

Ishmael

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Editor's note: Becca wrote this piece during her senior year of high school at Princeton Day School (Princeton, New Jersey). It was originally published in her school's literary and art magazine.

He presses his wet, dark nose to the palm of my hand and I can't help but coo at him as if he were an infant. They chose which black bull to save from slaughter on the basis of personality and not on size of the meat that would be produced by their death. Somehow, this endears Ishmael to me immediately. His personality outshone that of Starbuck and Ahab – both nervous and stand-offish, whereas Ishmael is sweet, only wanting to be stroked and kissed and whispered to. It saddens me greatly to think about leaving him and the other cows in December, but I know at least that I have a few more months with him.

Weeks later, sitting by a fire that I just ignited with a hand drill, I am filled to my brim with warmth. I am at farmer Caitlin's little home in the woods, Sunrise Cabin, just having finished my solo. I spent my solo sleeping, curled up in my mummy bag, my own personal cocoon, under the tarp that I set up between a snag and a living white pine, quasi-hibernating to imitate a little black bear. With the fire in front of me, I feel the hot flames leaping into my veins and my blood, making me feel more alive than I have felt for the past two days, alone in the woods. Speaking feels strange and answering Caitlin's questions makes my tongue feel heavy like a block of wood, the words stumbling out all wrong. I haven't spoken to anyone but the screaming blue jays for the past forty-eight hours, and they weren't good conversationalists, so eventually I stopped trying.

I feel a warm, strong hand on my shoulder and tilt my head up towards the grey sky, and smile with a burst of affection upon seeing Megan standing above me. Megan is the head farmer at Chewonki, my current home, and someone very worthy of my awe and admiration. She can move three chicken tractors all by herself (it takes me and three other cabin mates at least fifteen minutes to move just one together), milk a cow like nobody's business, help birth a lamb – Megan can do anything. After a moment, my smile falters. Megan looks sad and when she removes her hands from my shoulder, tilting her head to the side as if to signal to Caitlin that she wants to speak "over there" with her for a moment, I know something must be amiss. I wait patiently as they speak in hushed tones, and stare at my toes wiggling in my dirty Smart Wool socks before the fire – my fire. Patience is a virtue. When Megan and Caitlin sit back down, Megan touches my arm and says to me, "Becca, something happened on the farm this weekend . . ." As if on cue, my heart climbs up my throat and into my mouth, and I can barely speak. I only manage to muster a soft, whispered, "What?" Megan goes on

to tell me that, Ishmael, our black cow who is just a yearling has died. She describes it to me in its gruesome nature, holding nothing back. He fell in the barn, got tangled up in his tie-up, snapped his neck just like that, and suffocated to death. Megan tells me all of this because she wants me to know the details and to understand the pain, I suppose. There's no point in brushing aside such a big event just to avoid shedding a few tears; and shed tears, I do. My eyes begin to water, and try as I might, to hold the tears back, they start sliding down my cheeks in a vicious, physical caress of heartache.

I lean into Megan, and she hugs me tightly while Caitlin patted my leg, her own eyes watering. It is like a scene straight out of a play: three women crying softly together over the death of a loved beast, sitting on a tattered wool blanket in front of an open fire in the middle of the woods. But no play or book can ever capture the pain I feel in that moment. Shakespeare would not do it justice, nor would Charles Dickens if he tried. Megan's final words are the only things I have to console me in that moment: I've been thinking since it happened of how to tell you, and I just didn't know the right way . . . I worried the most about telling you, Becca, and I wanted to tell you first. I wanted to tell you one-on-one.

Ishmael has a plaque now in the barn where he used to stay. On the left, it says 2011, on the right, 2012. In the middle, written horizontally and perfectly straight, is his name: Ishmael. I guess it's strange that Semester 50 will never know him, when the plan all along was for him to be there to greet them, mooing softly from the field with Louise and Roscoe, but still what's stranger to me is that I will never know him again. I was there for a fleeting two and a half months of his life, but that is all the time with him that I will be getting. I believe that my mind understands his disappearance from this world far better than my heart, and I don't want to have to live through the day that my heart finally does realize the permanence of it all.