

EMERSON'S COWS

Fiction by Luan Hall Pitsch

When Callie Emerson asked me to sleep over, I would've said no—Callie and I weren't really friends—but Callie had something I wanted. Something I'd had my eye on for a while. Callie had cows.

I arrived at Callie's house with my nightgown rolled under my arm, wearing the next day's school clothes. It was May 1968. The day was barely warm, and snow still clung to the Wasatch Range our town huddled up against. Still, May. So I wore sleeveless.

The six o'clock news boomed out from Callie's screen door. I spied two enormous dirty-socked feet through the screen, moving back and forth over each other like sticks rubbed together for fire.

The screen rattled under my knuckles. I called, "Is Callie home?"

"Callie, your little friend Hallsey's here." Mr. Emerson's voice was scraping-the-ground low. "Come on in."

I slid in, my back against the wall. Across from me was a pumpkin-colored couch. To my right were Mr. Emerson's clown feet. He had feet most kids would've been happy to stare at, but not me. Instead I looked to the left, where Chet Huntley was broadcasting from a black-and-white TV.

I kept my head twisted, wishing I'd stayed outside. Not that I had anything against Mr. Emerson, but so far every adult I'd met in my new hometown wanted information. How long had my mother been divorced? When did she remarry? She stayed out awful late at night, didn't she? What were we kids doing for dinner, was there food in the house? Wasn't that me they'd seen out after dark? That line of talk was enough to put me off adults in general, and sympathetic adults in particular.

Sure enough, Mr. Emerson asked a question. "You see that man on TV?"



On the small screen, a lanky man sat at a table in front of a microphone. His grin was lopsided and a black patch covered one eye.

"I see him," I said.

"That's Moshe Dayan," Mr. Emerson informed me, "the Israeli commander who claims he single-handedly won the war."

"Oh." A black string ran across his mostly bald head, holding the eyepatch in place. "His nose doesn't look so big," I said.

Mr. Emerson laughed. "You think he's not Jewish?"

Heat rushed into my face. "I don't know." I still hadn't looked at Mr. Emerson. I kept not looking.

My older sisters had talked about the recent Israeli conflict, now called the Six-Day War. In fact, it was their whispered discussion that had made me want Callie's cows.

Late at night, when they thought I was asleep, Anna and Maggie discussed the takeover of Jerusalem as an omen signaling the End of Days. The Bible foretold tumultuous times, and sure enough, Martin Luther King had been assassinated, people were rioting, places in the U.S. were being burned and looted. There was a famine somewhere—maybe Africa. Earthquakes and hurricanes were particularly vicious. The U.S. was

in that hateful Vietnam War, and now, most significant of all, the Jewish people were taking back Israel. Any day now, God was going to send fire to burn two-thirds of the population of the whole world.

Maggie said, "I think *fire* means bombs."

"No," Anna answered. "Napalm."

I pictured a horizon of flame, trees like match heads, all lit at once. I groaned.

"You awake, Hallsey?" Maggie whispered.

Like I would answer.

After a minute, Anna murmured, "When I asked Mom about food storage, she said we had plenty of things put up in the garage. Peaches, chili sauce, tomatoes."

"Chili sauce!" Maggie yelled. "That's not what we're supposed to have."

Anna shushed her.

"What about the wheat?" Maggie continued in a quieter voice. "And water—have we got that?"

"I don't think so. But Grandma and Grandpa would take us in," Anna said. "We'd be safe with them."

My heart thudded, and my eyes stung. We weren't ready. Our house was a ranch without a bomb shelter. I remembered the spits of fire from heaven in that movie where Charlton Heston played Moses. God didn't need napalm. *End of excerpt*