

DARLENE AND THE ICE STORM

By Robert D. Culp

Offered here with the kind permission of the author

The freezing drizzle hit in mid-afternoon. First it was like a fog, only so heavy that in minutes everything was soaked and dripping. Frilly skims of ice appeared on the puddles. The drops on the ends of the branches didn't fall. I touched one and found it had a shell of ice. Soon the twigs wore a clear, frozen coat that swelled them to twice normal size. It was near dark; I gave up and headed home.

After a twenty pace start I hollered back at my one-for-all-and-all-for-one buddy, "Come on, Cotton. Let's get indoors 'fore we turn to icicles. That crazy cow can take care of herself."

"Sure. She's your cow, anyway, Rooster. Beat you to your house!" He jumped off a ledge, short-cut the switchback, and came out ahead of me. There's no way I'll ever get a for-real head start on Cotton.

We'd been searching the woods for Darlene—Pa's youngest Jersey cow. She was a pretty heifer, but headstrong and foolish, and about to have her first calf. She must have been impatient to be a mother, 'cause she was a good two months ahead of the other cows. And a January calf can be trouble on account of the weather.

Worse yet, Darlene got close to her time and took to wandering. The job of hunting her down and bringing her home, much against her wishes, fell to us kids—me and my best friend, Cotton.

Darlene strayed so often Pa got some worried about that fool heifer. He put a bell on her to help us locate her. After that, Cotton and I could find her easy enough, but we still had to persuade her to come back. Darlene had the habit of hooking at anyone who pestered her overly much. Fortunately, she was a muley cow—never sprouted any horns. But even so, we got some bodacious bruises from her hard head.

She had wandered just before the ice storm hit. With that cover, she was free for the night. Cotton and I were mighty happy to get back to a warm kitchen. We gave nary another thought to poor Darlene.

Pa was thinking about her, though. Next morning he roused me at first light, and sent me across the creek to search those rolling oak woods, while he checked out the upper pasture. I fetched Cotton—him grumbling and wiping sleepy eyeballs—as

much to keep me company as to lend a hand.

The world was a crystal palace. Every dried weed and stem, every fence post and rock—even the ground itself—was wrapped in clear ice. There wasn't a cloud in the sky. The first rays of the sun glanced through the ice prisms like stones skipping across a pond. Our breath hung like puffs from a steam engine. The air was still. Cracks and pops echoed through the woods.

"Hey, Cotton. Catch me!" I took two running steps and went sliding down the iced slope. My boots shaved the frozen stubble that stuck through the ice as cleanly as if'n they were a giant version of Pa's razor.

"Look out I'm coming." Cotton launched himself toward me. About halfway down his arms started windmilling and his eyes got big. He finished the trip on his rear.

"All right! Great slide, Cotton." I hoorawed while he gasped for wind.

While Cotton recuperated I stomped ice. Where there had been shallow ruddles the day before, there were white sheets that crackled and starred when I stepped on them. Then I reached the creek.

"It's frozen. Solid! Come see."

"No fooling, Rooster?" Cotton forgot his fall and scrambled down to the bank. "Frozen clean across! Is it safe?"

"Bound to be. Let's test it." I slid out onto the clear ice. It creaked and groaned, but it held. "Thick enough. Give it a try."

We skated downcreek like a couple of Dutch boys out of a schoolbook. Around the bend we came to the pigs' mudhole. Of course, it was frozen and those porkers were snuffling around trying to understand. Cotton and I pulled up to watch.

Where the ice lay on grass or soft dirt, the pigs' hooves dug through and gave them good purchase. That lent them a false sense of security. They'd hop about thinking there was no problem, till one hit a hard spot of glaze ice. Four feet went flying, a well-padded side of bacon splatted onto the icy ground, and the frantic pig scabbled with his stubby legs until he finally got righted and his feet solidly planted. For a while, that pig would stand stock-still, squinting about suspicious-like. Then gradually he would commence again, until he forgot and incautiously stepped onto a trouble spot, and the whole process started over. This was happening to every pig in random order. It was like watching popcorn kernals, trying to guess which one would go off next.

Cotton and I helped things along by staying well back and chucking hunks of ice at the pigs to make them dodge and go sprawling. Even Old Lop Ear took his spills. He roared at us between falls, but we were in no danger. That ice stole the old boar-hog's mobility.

“Hey, Rooster. Warting these pigs is a circus, for sure. But hadn’t we ought to get looking for your cow?” Cotton couldn’t fool me; he was leary of Old Lop Ear in spite of the ice.

“I reckon so.” I was through with the game anyway. “Pa was definite. We got to find Darlene. She’s ready to calve any day now. Pa says we’ll lose the calf if we leave it out in this ice, newborn and all.”

We skirted far around the pigs and entered the woods. The same woods where our bee tree was. A thick and marvelous woods that extended across that ridge and miles beyond, stretching forever, it seemed.

“She could be in the next county, Cotton, never leaving these woods.”

“Naw. We’ll find her. She’ll stop and hide when she thinks she’s plumb away. She’s not trying to see the world.”

We struggled up the hill, slipping and crawling most of the time. There were busted limbs lying everywhere. The heavy ice coated every tree and stripped out the weak branches. We came on one giant hollow oak split clean through the trunk to the ground. It was bound to have been the worst ice storm in a lifetime; there wouldn’t be a woods left standing if it happened regularly.

I stopped under the tangle of an ice-broken locust tree. “Hold up, Cotton. We’ll never find her this way. Let’s stay put a minute and listen.”

“It’s too cold to stand still, Rooster.” But he stopped and watched his breath in the sunshine.

Ahead someplace a bluejay screamed, “Thief! Scamp!” which probably was a fair description of himself. Then two black crows swooped over us and cawed a warning when they saw us. It was strange. The ice and the still air magnified every sound. I heard Flitter bark from the upper pasture where Pa was.

“There it is, Rooster!” Cotton put his finger to his lips.

“I hear it. She’s off to the left and up the hill a ways.” There were a couple more distant clangs from Darlene’s bell. “She’s not moving much. Must’ve found a warm spot and holed up.”

We both recognized the particular deep tone of Darlene’s cowbell. Following the sound, we found her in about ten minutes. She wasn’t alone.

“Look at the little feller,” said Cotton. He stopped so short I bumped into him.

I peeked around, trying to see past Cotton and through the ice-crusting branches. Darlene was standing in the lee of a low cliff, pretty well sheltered from the weather. Still, there was ice caked on her back. She guarded her new calf and stared at us intruders.

“See him, Rooster?”

I pushed Cotton aside so we could both see. “It’s a little bull-calf. Feisty as a houndpup.” I stepped forward as the calf wobbled towards us, but he lost his courage all of a sudden and skittered back behind his momma.

“Darlene doesn’t look too friendly, Rooster. I’ll bet we have the devil’s own time getting them back home. Maybe we ought fetch your Pa.”

“Naw, we can handle her. And the calf I’ll follow. Let’s catch her while she’s cornered against the cliff.”

Big talk. I hadn’t taken two steps when Darlene lunged and butted me square in the belly. I lay flat on my back, fighting to get the water out of my eyes and the air into my lungs. Cotton was laughing to bust his gut, but from a safe distance, of course. I expected Darlene to be plumb across the ridge, hightailing it for the hinterlands. But no, there she stood, ten feet away, her head held low in my direction. That new bull-calf had Darlene anchored. Catching was no longer the problem.

“Cut your hoorawing, Cotton, and help.”

“You’re doing fine, Rooster.”

I scowled until I figured I had his attention. “You come up on that side of the fool cow, Cotton. Whichever of us she lays into, the other one grab the calf and scoot for home. She’ll follow.”

“Follow and stomp. We’ll both be killed for trying to help this crazy momma cow.” He grumbled, but edged toward Darlene.

The cow swung her head from one to the other of us. I think she suspected something. She took a step in my direction and I shied back. With me scared off, she turned her attention to Cotton. One snort and a short dash and Darlene was on top of him. He slipped to the side, barely escaped her muley head, and stuck his arm through the cowbell rope. From then on it was a rodeo. That cow bucked and hooked in a tight circle trying to boliterate poor Cotton. I wasted no time cheering. I jumped in and scooped up the bull-calf. He was heavier than I expected, but I struggled off through the woods toward home. The calf seemed to enjoy the ride.

Darlene soon noticed I’d left with her baby, and she gave up trying to kill Cotton. In fact she seemed to remember she was a domestic animal, and was satisfied to follow me and her calf home, bawling all the way. Cotton hung onto the bell rope and was dragged along like a rag doll. In between gasping for air, I rubbed it in how well my plan was working.

We got all the way to the frozen creek without a rest stop. By then I was plumb give out. The calf felt as heavy as a full-grown bull. I plopped him down sudden-like at the edge of the creek. Cotton took that as a sign to turn loose of Darlene, and that fool cow plowed right through me to get to her calf.

Cotton gawked while I clawed that icy ground trying to get out from under Darlene afore she stepped on me. Neither of us saw Old Lop Ear peering from the brush on the hill above us.

Old Lop Ear gave a snort that only the biggest, orneriest boar-hog in Arkansas possessed. It must've shook icicles out of trees for miles around. For a second Cotton and I turned to icicles ourselves; when we thawed we were boiling. I headed across the creek, but got too close to Darlene. She hooked me good and I went spinning onto the ice, cutting down Cotton in the process. The two of us lay helpless on the ice while Old Lop Ear roared down the hill toward us.

That big pig hit the patch of glaze ice above the creek going like a freight train. His legs flew out from under him and he sledded straight at us, picking up speed as he came. Cotton and I scabbled desperately to get to the opposite bank.

When Old Lop Ear hit the frozen creek, there was a ten-stick-a-dynamite explosion. The splash went higher than the oak trees and chunks of ice rained down all across the barnyard, scattering chickens like a sudden hailstorm.

Cotton and I found ourselves knee-deep in muddy ice water with Old Lop Ear swimming towards us. We were soaked and frozen, but we managed to climb onto the bank 'fore that hog reached us. Then we ran for the house.

Darlene and her frisky calf were already headed into the barn—Darlene ambling proud-like, trying to act as if she knew all about this mothering business, and that little bull-calf prancing like a show-off kid.

The folks took turnabout heaping praise on us for bringing back Darlene and her new calf, and scolding our ears off for pert-nigh catching pneumonia from our soaking. All in all, everything worked out great. But I'd as soon forget the whole shebang.