The heavy fog of early morning seemed to surround me, attempting to smother my fears as I trudged to the barn. This day had been six months in planning, yet, even in that time, I had not realized how different my life would be at the end of this hot July day. Our 300-acre dairy farm had been in the family for over ninety years, providing an occupation for my dad and a way of life for three generations. It was my way of life, but all that was about to change.

I trudged to the barn, the smell of sawdust and Wisk laundry detergent hung in the air as a stream of soapy water trickled through the grass. The auctioneer’s workers scrubbed and brushed every cow as if preparing them for a beauty contest. This time, however, the prize would not be a golden tiara but a high bid from a prospective buyer. It was only 8:30 and already strangers walked through the barn, inspecting each dairy cow in much the same way a teenage boy inspects a used car.

As the mob of bargain-hunters eyed the herd with great interest, they read the pedigrees of each animal listed in the sale catalogs. They failed to realize that this gave them little information about my pets. To me, the cows were more like friends, each one having some quality which set her apart from the others. The catalogue didn’t inform bidders the Jenna liked extra hay before milking, Bretta liked to be brushed every day, and Shirley was always the last one in from the pasture. How could these shoppers possibly know how to take care of my girls.

Straw crackling under by dirty boots, I walked through the barn, remembering all of the adventures I had as a pony-tailed, freckle-faced tomboy. I would spend hours at the barn, chasing the calves around their pens or feeding them their nightly bottles of milk. They delighted in my attention, showing their appreciation by lapping their pink sandpaper-like tongue across my cheek.

“Did this row of cows get fed any hay yet?” one of the auctioneer’s workers barked at me, bringing me back to the reality that, after today, the calves would belong to someone else. As I broke open a bale of hay to put in the manger, the aroma of fresh cut hay filled the barn. This had been baled only a week ago; it was still dark green and fell apart in the manger easily. The cows muched contentedly on the alfalfa, unaware of what lay ahead for them.

I felt a gentle hand on my shoulder and turned around to see my dad.

“Tough day,” he said quietly. He was always a man of few words, but I knew this day was hardest for him. I gave him a quick hug, hoping to reassure him that we would be o.k.

“I have to go get some more catalogs. We already went through the first box. Can you go check on the calves in the back pens?” I knew he was trying to keep me occupied by giving me different jobs, but the real reason was he didn’t want me to see him getting emotional as the day took its toll on him.

As I walked among the buyers, I couldn’t help but hate them for being there. I hoped that the sale of our animals would bring enough money to pay off the large mortgage of the farm, but I was not ready to give up this way of life. Growing up on a farm had taught me certain values, especially the importance of hard work. When most little girls were picking dandelions for their moms, I was picking rocks from unplowed fields with my father. I also helped make hay, pushing the hay bales onto the elevator with all the might my seven-year-old legs could exert. My favorite job was feeding the newborn calves. They drank vigorously, butting the bottle into my stomach when it was empty. After the auction, my chores would be the same as every other American teenager, taking out the garbage or cleaning my room.

The auction would be hard for everyone in my family; the farm had provided the setting for many memorable family times. I can vividly remember driving on Sunday afternoons, sandwiched in the backseat between my two sisters, Susan and Michele. We would drive down dirt roads, looking at the newly-planted corn shooting through the cold hard ground. I recall one Christmas Eve when the temperature plummeted to twenty degrees below zero, causing all of the water pipes to freeze in the barn. We spent the entire night thawing pipes with blow torches in order to provide water for the thirsty cows. This was not the typical Christmas Eve, yet it reminded me of that first Christmas in a barn in Bethlehem. Our years on the farm were both rewarding and challenging, and it created a bond that would pull us through this day and help one another adjust to our new way of life.

By 8 p.m., the auctioneer’s call silenced and the people sauntered into the barn, examining their purchases. After leading the cows one by one onto the cattle trucks, the new owners whisked them away to their new homes. I led my favorite cow, Bretta, onto the truck, gently patting her neck as I said good bye. As the trailer slowly pulled out of the driveway, I felt as if it took a little piece of me with them.