

I HATE MOOBERLY

By M.p Temple

Episode One

Leonie slammed the truck door shut.

“We’ll talk about this more after school.” Her mother said before driving away.

She threw her blue book bag at the only street light at the bus stop. The post shook so hard from the impact that the globe shattered, sending broken glass pieces. She covered her head with her hands as the canopy and bulb crashed on the sidewalk. Sending the west side of the small town down in the dark. In truth, the place is more like a school, a post office, and a gas station, and it is in the middle of nowhere close to the Missouri River.

She checked her bangs in the reflection of the broken glass while recalling the entire fight. Moments before, they had stopped in at the Casey’s station to use the payphone. Not only did her father run out of quarters midway through their argument, but he had sided with her mother. Her father, being away working at a cattle farm in Wyoming, had been awful enough. He didn’t live there anymore, yet he could still tell her what to do?

She kicked the cement post. There was no way to change her parents’ minds. A ‘D’ was not a passing grade and not okay, even if it was her first year in high school. It wasn’t fair. Her parents didn’t understand what this meant to her. They didn’t understand how she needed to get away.

Even worse, the power had gone out at the ranch house. She was out of clean clothes and forced to wear faded overalls and a boring black T-shirt. Taken from the donation bin at Sundown First Baptist church. Not at all how she wanted to start a school week. Most of the rest of the students were also relying on disaster relief for clothing and food. But her t-shirt was the wrong kind of faded to be cool. It was lame. And muggy already.

What is this? She thought.

A raven cawed somewhere from the cloudy sky above. The sound snapped her back from school blues and back to what mattered. Her greatest dream could still happen. Each summer at Golpher Canyon, they assign a student to work in a historic fire lookout tower. Unsupervised with check-ins with the park rangers. She could be a

real Firewatch. The park was looking for someone with outdoor experience. As a rancher's kid, that's all she had going for her. She was made for the job. It was all she could think about. She had to find a way to pass the agriculture class. Or else she would be stuck going to summer school and working on the family ranch. The thought curled her stomach. She wanted the outdoors, the scent of the pine passing in the grass, a tickling breeze. She wanted to be in the wilderness. With only a backpack of hiking gear and a portable CD player. With plenty of batteries, of course.

I should run away and hide in a forest somewhere. Leonie thought. *Build a house on some sycamore.*

The roaring of the diesel engine pulled her away from her thoughts. It was 1996. She had school. And Firewatch summer was not happening unless she passed every class. Her father was firm on this. No pass, no grass. Maybe she could find a way to make Mr. Blinkensberg change a few of her grades. And while the idea leaving everything behind still seemed grand, recent floods had greatly reduced the wild life in the area.

The door of the half-painted yellow bus swung open. A short lady with dark curly hair sat in the drivers seat motioned with her lips to the back to the bus. Leonie discovered as she walked through the crowd that only one seat remained. There sat a girl wearing a white and pink cheerleader uniform with printed Ren and Stimpy PJ bottoms on underneath. Smelling like coconut oil. Her sandy blond hair and round cheeks stood out to Leonie, as her features always did. In the same way that if some had been stung by bee's they know to take cover when they hear buzzing. She was watchful of those arctic blue eyes. If you look too long at them, they reach out and steal you. Of course, she had to be there.

Fantastic. Leonie thought. *That's who I am trying to get away from.*

"Hi Cassie, I. Like. Your shoes." Leonie said, trying to sound polite.

Cassie put both feet across the seat. Leonie felt her knees buckle from the weight of her bookbag on her shoulders.

"That's where my bag is sitting. You'll have to ask Mr. Bookbag for permission." Cassie said.

"I am not in the mood for this. Move over." Leonie said.

“No. You have to ask the bookbag.” Cassie yawned.

Leonie sighed. “Mr. Bookbag, can you and your entire ego go play free tag on the freeway or something? Move over.”

“No, you can’t sit on me!” Cassie said in a goofy voice, speaking for her bookbag. “No one is saving you a seat to Golper Canyon either.”

The bus driver picked up the mic and spoke. At first, the speakers played something that sounded like two teenage boys talking. A loud hiss rang from the speakers. The lady adjusted a setting on a panel by the shifter and spoke again.

“Girls. We all got stuff to do. Sit down so we can get out of here.”

“That fire lookout summer job is mine,” Cassie said, smiling. Still taking up the seat.

Leonie threw her bag at Cassie. She then sat down on Cassie’s lap, who screamed, flailed and kicked. Leonie forced her way into the seat next to her, taking back her school bag and using it as a shield.

She put on her headphones and started listening to grunge to block out the sound of the girl’s yelling.

Why does SHE want that job? Leonie thought. *I am not letting that stuck-up mouldy carrot muffin take my summer away.*



“I heard you kicked Cassie in the head.” Coach Blinkensberg said while snapping the cap back on a dry-erase marker. The bell had rung, and most of the students were jammed at the door trying to leave the tiny classroom for lunch. The

building had been built in the 1920's and hadn't been updated since. The agriculture classroom Leonie stood in still had the wooden desks with the folding seats.

"I didn't kick her," Leonie said, adjusting the extra credit paper in her hands for the dozenth time. Her agriculture teacher towered above her at his desk. He was a man in his thirties, a little heavier, with a great personality. He had a large nose, thick black glasses, a button-up dress shirt, and never a tie. All the kids loved Coach Blinkensberg, which was why this was shocking to hear-coming from the teacher who held the fate of her summer in her hands.

"What I heard was." He said. "On the back of the bus? You smacked her across the head with a water bottle there after yelling, 'I am the water queen?'"

Was this a set-up? Leonie realised Cassie must have made up a story to tell the other kids to increase her chances of getting that summer job. That little snicker doodle planned to go all on.

"I am the water queen sounds like something someone would make up if they couldn't think of anything else."

"Could you not think of anything else?" He asked.

The stare coming from the usually charming man alarmed her. She stood straighter and set down the papers on the desk near her.

"I sat on her a little. To get her to move her feet."

"Leonie, I knew you would be coming searching for extra credit, and I thought you could handle the assignment I had in mind. But now I hear this."

"Ask everyone on the bus," Leonie said, tightening her fist. This was an outrage. She was not that kind of person, she tried so hard around everyone.

"The only reason I am still entertaining this idea is because I have asked around." He said. "Her story changed when one of the teachers asked. But I see how your fists gets sometimes when you think no one is watching."

Leonie tried to relax her hands. She looked down. Her black hair fell in her eyes, but she did not bother to brush her bangs aside.

“Is this really about the fight I had with Mooberly?” She asked, looking up frantically. No one could have seen that. That conversation was private, away from all ears. Far from the main school building, in a barn in a field that is part of the school.

“Why do you keep calling her Mooberly? The class cow doesn’t have a name.” He said almost in shame of having to say the words aloud. He leaned on the cluttered teacher’s desk. He looked tired to the girl.

“How did you...” She gasped.

“That is not important.” He said. “I know about it. It is concerning when any student gets in verbal conflict with a creature that wants to cuddle you.”

“It’s true. I don’t get along with that prat Mooberly. That’s not a crime. Otherwise McDonald’s and Dairy Queen would need really good lawyers.” She said.

Coach Blinkensberg moaned as if hearing the worst joke ever told poorly. He handed her a flyer, made from cut-out magazine clippings that had been copied and recopied a million times. The flyer read:

Wanted. After school, cow caretaker. Extra credit available.

Leonie mouthed a bad word. She hated that cow. The smell, the sound she made. The way its nose and lips turned up when it chewed on grass, everything. It’s big brown spot and a white coat of smelly hair. Most of all, she hated how it reminded her that her father would be gone for most of the year. She found herself tearing up.

“I don’t want to stay after school. I hate this place. No offence.”

The coach shrugged. “Do you want the Jr. Golpher Canyon Fire lookout position? Or do you want to hang out all summer with me, redoing this class?”

“Oh my gawd no,” Leonie said. “Stop, I’ll do it. When do I report in?”

Again, Coach Blinkensberg sighed. “Show up after school at the barn by the football field. There’s a list of everything you need to do. Do that for two weeks straight, and I will even endorse you for the job. The school needs that cow as healthy and large as it come fall for the auction. To show the pride of this town! And to make a lot of money.”

“If the town has so much pride, why won’t anyone say the name?” Leonie asked.

Coach Blinkensberg hesitated. “It’s um. You know why no one says the name, it was named in different times back then. Forget our horrible town name. I trust you more than the others. For right now. That can change. I’ll write Cassie a letter of recommendation if I need to. So act wisely. Don’t let anything bad happen to the cow.”

“You have my word, Mooberly will live.” She said, “I need this extra credit. I will not fail you.”

He shook his head. “I’m not a Sith lord, and the cow doesn’t have a name. It’s a class cow. Don’t get attached. It is being sold to raise money for a new wrestling mat. Don’t take this from me and the kids. This is all we have! If I hear any more about you and Cassie fighting. It’s over for both of you. Got it?”

Leonie swallowed hard. “Yes. I understand.”



The water bucket clunked on the barn floor as Leonie watched in

frustration. The handle was wetter than she had expected. The leaky pump always sprayed water in all directions while it was on. The large cow munched on grass and let out a “Moo” from its straw-littered pen. Its tail swatted back and forth as if it were making up a drum part in the melody the cow was making up in its head.

“Stuff it in a grocery bag, you future cheeseburger,” Leonie shouted as she picked up the bucket. She froze and thought about how her teacher knew about their argument. More so her day of venting anger to whatever was in front of her. What if Mr. Blickensberg could hear everything somehow?

“Sorry Mooberly. I get angry when I mess up.” She said. “Why do I have to use a bucket anyways. Can’t the school district afford a hose?”

The cow mooed.

“No one asked you.” Leonie sneered.

She refilled the water container from a leaky pump at the opposite end of the barn. Her knuckles and arms burned from carrying it to the cow’s water trough so many times. She made her way back across. As soon as the water landed, the cow stuck her head in and with her large tongue began to lap up liquid into her mouth. Making a face that looked ridiculous to Leonie. If she made that face every time she drank water, she’d be afraid to drink.

The soft crunching of footsteps caused Leonie to turn around. As she did, she felt a cold splash. From her left, she saw Cassie, still in a cheerleader uniform and PJ bottoms, with an empty bucket. She had missed the cow’s water container and soaked Leonie’s shirt and overalls.

The two girls glared at each other.

“What are you doing here?” Leonie asked her. “Don’t you have cheer practice or something?”

“Who are we cheering for, the cafeteria ladies? We don’t have any sports teams. They cancelled practice again. I’m here now because I know you are going to screw up.” Cassie said, walking back to the water faucet.

Leonie picked up her bucket and dashed towards Cassie. She stopped with a sharp poke to the shoulder. She dropped her bucket on her own feet, even, and

crossed her arms. She did not flinch. Cassie did not back away. They faced each other as if they expected a bell to ring and a boxing match to start. Leonie stood firm. Cassie glared with lowered brow and squinted eyes.

The cow mooed.

“Stay out of it Mooberly! Cassie, why do you have to be into everything I am? Can’t you get your own hobbies and interests? You’re popular enough you can do anything you want in school. Go do somewhere else.” Leonie pointed towards the big creature, still munching like nothing of interest was happening.

“What I heard when you said that is ‘can you stop existing please?’”. Cassie said.

“I want you to exist. Over there. Far away from me with everyone else in... this town that we can’t say the name of.”

“I’m a threat to your little world you like to hide in all day.” Cassie gawked. “I bet in your head, you got your own theme park with posters of yourself all over. Look, I’m not here to solve your problems. You don’t even let anyone ride the bumper cars in that world of yours. You’re too awesome apparently, to talk to anyone.” She poked Leonie in the shoulder. Who drew back with a widened-eyed eyed shocked expression.

“Um. Time out.” Leonie made a T shape with her hands. “Where are my bumper cars at? Cause I have been living in my head a while, and there are no rides. No cotton candy machines. Just killer clowns and water fountains of crystal Pepsi. No, when the street lights go off in here.” Leonie pointed to her head. “It is not a safe place to be. There’s like Vampire From Dusk Till Dawn type stuff happening in there. That’s why I need to be out there in the wild. And not here!”

“Again, what I hear you say is ‘I am pathetic and want to run away from all my problems,’” Cassie scoffed. She dropped her bucket. “You want that job to get away. I need that job to connect. I’m not going to stop existing cause we want the same thing. I’m sorry I lied about you kicking me. I was wrong. But I want this. It’s not fair that your parents do ranch stuff. Not all of us have that.”

“It’s not my job to solve your problems,” Leonie said.

Cassie’s open hand struck Leonie’s cheek hard. Leonie shoved her so hard

that she landed on her backside. Standing over her, with a bright red mark on her face, she yelled.

“I was being nice to you!”

Cassie tossed a bucket at Leonie’s head. She ducked, then kicked Cassie. But she grabbed hold of Leonie’s overalls and dragged her down the barn floor. Like alligators engaged in a rolling contest, they scuffled. Punches flew as they wrestled around, shouting insults and name-calling at the top of their lungs.

Neither of them heard the commotion happening other side of the cow pen.

“Horse face!”

“Edward Scissorhands wanna be!”

They fought, releasing years of pent-up anger and hate towards each other. The fighting brought them to the back of the barn, where they began to push and shove into tall stacks of hay. The hate between them ran so deep that neither of them noticed the barn door creaking open. Or the sound of a large engine revving.

A strong, cold breeze with the scent of rain swept through the barn. They stopped and turned in the direction of the wind. A single straw floated towards them from the outside world. It came from where the cow had once been.

“I don’t hear Mooberly chewing,” Leonie said in a panic.

Loenie ran from the back to the pen, placing her hands on the railing. She saw in the distance through the open barn a pickup truck with the Mooberly in the back heading over a hill.

“You let someone cownap Mooberly!” Leonie exclaimed. “No one is getting that job now.”



“I want an explanation. Right now. Starting with how you got that red mark.”

Leonie and Cassie sat in shock in front of Coach Blinkensberg’s desk in the agriculture classroom. He paced back and forth rapidly. With a hand in his hair and the colour faded from his skin, he looked like he could pass out. They all looked ill. Leonie mostly stared at her white light-up sneakers, as she did most times when she could not process things.

Cassie shuffled. No one answered.

“That cow cost two hundred and seventy-five dollars. We are never buying new Wrestling mats now. Those poor kids are going to keep getting ringworm every week. We’ve run out of bleach tablets. All you had to do was keep the gate closed! Why were both of you there? How did this happen?”

Leonie looked at Cassie, who also stared at her feet. Having been so fierce a few minutes ago, she now seemed different. Quiet. Withdrawn. It felt to her like looking in a mirror. You see yourself, but it’s backwards somehow. Her dream had died too. Maybe she did suck as a person, but maybe she was one of those peoples with good intentions.

“I fell. On a door. Knob. I deserved it.” Leonie said, straightening up. “I. Didn’t want to go to the nurse and leave Mooberly all alone. So. Cassie came to help me when it happened. Someone stole Mooberly in the back of their truck. I saw them driving over

the hill towards the other side of the tracks. This couldn't have been prevented."

Cassie's eyes darted to Leonie. Like a lion spotting a gazelle. But she nodded.

"Leonie and the door knob deserve each other. But it's true." She lied.

"You're right." Coach Blickensberg said, sitting at his desk, out of breath. "I shouldn't blame you. I'm going to report this to the police substation."

Coach Blickensberg dialled out of his avocado colour desk phone and hit the "speaker" button. They all listened to the ringing for a few moments. There was a beep, and the voice of a woman.

"Hello, this is non-emergency dispatch. which city are you in?"

The three looked to each other in silence. The phones at the substation were out again.

"Um." Coach Blinkensberg mumbled. "It's, well that. Town. I want to report a stolen cow. Taken at the ... town's school.

"Sir, I don't know where to send officers to if I don't know the town name."

"It's... I can't..." He lowered the receiver and took a breath like he was a deep driver coming up for air. He put his hand around the receiver and spoke into it, turning away from the girls. "It's the town with the really racist name."

"Oh." The dispatcher said. "You... all haven't changed that yet?"

"Um. It's not. Well. Maybe I should call when Frank has the phones up at the station." He said.

"Ohhhh. Okay." She said. "Cattle thief falls into state jurisdiction. We can send someone out, but it might take a few weeks. Things are sort of busy here, we are still trying to recover from the flood of '93. It's a mess."

"As soon as you can." Coach Blinkensberg said.

"There's something you should know." The lady shouted for some reason. "Most cattle that are stolen are never seen again. It's not worth the hassle. And with that town name you refuse to change, I'm going to be real honest, you aren't doing yourself any

favours.”

“We can’t change the name of the town until everyone is done with getting aid from the flood.” He said.

“Okay. I’ll see what I can do. Well. Good luck I guess.” The dispatcher said.

“As soon as you can, please.” He repeated. He hung up. “I’m going to go lie down in my car.”

He walked out of the room holding his stomach, leaving the two girls seated at the front. The door closed quietly. For a long while, they did not speak. It might have been the longest they had sat next to each other without throwing an insult around.

“You lied for me,” Cassie said.

Leonie crossed her arms. “Not for you. But. The only way either of us can get this junior firewatch gig? Is if we find that cow. And we need to do it together.”

Cassie crossed her arms. “I’d rather chug rotten yogurt.”

“It’s the only way one of us is getting that job. You heard the dispatcher lady, we don’t have much time.”

“Wait, are you serious. You want us to break curfew to go after whoever took Mooberly? My parents would murder me.” Cassie said.

“You said you wanted this,” Leonie said, standing up. “It’s pretty obvious that the adults in this city are pretty worthless. So it has to be us. I bet if we go across the tracks, we can find some clue to where they took her. We need to go find her. And bring her back.”

Cassie stood and shook her head. “I’m only doing this because I think you like that cow. Since you gave it a name.”

“Ugh,” Leonie said. “If it weren’t so dumb, it wouldn’t have freely wandered into a truck. Weston and Boone from science class. Don’t they live across the tracks?”

Cassie let out a laugh. “I don’t know what planet those guys are from. They are weird.”

“They might be weird, but at least they know the area. They might know who did this. Come on. We can take your car.”

Before Leonie could walk out, Cassie stood in her way. “1. I still don’t like you. 2. I don’t have a car. Like, I have my permit, but why would you think I have a car? We’re in Jr high.”

Leonie blinked. “Oh. We. Can. Take mine I guess.”

“... You have a car? Already? At 16? And a license?” Cassie asked.

“Like. No one said anything about a license. You don’t drive anything? What do you haul hay with?” Leonie said.

“You are not normal,” Cassie said.

“I told you there weren’t any bumper cars. Let’s find out who took Mooberly. Before something bad happens to her.”

