch-dramatic to lullaby effect. While Harley laughed and slapped his sides at every mini-mook embellishment, the cows blankly fixed their gazes on the nearest shiny thing. Neither Sally nor Harley could get them to turn their heads and look at them. If the couple placed their faces in front of a cow, the cow disengaged with an unfocused certainty. Only the spotless, galvanized, and whitened caught their attention. Harley took it personal.

"We was ignored. See what I mean?" Harley ventured before they turned in that night.

"Wouldn't even look at us. Like they was dazed and didn't care. Maybe we've bred the beasts too far."

He felt as if he were a hired man again, new to a barn and likely to disrupt the cow-beliefs and lower the milk production.

The next night Harley picked up the book Davey Brisker had given him: "How to Win at Draughts." It was a book about how to win at checkers, a game that Brisker and Harley always liked to play together. Davey won most of the time and had bought Harley the book to chide Harley into not kinging so early. Now, Davey and his wife Connie were gone. The Brisker farm had gone broke the year before, and they had moved back to Illinois after 23 years of Tillamook County. Now that Harley had no one to play checkers with, he found himself poring through "How to Win at Draughts" and trying not to remember how the cows spurned him daily. What had he done that was so wrong?

Staring at the book diagrams and moving checkers around the gameboard unsettled Harley. Davey wasn't there, and the book wasn't going to introduce him to a new checker partner. Alone one evening in the parlor, Harley slammed the book shut and slid it and the checkers into the V of the checkerboard and dumped it all into the woodstove fire. He retrieved the checkerboard before it caught, set it open on the kitchen table, and stared at it until time to go where Sally was, in bed upstairs, reading.

"Gameboards is just gameboards," Harley said as he eased into bed and poked a weathered hand into his pillow. Sally yawned and backed an ample hip toward Harley.



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"Your shoulder troubled?" she asked.

"It was better today, thank you."

They cuddled, then slept, and dreamt of haystacks and oranges.

It was soon thereafter that Harley lost interest in the milk business. Oh, the feeding was done on time, and the milking, and the contracts were honored. The farm was paid off and thirteen cows were enough. Another activity came to claim much of Harley's search for something new. In town to buy antiseptics, Harley had discovered the Tillamook Safeway's new policy: it stayed open all night.

The dairy section of the Tillamook Safeway attracted Harley. The plastics and chromes of the display cases produced an odd, reflected light... different from the defeated glow of the contained Tillamook coastal skies. Somehow Safeway's dairy section made Harley think of cactus, and look for answers.

Barn milk had lost its mystery and reason. Harley guessed there had to be something more. He felt a need to pursue milk's end, to finally understand what a dairy product meant, bullied from its essence into forms and packaged realities: pleasing yet strange. "Yami Yogurt"? What in the world could that mean?

Better to understand milk than checkers, or death, reasoned Harley to the cows one morning when the breath came hard. Or bankruptcy, Harley added as an afterthought.

"Damn, I miss Davey," Harley said aloud.

He allowed two hours late every Saturday night for what he called his "safari." This included a travel time of forty minutes, if it was not raining. Harley did not dress for the occasion, but he would remind himself to buy something at the supermarket, generally a gallon of the milk with no cream in it. That would pay the market for their time and keep his doctor's advice paid up.

Once there, cottage cheeses, milks, butters, expiration dates, logos on yogurts, anything and everything having to do with this end of the dairy product chain of being fascinated Harley. The colors of the milk cartons reminded him of late spring flowers in the fallow meadow behind the barn.

Not many people shopped after midnight, so Harley's study had the quality of a meadow walk during the full moon. The clerks never bothered him, even when he squatted low to take the ache off his back, and stared into the labels up close. His breath frosted in the refrigerated air. The cashiers knew him to be a property owner and unlikely to pilfer, and they passed word to the night-time stockboys: "Just pretend he's not there."

Harley wondered why a business would stay open all night when it was losing money to do so, and decided it was no different than the government paying him to stop producing part of his milk. Probably no different and none of his business. Anyway, there was too much else to be understood. Things like: was Philadelphia Cream Cheese really made in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania? Near where all those hell-bent cows without flies were acting up?

Often, on the drive home, Harley wondered if dairy farmers in other places were going to their town Safeways on Saturday night late. Secret meetings, like the Masons. Just to compare notes. Get together.

Harley would delight in telling Sally of his late night excursions and what it was like to sit or stand amid the medley of milks and butters and cheeses. Everything spotless and shiny and galvanized.

He brought stories home. Opening of the freezer door was forbidden, he would relate, since that was too much like opening an Egyptian crypt, and it would not do to curse the Safeway. Just the type story Sally would enjoy, he knew, and she, on hearing such a thing, would laugh and throw a washcloth or towel his way.

"Honey, it's a hoot," Harley explained over dinner biscuits. "You look long enough, and it's like something's in all those shelves and products that you can't quite see. You have got to see it for yourself."

"Do they ever show any big pictures of Borden's Bessie the Cow?"

"The what?"

"Borden's Bessie the Cow. Or was it 'Elsie' the Borden's Cow? That's what got my mini-mook stories going. Borden's Bessie looked so happy — just like she just heard a wonderful funny story."

"All these years. Sally, I'll swear you are a she-devil."

"Well, maybe Saturday I'll go in with you, Harley. You sure they don't mind?"

"No, they don't mind. Sometimes the clerks come around to make conversation, but the trick is to pretend you don't hear them. Pretend you're shopping. Or something. Kind of look yonder, or even look yonder through them, and they'll go away."

"Saturday, then," said Sally. "Unless it's storming."

Newall Gilchrist lives in Portland, but sometimes on the Oregon coast and other places.

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