I've never had to defend humanity from complete utter destruction; nobody has, as far as I know. Don't get me wrong, I'm flattered that this - what would you say, court? A trial? - has picked me for this. I'm not saying you made a mistake, per se, but wouldn't, I dunno, a philosopher be better at this? Maybe an author? The President?

It's not like we have a "President of Earth", but surely there's someone more in that vein that would make more sense for this… exercise?

I'm just your average guy. But maybe that's the point? You want more of a working-man, blue-collar perspective on things?

I mean, I do run a ranch. Third generation, and that's no small potatoes, given how uncertain everything seems to be these days. That's about a thousand acres of prairie, solo. I'm the one out there checking fences, replacing the salt licks, and dealing with the animals. Any given year, I'm having to navigate everything from weather to hay prices. Some years are better than others, but - after some bumps - we're on the right side of the balance sheet. Grew the herd, kept the lights on.

Speaking of lights, did it just get dimmer in here? I can't tell if my eyes are just adjusting or what.

I guess I'll keep going and you'll tell me if I'm on the right track? OK?

If this were one of the extension meet-n-greets, what else would I say?

How about that "we do it right"? We, in this case, is me and my Mom and the herd. The cows have plenty of room to roam, free range, and all that. My herd is almost entirely a Hereford-Angus cross - we call the breed "Black Baldy". They're cute suckers, big things. Sometimes they come with a shock of white on the head and a circle around their eyes. Makes 'em look like pandas.

It's kind of a miracle, if you think about it - you take sun, rain, and a plot of prairie and run it through a herd of grass grazers. Never a feed lot. Never. Our animals are cared for. Watched

over. Protected. Which, I suppose kinda seems like a contradiction, right? To put so much love and care into something right up to the point I ship them off, turn 'em into hamburgers.

"It's not much, but it's an honest living," is what they say.

#

Wait. It just flickered - that's you, isn't it? I definitely didn't imagine that just now. I'm 100% positive it got darker; not a ton, but something changed.

I don't mean to question your methods; this is all very new to me. One minute I'm applying teat dip - the mastitis has been bad this year - and the next thing I know I'm here. Very painless, very seamless, by the way; my compliments to you and yours that are in charge of that.

But what do you want from me? A song? Maybe a dance? Because, if I'm here in this… void… and not there, are my cows gonna be OK? I can't remember if the chute was open or not when I was… you know.

It's kind of a big deal - the whole ranch kind of hangs on it. It'd be ironic if I saved the world but lost the farm. Not like funny ha-ha, but like funny sucks.

OK. So that wasn't it. Or not all of it.

Let me try again.

See, the whole "third generation" thing wasn't really the way it was all supposed to play out. That's a bit I use to help gussy things up a bit.

It makes things a bit more digestible, you know?

The *real* story was that Dad had inherited some acreage from one of his uncles. Before that, Dad had worked odd construction jobs here and there, sometimes gone for stretches at a time. When he had a chance to have a bit of land, Dad wanted to give it a go.

Mom wasn't crazy about the idea. She'd been a 4-H kid growing up; she didn't grow up on a farm, but she was animal-adjacent enough to know what was involved. I was told it was a source of irritation between the two of them, but Dad must have won. By the time I came around, that

dust was settled, and the ranch has been my home ever since. Well, except for a brief stint after high school.

I left for college to become a mechanical engineer. I was into my second year when Dad had his heart attack. Mom knew something was wrong when he didn't turn up for supper. They found him, slumped over his quad. It was a blessing, they said; he had gone quick.

I don't know why people say that. Maybe in your infinite… whatever… you know, but it certainly didn't feel like any blessing I'd care for.

I dropped out of school right after that. I figured Mom needed the help. And it was a good thing, too. Going through Dad's books, it was clear just how bad things had gotten.

The ranch owed money, and a *lot*. It started when I was in high school. We had a dry year; one of those where the hills were straw by July. Dad bought hay to make up the difference, but so was everyone else. The prices spiked, and he started selling steers early to try and make up the difference. Underweight steers mean a smaller check. It also means a year later, you have fewer animals to sell. It just so happened that next fall, the market *was also* flooded with Argentine imports.

So you're making like half what you'd expect. But the expenses stay the same. For years.

There were a few diesel spikes, equipment breakdowns, and unexpected vet bills in there, too. Bottom line, by the time I dropped out of school, the ranch was eating operating capital and shitting IOUs.

Hey, it seems like we're at a consistent glow, now. Or at least things haven't gotten any darker. I'm not sure how this sob story pleads humanity's case, but I guess you're into it? So I'll keep going? And you'll let me know otherwise?

OK?

Well, um, to keep going, you have to know about small towns, especially how word spreads. Especially when it comes to money.

The way I always thought about it was that, in a place like this, what affects one eventually gets us all. You end up owing the co-op fifty grand and can't pay; that isn't just your problem - you just put a tax on every bag of additive your neighbors buy for the next five years. And they know it. We may talk about mercy, but the grace said for supper rarely extends to those threatening it.

Now before you reach for the dimmer, *it's not that these are bad people*. Not at all. It's just when you're having a hard enough time getting by, it's hard to remain decent to the person making that job harder.

Mom had her Thursday afternoon coffees, her nights with the booster club. Last thing I wanted was for her to be cut out. I had to make it right. For her sake.

First thing, I started working at the NAPA in town. Pretty simple stuff - oil changes, maybe fixing a hydraulic line or two. Like I said, not the most fulfilling stuff but they had the work and we needed the money.

That carried us over the winter.

Then came my first solo spring calving. And maybe here's what you're looking for.

I'm not gonna lie. It was hell. I don't think I've ever been so exhausted. I'd be out at 2, 3 AM making sure a cow got her calf out safe, swing by the house for some coffee and a change of clothes by 8 AM, sign over my paycheck to the elevator after work at 5 PM, get home, microwave a couple frozen cheeseburgers, and then pass out for a few hours. Then get up and do it all over again.

Every time I'd about think we'd have a rhythm going, something would happen. Like with Bernice.

We don't name all our animals, but Bernice was one of Mom's favorites and had been with us for a while.

That evening, I spotted Bernice. She had all the signs she was pushing, but nothing was happening. That isn't unusual; sometimes the calf is big enough that the cow can't get comfortable

and needs help. I had Mom get a pen ready while I went out to get her.

We waited it out for a bit in the barn. Her water broke, but we could see there wasn't any progress. That's a problem; the longer a cow carries on like that, the weaker she gets.

So I climbed over the panel and went to pull. I could feel that the calf was big - too big, barely able to fit. I got a hold of the hooves with the winch. Mom kept the tail out of the way and talked to Bernice the whole time.

"You're doing great, you're almost there, almost there. You can do it," she'd say.

I managed to get the calf out, but he was weak. It had taken a lot out of him. On the ground, he was sputtering and yellow-stained; means he was distressed. We had taken too long.

But before I could figure out what was next, Bernice prolapsed. I don't know if she had pushed too hard or too long or what, but her uterus was hanging beneath her tail, down to her legs.

We had to get the calf out of the way and stitch Bernice back up, but we weren't ready. She collapsed while Mom and I were racing around, going through the cupboard. I know Dad probably had the stuff to sew her back up somewhere; he was organized like that, prepared. We really could have used him here.

Maybe if Bernice had been in the pasture, we could have rolled her onto her side to work on her, but there was no room in our pen for that. Mom opened the gate to try and give us space. We both tried to get Bernice up to her feet, but she didn't budge.

By this point, we were exhausted and needed to figure out what to do.

We paused to catch our breath. Bernice seemed to sense an opportunity. Cause, all of a sudden, Bernice leaps up, before we can react, and goes tearing through the open gate out the barn door.

She kicked and bucked into the pasture, as if she was trying to shake off the past few hours. Then - I remember this part, clear as day - her uterus snagged on her leg.

It was the worst thing I've ever seen in my life. I remember yelling as it ripped completely

free and fell to the ground. We went from having saved Bernice's calf to Bernice being dead in under ten minutes.

I just stood there, shocked. I hadn't heard Mom crying, but it must have been a while. At some point, she went back to the house, hugging herself the entire way there.

As much as I wanted to pack it in - all of it - the calf started to moo for its momma that moment. It was weak as hell, given everything it went through, but it was trying.

I got the colostrum in the bottle, grabbed a stack of old towels, and tried to dry him down while he drank.

I know this is a long walk to water, but it all matters because of the next day.

I was doing a calving check, and there was another heifer. I found her down, with her calf only partially exposed, already dead. The cow must not have struggled too long, though, as she still seemed to have plenty of energy and wasn't paralyzed. I got her up and into the barn with some encouragement.

There, I pulled the lost calf the rest of the way. Then, I got Bernice's calf over to the stall. I had only one shot at this. I covered the orphan in the dead calf's afterbirth. I'm sure it was weird, with me spending most of the night drying him off and trying to keep him warm, but life is weird like that sometimes; best he learned that sooner rather than later. After I did about all I could, I opened the panel between pens for momma to take a look. As far as she knew, she entered the barn with something stuck in her, I pulled it out, and when she turned around, there was a calf there: looking and smelling like he had just come out of her. She sniffed him and began licking to clean him up.

I checked back in a half hour. He was totally clean, and she was following him everywhere around the small corral just outside of the barn. Whenever he'd get too far away, she'd low to him. She was proving to be one of the best mothers so far. When I turned them out to pasture, she waited for him and his wobbly legs, and they walked out shoulder to shoulder.

That first calving felt like years. But that kept me going - both that season as well as the ones that followed. And, boy, did I need it.

I wasn't just exhausted. I remember just how lonely it was, too. I was around people all the time - at the shop, at the bank, the vet, and the elevator, but I didn't really talk to any of them. Thing about a small town: either its kids or people who are more than twenty years older; every young adult either joined the military or went off to college. The guys in college would check in every so often in the beginning, but they started trailing off. The longer we went our own ways, the less we had to talk about. I mean, was I going to tell them my Bernice story after they finished recapping whatever frat party happened that weekend?

But here's my point, I think.

Do you have social media where you are? I probably shouldn't mention that; it's probably not a point in humanity's favor, to be honest. But I remember that season, there I was, in Dad's pickup. Dips - that's one of the cows - wasn't in labor yet, but there was a low-pressure front moving in fast. So I was there, scrolling on my phone, waiting.

There was this video of this Stretch Armstrong doll. It's like a toy, a thing for kids. You pull on the arms, the legs, and it just goes and goes and goes but it doesn't break.

Anyway, in this video they cut one of the hands off the figure so that they can insert a garden hose. They zip-tie the remaining arm over the hose, and then they turn on the water.

Somewhere there's a cow trying to find a break to get out of the wind, and I'm sitting there watching this doll fill with water. They keep interrupting the time lapse at points to poke at the figure, then they keep going.

The doll grows and grows and grows - the material stretching but not breaking - the features all distorted.

I don't know if it was the lack of sleep or what, but, in that moment, it made sense to me in a way I didn't like; strung out, unrecognizable, to the point of breaking. And there was only ever

more.

But as much as I might want to, I just… keep going. It really didn't feel like we had any other choice. And maybe that's what's worth hearing - we find ourselves sad or tired or whatever, and we find what we need to continue.

Maybe that's worth something.

Something, you know, redeemable?

#

So… how about that?

People are worth it because, because… we keep going.

Hey.

Hey?

HELLO?

Nothing?

You wanted a story, and I told you mine. That's the best I got, seriously.

I don't know what's going on here, but there's nothing else.

The ranch wasn't a calling. You're right to be upset that wasn't the truth. I get it. I'm sorry. But everything I just said was real this time.

I did it for Mom.

I did it for the herd.

I sacrificed, and that's something a lot of people would call noble. Something praiseworthy.

Why aren't you responding? Isn't that what you wanted?

Why are you leaving me hanging here?

I did all that for Mom.

I -

-

Seriously?

-

I don't know how you know. But if you already know, I shouldn't have to say it.

-

Right?

-

Right.

-

The truth of the matter is that I did it for Mom… even though she didn't want it.

We had an offer, after that first calving season. There was a big, corporate operation east of the river that was looking to expand west.

Mom was ready to sell. It was even a decent offer. But I fought her on this, probably a lot like how Dad would have done.

I couldn't say then why I had to keep going.

It was me. Are you still listening? The truth is *it* was *me*. I was the one that couldn't walk away.

I don't know how you knew. It took me damn near *years* before I figured it out.

Five years, to be precise.

That whole time, it had been two steps forward, one step back; every time we just about made good, something would happen.

And then I took the two-year-olds to market in the fall. I left the sales barn with an empty trailer and pulled into a fast food place. I was celebrating, kinda. With what we made from that sale, the ranch would be whole. Not out of the woods, mind you, but at least able to look folks in

town in the eye again, if you know what I mean.

I got my order and went to the truck to eat it. I bit into the cheeseburger, and it hit me like lightning - I could say goodbye now.

When Dad died, I didn't really cry. I told myself there wasn't time for feeling sorry for myself. Being busy was more important than feeling bad. Right after the funeral, I rolled right into the bills mess, getting another job, then calving. I thought that losing the ranch would mean losing what was left of Dad, and I couldn't let go.

I was sitting in Dad's truck. His shades were still clipped to the visor. His presets were still on the radio. And, as bad as it may sound, you could still probably find his sunflower shells crunching in between the floor mats. I hadn't changed a thing.

And now, the excuse I had for all this was as gone as he was.

It took forever, but I finally figured it out.

And I cried.

I *so* cried.

I'm sure anyone passing by probably got a pretty good show - this guy bawling his eyes out over his burger.

I'm shuddering, barely able to catch my breath.

I've never cried like that before or since. I ran out of napkins, you know?

But when I was finally done, the world was still there. Everything wasn't right, not really. Nothing was ever going to go back to the way it was.

But everything was where it needed to be. And I understood that now.

-

So… yeah.

-

Hello?

-

That's it? No more flickering? No shadows? Just the silent treatment?

I don't know what that means.

I mean, I know what I hope it means. But I've been wrong enough already that I'm not going to stand here and make any assumptions.

Maybe all you wanted was the part I kept walking around. I don't know how or if that helps humanity's case, to be honest.

It's not much of a defense.

It's just what happened.

So.

If this is where you turn the lights out, I understand.

But if this is where you send me back, I really do need to check that chute. I know that probably seems small, considering, but there's a cow back there, Anne, that doesn't know she's part of an argument.

She just needs somebody to be there.

Wait. There was a noise… like, how the gate chain -

Is that the barn?

No, no, hold on. Are we done? Did I-

Hello?

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#