

Tied To the Whipping Post

By Kenn Hartmann

After a particularly long stretch of empty highway, I pulled my sickle into in a turn-around on an otherwise thin gravel shoulder in the middle of nowhere to contemplate the odd sight of two bulls chained to the rusting hulk of an abandoned bulldozer. The first bull got up, walked slowly towards me until its chain tightened. I kept my hand on the throttle ready to split. The second bull did the same, plodding slowly towards me until its chain tightened, drawing abreast the first bull. They leaned forward trying to move the bulldozer sideways against the caterpillar track straining the limits of the chain, each bull trying to take one last futile step. I shut off my machine, gingerly leaning back. The field in which the bulls stood had been denuded either by someone operating the machinery or the bulls pulling it around. It seemed I wasn't the only one to contemplate this view. A bleacher had been improvised out of a weathered plank resting on two bare stumps. From the thicket at the edge of the field, a hunter in a homburg emerged, wearing a sports coat and carrying a shotgun lowered at his side. I wanted to acknowledge him, say 'howdy', wave, do anything but instead lay back motionless on my leather seat, hands clasped behind my head. He looked me over and said, "'tis a sight." Twitching just a bit, I asked, "the sickle or those bulls?"

The hunter said he owned a few acres of thicket adjacent to the denuded property, saying he wasn't hunting but just liked being armed. I pointed at fishing rod on my handlebars and said, "I know what you mean." He said, "you never know." The bulls stood staring at each other, idly kicking dirt, their chains tangled below their shanks. The hunter, who wasn't really hunting said, "Those bulls can get real friendly, that's the problem." The beasts methodically untangled the chains, slowly leaning forward as if to break the bonds that held them. A pickup truck bounced across the field from opposite end, grinding through gears, lurching mechanically over caterpillar ruts. "Here he comes," said the huntsman dryly, "the owner." Apparently, the owner had the bulls chained together after one tried to climb into his cab the first time he came out to inspect his investment. The pickup ground to a halt, three men got out of the cab, an old feeble man sat in the back bed. The driver, the owner of the place where the bulls were chained, pulled a knife from the dash, madly rushed the back bed, lifting aloft what looked to be a fluffy white blanket. I couldn't tell whether it was the lamb that shrieked or the feeble old man when the owner's knife slit the lamb's throat. The owner yelled angrily, "I told you not to name anything we might have to eat." The feeble old man sobbed, grotesquely moaning, "oh god, oh god." The two other passengers laughed but the owner told them to "can it."

In retrospect it's easy to regret my actions, even the huntsman looked stunned when I wandered into the denuded field to denounce the knife wielding owner, who lunged at me brandishing the bloody weapon, growling through clenched teeth, "mind your own goddamn business and get the fuck off my property." I stood my ground as he rushed me, trusting he wouldn't slit my throat but not so sure he wouldn't. Even his two cronies picked up weapons, a pitchfork and an axe, holding them menacingly in my direction. I felt naked, overplaying whatever hand I thought I had, realizing the danger of relying on compassionate sense from a raving maniac. The huntsman stood, shotgun grimly cradled in his arms, looking as much an adversary as a friend. The feeble old man, wiping his nose with his sleeve, had been reduced to a whimper, sniffing in odd rhythms, blowing his nose in a blue bandana. I asked the owner why he chained the bulls to the machine. "One of them tried to climb in my goddamn window," he said humbly, as if remembering it, embarrassed at the thought. Everyone laughed, the two cronies snickered, the huntsman cracked a grin, even the feeble old man suddenly laughed happy the tension broke, the owner grinned, everyone except me who needed an out, an escape. The owner explained to his cronies that bulls were dumb beasts of burden, devoid of any intelligence. I moseyed back to my sickle, longing to be on the highway, wind in my face, all the bullshit behind me.

-Kenn Hartmann

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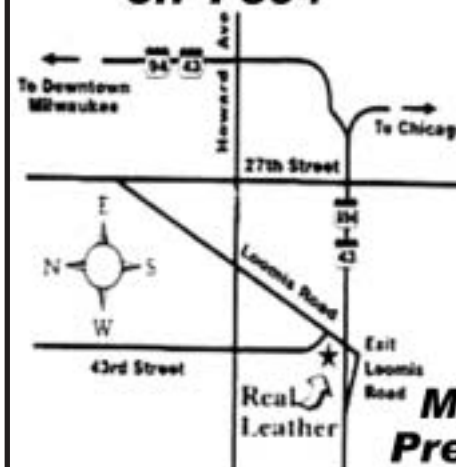
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