

A Bum Steer

Era: circa 1990

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"So... did you go on a binge this weekend, like you were threatening?" Hector asked Jeff.

"No sir-ee. No hard-stuff at all. I bought an ultra-light instead." Jeff was bouncing around the coffee machine on his twenty-two year old legs. A barely concealed exuberance rippled through his muscles and his glasses slid around on his nose. He and Hector were occupying most of the space in front of the sink, and were oblivious to the stench from my cup. I wedged a path between their bodies and turned on the tap, so I could rinse away a three day growth of organisms. I decided against soap. It was my contribution to species diversity.

"I never buy the light stuff," Hector told Jeff. "...costs too much to get drunk." He filled his coffee cup, took a sip, grimaced, then tipped the contents down the drain. "This stuff has been sitting here since Friday," he said. He picked up the pot and tipped it over the sink too.

"Hey Hector," I whined, "I want some of that... keeps me awake."

"Don't get your legs in a pretzel, Lois." He continued to pour. "I'm going to make some more." He turned to Jeff. "If you had to pay to feed my cattle, you wouldn't waste your money on light beer either."

"I don't want new coffee," I told Hector.

"Not light 'beer'," Jeff corrected Hector. Hector was now preoccupied with a cupboard door that was falling off its hinges.

"I bought one of those experimental aircraft - an ultra-light plane."

I spent the next few seconds just staring at Jeff. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Hector was dangling like the broken cupboard door he had been playing with. His mouth looked like an airplane hangar.

"D'you know how to fly the thing?" I asked Jeff.

"I've been up a couple of times."

"D'you have a license?"

"No."

"Jeff, you'll kill yourself," I informed him, then turned back to the sink. "And I, for one, don't like the idea."

"Actually, I'm looking for someplace to do it." He turned to Hector. "I was wondering how you'd feel if I used one of your fields."

"That's possible. But I wouldn't want anybody disturbing the cows. They might not give milk. You could use the field where the steers are grazing."

"Is that the field," I asked, "where you buried your dog, Hector?"

"Hey, don't knock it... self-fertilizing soil." He clicked the heels of his cowboy boots on the floor.

Jeff laughed. "I don't scare that easily, Lois."

"Just so long as you don't fly into any of my animals," Hector cautioned. "How much are you willing to pay me?" He put his arm around the younger man's shoulders. "Come on back to my board and I'll draw you a map. You can come out tonight, look around and we'll talk about it."

They headed down the hall to the drafting department, Hector's boots clicking and Jeff's glasses sliding down his nose.

"An ultra-light," Hector mused. "Thing like that must cost \$10,000 bucks. It's already assembled, hey?"

Quietly, I tabulated the number of dresses I could buy with ten thousand dollars and pictured myself making a down-payment on one of Jake's houses.

"We're going to have to protect your investment," Hector continued. "For a few dollars more, I'll let you store your plane in the cow shed."

"The shed won't cost you much, Jeff," I hollered after them, "because you won't need it for long."

They ignored me, so I turned back to the coffee machine. Three pre-measured bags in a pot would probably be a suitable substitute for the tar Hector had washed down the sink.

For the next two days, Hector and Jeff spent a lot of time drawing up a contract. When it was finished, it consisted of three sheets of legalese approved by the entire Pressure-Plus drafting department, typed by the Pressure-Plus drafting secretary, printed on the Pressure-Plus laser printer, and notarized by the Pressure-Plus Notary of the Public.

Hector allowed Jeff onto his pasture the following Saturday. I asked if I could attend but Hector was reluctant since he thought my presence might upset his cows in the adjacent field. He also told me he might have extra veterinary bills and could be sued for funeral expenses if I distracted the pilot. He would be willing to allow me to attend, however, if I were willing to compensate him for lost milk and risk. An admission price of \$30 would be adequate, he figured. I decided I could buy a new sweater for that and turned him down.

Jeff came to work the Monday following, with no glasses and discolored skin. His left eye glowed white from a socket of black and green. I have to confess I felt a little anxious. I happen to like Jeff. I stopped at his board early that morning, ooh-ed and awed over the separator he was drawing, then asked, "So. How did the flying go this weekend?"

"Not too bad. I managed to do about thirty circuits."

"What's a circuit?"

"You just keep taking off and landing. Go in a big circle. Good practice."

"Doesn't it get kind of boring?"

"That depends on whether or not you know you won't kill yourself."

"And you're not sure?"

"Well, the cattle add a little bit of excitement. Once in a while, one of them walks onto the runway. If that happens, I have to improvise."

Hector's head appeared over the board behind. "What are you complaining about?"

"Not complaining. Just telling Lois how things went."

"Well, my wife is complaining. She says the steers are spending all their time at the other end of the pasture, down where the cows graze. She thinks the cows are getting upset."

"Does your wife pretty well look after things?" I asked Hector.

"Oh, yeh... she does the whole thing. Milks the cows and bales the hay, feeds the chickens and all that sort of stuff. She's great. She even put a TV in the barn so she and the cows can watch the soaps. We had a problem at first, finding a spot to put it. She wanted all the cows to be able to see it at once. She says they're just like people... real thinkers."

I considered the idea of an equal rights amendment for cows who wanted to watch television. It wouldn't work, I decided. Somebody would be sure to use the notwithstanding clause.

"She won't let them watch the news, though," Hector continued, "because she figures it might make their milk sour."

"Oh Hector, she can't be that bad," I said laughing then turned to Jeff. "So how did you get the eye?"

"When I came off my last circuit, I missed the edge of the runway, hit a gopher hole. The port wing dropped a little too far and it scraped on the ground. I got jarred around a bit and hit my

head on the gyroscope... broke my glasses. No problem. Just some minor repairs before I go up again. Hector says I can use his workshop and he'll only charge me a few dollars."

"Yep," Hector agreed. "We'll just add a clause to our contract."

"Another clause?" Jeff asked. "Jeese, Hector. Hayden is beginning to wonder why it's taking me so long to draw this separator."

"Jeff, do you know what a cash cow is?" I asked.

He looked at me. "No. Should I?"

"Look it up."

"What's a cash cow?" Hector asked.

"Yeh, what's a cash cow?"

"There's a dictionary in my office."

"It probably takes a clothes horse," Hector consoled Jeff, "to know about cash cows. Lois has us beat on this one."

"Hector, why don't you go home to your kids."

"I don't have any kids. I can't afford them. Besides my wife doesn't have time for kids. She prefers cows."

It was only a short while later that the ultra-light was christened - in the watering hole with the steers.

I heard about the ceremony Thursday morning when Jeff swung into my office on crutches. His eye socket had faded to a dandelion green, and he was wearing a skull cap of wrapped bandages.

"What on earth happened?" I asked, sucking in my breath.

"Oh I just flew my ultra-light into the water hole at the end of the runway. One of the steers blocked my landing, an old guy with half a horn missing... didn't leave me enough room. Little bit of concussion, no problem. Well, a little bit of a problem. I can't drive." He shoved his new glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"How are you getting to work?"

"One of the guys in the shop lives right next door to me. My problem is that I want to get out to Hector's this weekend and take my plane up but I can't drive."

"Then how can you fly the plane?"

"I can fudge it. Hector said you wanted to come out and watch the other day...that's why I'm asking if you'll drive me out this Saturday. I'll pay the thirty bucks 'admission'."

"Why don't you let your body rest for a week?"

"I don't think Hector's wife is going to let me use the field much longer. She says the steers are too upset. They've broken down the fence into the cow's pasture, and her milk production is down quite a bit."

"Can she stop you? I mean you and Hector have a contract."

"He's trying to talk me out of more money. He says he has to make it worth his wife's while. I should get a proper license he tells me and have my plane inspected."

"That's not a bad idea."

"Well, yeh. I'm going to get it done pretty soon. That's not my problem. My problem is flying. I don't want to give up the field. Hector's really on at me. Flying is too risky, he says. If he took risks like I'm doing, he tells me, he would have lost his ranch a long time ago. That's why he works as a draftsman. Let somebody else take the risks, he says. Get a wife and let her do it. Fly by proxy. I told him I don't even have a girlfriend."

"Getting married would cost you a lot more than ten thousand bucks."

"I knew there was a reason why I preferred flying... so what about Saturday, Lois?"

"You have a driver," I told him. "What time do you want me to pick you up?"



The weather was good for flying - not too much wind, lots of bright sunshine and puffs of cumulus cloud that capped rising columns of air. A red-tailed hawk rode an overhead thermal, gaining height, then dropping as he soared cross country to a second thermal.

From the hood of my car, I watched Jeff three-legging his way to Hector's cow shed. The building was located below and to the left of the hill where I had parked.

"He's crazy to go flying when his leg is like that," Hector informed me.

I hadn't expected Hector's company on this fine day, but I got it anyway. Apparently, he hadn't found cash cow in the dictionary.

"Is he? I'm not so sure. I mean - I'd still try to keep up with things if my leg was only that bad."

"Yeh but you're not going to crash and kill yourself if you go shopping."

"I'd probably crash and kill myself if I couldn't go shopping... unless, of course, I had nothing to wear to the funeral."

The airstrip consisted of a section of road that had been built across a low-point in the field. Rather than run through the middle of the hole where the cattle drank, the road branched into a tee. The two arms of the tee petered out in dry land. A hundred or so head of cattle dotted the landscape.

About five hundred feet past the runway I could see a section of loosely strung barbed wire and on the other side of it, a herd of plump looking cows sporting handsome milk bags.

All the steers and all the cows had the word cow painted on their sides.

"Why are all your animals painted?" I asked Hector.

"Oh, my wife did that," he responded. "We lost one during hunting season last year, and she doesn't want it to happen again."

A few chugs and throaty coughs told me Jeff was starting the ultra-light.

When the cattle heard the plane lurch out of the cow shed, they jostled their way across the pond and off to the other end of the field where the barbed wire was strung. They stepped on each others hooves and rubbed against one another. Several bleated and protected their heads by lifting them above the surrounding crush of bodies.

Only one old geezer remained behind. He sniffed the air and tottered at the edge of the watering hole, eying the plane with rheumy red eyes. His shoulders were lopsided and he couldn't quite keep his balance so he stumbled a bit when he walked across the end of the runway. One of his horns was broken off at about half the length of the other.

The transparent bubble on the ultra-light glinted in the sun as Jeff and the plane lifted into the air. Old Horn and a Half stood, watching, followed the vehicle with his eyes as it circled through the sky. I felt sorry for the old guy. He was obviously irritated, sort of like those homeowners at the meeting who didn't want all the traffic from the new shopping centre.

When Jeff touched down, the plane bounced two or three times then rose again into the air. Over and over, Jeff drove down the runway, lifted and circled with the hawk that was still up there.

After Jeff had completed a number of circuits, the steer began walking down the side of the road. He was snorting now and tossing his head with a defiant thrust, stumbling each time he lost his balance. Neither Hector nor Jeff was paying any attention to him.

"My wife is going to come by in half an hour and take you across to the barn. Show you around."

"That's nice. I'll enjoy meeting her."

"She wants you to have a milk break with her and see the new curtains she's hung in the barn. Brown and white, she says, to match the cows."

"What's her name Hector?"

"I usually call her Little Dumpling."

"Yeh, but I can't call her that."

"Her mom calls her Mildred."

Old Horn and a Half rubbed his hooves on the grass beside the runway, shook his head from side to side, continued walking.

"You can see the baby cows, too."

"Why don't you call them calves?"

"Force of habit now. My wife won't let me. She says I distance myself too much from her animals. She says it's much better if I think of the new ones as babies."

When Old Horn and a Half reached the part of the runway where Jeff was landing, he stood at the edge facing the noisy, irritating bug of a plane and when it landed he charged, hooves careening, nostrils flaring, head down, his body tottering from side to side.

Too late, Jeff noticed the charge. I heard a screech of brakes, and saw the front end of the plane rock forward. Seconds later the stoop-shouldered steer was on top of the vehicle smashing through the thin fabric of the port wing with his one and a half horns. His stampeding hooves knocked the whole vehicle over with sufficient force that the struts in the starboard wing buckled.

I could hear Jeff screaming and was relieved when the steer stepped back from the pile of bent fabric and metal. Jeff clambered to his feet, reached inside the cockpit for his crutch then swung at the steer. He was cursing and thrusting for several minutes but the steer stood just beyond his reach.

Finally, Jeff moved away from the plane and started up the hill toward the car. Old Horn and a Half swayed back over to the mutilated vehicle and swung his right hoof through the bubble roof, then stood on the engine compartment until it caved in.

I didn't say anything. Hector didn't say anything. Jeff didn't say anything. He just stumbled up the hill.

Over by the farm house, a jeep jumped out of a cloud of dust and careened along the edge of the field. Hector's wife was on her way. She wasn't going to be happy with Jeff.

Two of the steers who had been hugging the barbed wire by the cow pasture, headed toward Old Horn and a Half.

Jeff reached the top of the hill. I studied his eyes, trying to read his emotions. His face was long and drawn, pinched and morbid.

"I don't think they like ultra-lights," he explained to me.

The two steers that had left the far end of the pasture, walked up the runway. They sandwiched Old Horn and a Half, nuzzled him, sniffed his knees and hooves to check him out, rubbed noses, then all three meandered back to the watering hole.

I watched the red-tailed hawk circling overhead and decided Old Horn and a Half was one of my favourite people. What had Hector's wife said about cows? That Hector distanced himself

too much from them? Maybe Hector and I both did. I was going to go up for that milk break before I left.

Mildred arrived within seconds. The jeep screeched to a stop and a red-headed woman wearing fluorescent blue shorts and an orange Mickey Mouse shirt hurtled out of the driver's door.

"Is he okay, Hector?" she screamed on her way by.

The spikes of her hair jostled up and down like floppy old carrots sticking out of a sand box. She slid down the hill. "Is he okay, Hector," she kept screaming.

I whistled a couple of bars of Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines, pleased that Jeff had survived to kill himself another day and that Old Horn and a Half had taken a bulldozer to the development on his street.

"Hey Hector?" Jeff asked, "Do you think your steers would like a hang glider any better than an ultra-light?"

"I think you should try bungee jumping," Hector replied. "...at Canada Olympic Park." He sat thinking for a moment. "Since you're kind of laid up for the next while, I'll see the ultra-light is cleaned up. How does three hundred dollars sound?"



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