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Twelve hours before the mid-January cold spell hit, we pulled a calf on a 56-degree morning. The delivery was so hard and the timing so close to losing the calf that the subject's head swelled too much for him to nurse his mother.

In the afternoon, my helper induced him to drink a pint of warm milk after he refused to nurse his mother in the chute. Her symptoms were normal. She kicked off the hobbles, trapped a hind foot in the squeeze chute, and tried to get down in the chute.

Signs, however, pointed toward the negative for her baby. He kept wandering back on the cold concrete slab of the delivery chute, attracted to the odors and residue of the birthing.

About dark, the diagnosis (consensus) was that we had a "dummy calf," wobbling around too disoriented to nurse his mother in the face of three or four days of predicted freezing rain and snow.

Some dude wrote a song a long time ago called "Home on the Range," the one where never was heard a discouraging word.

Ol' Dave, the kid who led the way to day working on ranches during World War II after school, knew two or three verses of the song. He hummed and whistled the rest, hoping someday we could go on the stage to sing a duet and do our rope tricks.

But back to the choice of "some dude." The songwriter never stood at dusk in a desolate cow pen on the bleak, open 09 Divide, watching the sky in the north turn the fierce bluish purple heralding an ice storm with a six-hour calf too afflicted by shock to respond to his mother's instinct and desire to feed him. Had he done so, he would have composed a dirge that would have made "The Mean Ol' Lonesome Blues" sound like a Rodgers and Hammerstein production.

Inside the barn, breaking a bale of hay trying to decide whether to open a stall gate baited with feed to lure her in close enough quarters the calf might suck, or put her in the chute and slip a halter on to snub her outside to feed the calf, the thought struck: the theme song for old herders should be "I've Already Tried That Twice and Failed."

The air compressor coming on dimmed the lights overhead just as I needed to see to climb up the back end of the feed wagon. The step from the trailer hitch onto the

bed took two tries to gain footing on the round ball. Once over the feeder, the plastic bucket scraped along the last crumbs of meal and broken cubes.

Lights struck again: "You tried to dip feed from this feeder twice before and cut your hand each time on the auger blade. Still haven't had enough, Monte?"

Back with the patients, "Old Six Hours Old" was on the slab, sliding in the mess, "Old Six Hour Momma" stood planted over in the corner of the pen, facing the direction of the calf.

The ranch nurse (me) put down the chip of hay in a long steel trough. Next, I started shaking the bucket and dumping the cubes in the trough loud enough to cause most black cows...no, to cause all black cows to un-track and come to feed.

In the crustiest old souls of all the country's herders reigns a soft spot for all of the Almighty's dumb creatures. Proof? The long night we hauled wool back from the Cedar Canyon ranch, Wild Bill Doran cried three times as hard the third time he told about a cowboy on the Diamond A's who let a pet lizard sleep in his bedroll all one winter to save that cold-blooded reptile from freezing. Sounded like a cold winter and a mature lizard, too, the way Bill told it.

But there the three of us stood, except I sat down in the trough so defeated and lonely, I began to hear tire treads whining against asphalt, singing the old tune: "Time for Bright Lights, Little Cowboy." (Telephone lines play the same song to horsemen.)

Still sitting in the trough, I thought maybe there is a cure for ranching, yet to be announced or discovered. But I feared it'd be like trying to cure an old cow from eating prickly pear cactus by burning off the thorns in the winter, to turn her on fresh green pads the coming spring and test if she'd lost her inclination for oral destruction. But were we saved, soon as we had a tenth of an inch in two rains, we'd feel mandated by a higher power to start over again trafficking in four-legged beasts, like it was a real business.

In the bare light, the last glimmer, actually, that sweetheart of a momma made the lowing sound signaling her milk was coming down. Ol' one-time dummy took a giant step off the slab, met her halfway, and retired the ranch nurse for the night.