We bought Daisy when she was two months away from her first heat. She was a golden Guernsey, a breed known for its sweet disposition. Daisy had spent all of her calf-hood in a horse pasture, so she was used to the outdoor life. We wanted a heifer of modest origin because our place was old and ramshackle and we would not be able to provide luxury dairy farm accommodations for our heifer. She did have her own stall though, and all the innocent enthusiasm two rookie back-to-the-landers could muster.

Right away, we could tell that establishing a friendly working relationship with Daisy would be work. There was something about this heifer that didn’t quite square with the books. She seemed to have a bad attitude: she ignored us and seemed to resent the scrap-wood fence we put up for her; to take for granted the grain and hay we worked so hard to acquire. We figured in time she would become pet-like and docile (otherwise how would we ever milk her?) so we tolerated her attitude, bribing her to love us. When she snubbed the ready-mix feed from the feed mill, we bought Morrison’s Feeds and Feeding and custom-mixed her food. When she tossed the hay onto the stall floor we searched for bales that had a higher alfalfa content. She ate and grew and greeted us at the fence when it was chore time. This seemed to indicate improvement.

Daisy also had a wild-eyed exuberance that we couldn’t account for. She seemed too old for calf-like behavior. This bovine acted more horse-like than most horses. She ran around and snorted, bucking and tossing her head like a colt. It was entertaining and funny, but sort of undignified. When foals act that way they seem spry and graceful. Daisy looked like she might hurt herself. Or one of us. We admired her spunk, but it presented a problem. How would we ever be able to tell when she was in heat? If she didn’t settle there would be no contrast. The onset of the heifer’s first heat was a milestone we had studied and prepared for. It was to be our debut as farmers, the first proud step toward self-sufficiency. We wanted her milk, but first she would have to be inseminated.
With the big event approaching, we thumbed through the semen catalogs for a bull we thought Daisy would approve of. The catalogs categorized bulls by breed. Each sire’s picture included a genetic history and outstanding physical attributes. We ordered semen from a promising white-faced Hereford of acceptable lineage. Then we contacted Arnie Maki, a neighborhood dairy farmer who performed artificial inseminations. Arnie stored semen for local operations then showed up to inseminate the cow whenever a client called. We counted the days to Daisy’s first heat, watching for the symptoms of estrus.

Returning from the barn one morning close to ground zero, I said to my husband, “Hey, don’t you think her eyes look a little wilder than usual? I really think her eyes are bulging and she seems more restless. I think you should go down to the barn, and if her tail looks a little goopy, scratch her brisket. If she tries to mount you, run right back up to the house and we’ll call Arnie.” I had no chance to see how my husband would respond to this suggestion because we were suddenly distracted by a heart-stopping Craaack!

“Omigod, what was that?” We were both stunned by the sickening sound. (Breaking boards sound like gun reports). By the time we got around the corner of the house, there was Daisy charging for the road at full tilt, eyes bulging madly, tail held high, hooves throwing clods of sod in every direction.

“Look at her eyes! She’s gone crazy!” I screamed.

Bob said, “Oh shit. Look at the fence!” A section of fence was flattened, the boards cracked and splintered.

“Daisy, come back here,” I screamed, pointlessly. In a flash we were in the pickup, shooting down the country road after our wild cow. We didn’t have to go very far. Daisy was at the next farm and she had already broken down another fence and mounted the neighbor’s palomino gelding. As we pulled up we watched her fling her front hooves up and over his withers in a graceless embrace. She was trotting on hoof tips around the pasture behind him, hanging on for romance. The gelding was not flattered by Daisy’s passion. In fact he was aiming to plow through another section of fence in his frenzy to dismount Daisy when our truck
spooked him and he whipped around in the opposite direction. Daisy slipped off, mercifully landing upright to her surprise. As she paused to gather her wits, we ran up behind and on either side of her. She was cornered. We grabbed the halter, clipped the rope to it, then just stood there surveying the damage. The horse peevishly pranced around in circles. Daisy glared at us.

“See, this is exactly what the book said she would look like. This,” I marvelled, “must be standing heat.”

“Yeah, well look at the fence. One entire section isn’t standing at all,” Bob accurately noted.

“Well, I’ll wait here and block the hole while you run Daisy back to the barn. Then you come back and we’ll fix the fence together.” So with a bucket of custom-mixed grain for enticement, Daisy was escorted to her own stall a mile back down the road.

And there we stood, the gelding and I, staring at each other. I had known a horse or two in my day who would have taken this golden opportunity to bolt for freedom. In fact I had been responsible for rounding a few of them up when I was the one responsible for the get-away. I wondered when this horse would make his move. “You’ve got about a ten foot gap to pass through, buddy,” I thought. “What’s stopping you?” In response to my telepathic transmission—my dare—he tossed his head, flared his nostrils, then trotted back around behind his little shed. The end of our standoff. Anti-climactic, but I wasn’t sorry. How complacent he was with his dull captivity, his little quarter acre of mud and manure.

The fence repairs held for exactly one month. Daisy came into heat a second time, and we weren’t ready. [We naively assumed that one dose of semen would do the trick.] As suddenly as before Daisy broke through the fence and disappeared down the road, the romance repeated verse for verse concluding with more fence repairs. We called Arnie and he arrived after his evening chores, yanked his equipment out of the back of the pickup—and with dry ice vapors pouring ominously through the seam of the stainless steel semen canister, stomped back down to the barn for a second try. It was embarrassing to have to admit our botched attempt at animal husbandry, (as if our clumsiness were news... as if the entire miniscule town of
Carlshend, Michigan wasn’t having a few fireside chuckles over our blunders that very
minute...).

As he pulled on his rubber glove and loaded the applicator, he quizzed me on the cow’s
readiness.

“Been about 12 hours since she started bellowing, ya say?”

“Yes.” I couldn’t keep the frustration out of my voice. I couldn’t believe the timing for
this project was so complicated. “What do you suggest we do if she goes into heat again. Isn’t
this unusual?” [This one lost month seemed like such a huge disappointment, a waste, a failure.]

“Ya know, sometimes it’s hard to tell when ya only have one animal. But if she goes into
heat again why dontcha just take her down the road to Carlson’s bull, eh?” he suggested.

“I didn’t know Carlson had a bull.” More ignorance to admit. “Anyway, Daisy prefers
horses. If we try to take her out of the barn next month she’ll just go back to McMaster’s gelding.

“All the more reason to stick her in with Carlson’s herd, eh. He’s got whitefaces, so there
won’t be no problem. He probably won’t charge ya much either, maybe just for hay. She’ll take
for sure. Unless she’s deformed or something.”

“Uh, well, how do you mean . . . deformed?” I whispered.

“Oh, ya know,” he grunted, shoving his forearm up to the elbow into Daisy’s pelvis.

“She might be a free martin, eh?”

“A what? Does that have something to do with twins?” I couldn’t quell the rising panic.
I sort of remembered hearing somebody talk about what good eating a free martin made.

“Ya, when she’s twin to a bull, she gets too much male hormone when she’s in her
mama’s belly, ya know.” Arnie’s arm made a soft sucking sound as he plunged the end of the
applicator, releasing sperm into Daisy’s possibly defective reproductive system.

“Can’t you tell when your arm is in her, Arnie? Can’t you just sort of feel around with
your fingers and see if everything’s there?” I looked on Arnie as our only help.

“Nope. If Carlson’s bull don’t do the trick, ya have the vet to check her out, eh?” he
counseled, withdrawing his arm and towelin it off.


Eat Daisy. “Free Martins are supposed to produce an excellent fine-grained beef. About 90% of these heifers are infertile and have incomplete reproductive systems due to interference from male hormones that somehow were able to pass from the bloodstreams of fetal bull calves into the bloodstreams of their sisters. Derivation of the term freemartin is not certain. Some think ‘free’ may be a corruption of farrow, meaning barren, and that ‘martin’ may have to do with the fact that years ago in England St. Martin’s Day (November 11th) was a big day for slaughtering cattle for winter food. Freemartins are supposed to produce an excellent, fine-grained beef.” My cow book made it seem so acceptable, but I felt like Daisy had been victimized by Druids inutero. Sacrificed before birth, and now we would be asked to eat her.

The following month we were once again awakened by Daisy’s bellows. My stomach kinked, over-reacting to the possibility of Daisy’s abnormality. Bob kept reminding me that it was probably our own ineptness that was the cause of Daisy’s failure to “take.”

“Just think of us as impotent. Impotent from ignorance,” he reasoned. “Daisy’s fine, we’re just still learning and making expensive, time consuming, dumb mistakes. It’ll work out.”

I was usually more than ready to take the blame for stupidity, and I could take it this time too. “Yeah. Well. What if our first mistake was buying swamp land in Florida?” I challenged.

“What are you talking about?” asked Bob

“I mean, what if Daisy is swamp land in Florida? What if she’s a lemon or something?” I accused. (After all, we really didn’t trust the people who had sold her to us, now our fears seemed to be substantiated.)

“Well, hell, let’s overreact all day and let Daisy go another month why don’t we?” Bob asked.

“Okay. Fine. Let’s go. I hope you’re prepared to buy a freezer.” I muttered.

The only way to get Daisy down to the other side of Carlshend was to tie her to the tailgate of the pickup and have someone sitting there with a bucket of grain. The other person would drive us slowly the mile and a half to Carlson’s farm. The trip went smoothly and Daisy happily joined in with her new bovine neighbors. Mr. Carlson knew how to direct the
transaction between his bull and our cow, so all we had to do was leave and come back in two
days to take her home, which we did. And wait one month. A month went by and then another
month. No wild, bulging eyes, not a single hysterical bellow. Nothing. No broken fences, no
love affairs with geldings. Daisy was no longer fine-grained beef. She was the rising star of the
barn. Boy, were we relieved.

Daisy spent the winter in her stall because there was so much snow in Michigan that
winter... we couldn’t keep up with it. After a two-day storm in January the bottom half of her
double door was blocked and we had to climb down into her stall through the top. Daisy would
stick her head out of the top and we would visit her and pat her nose. Her disposition was
sweetening in her confinement. Daisy was almost acting like a real cow.

In the early spring, Daisy gave birth to a fine calf. He sucked his share of his mother’s
bounty, then we milked what he couldn’t finish. All that custom-blend grain ensured that
Daisy’s milk was rich and creamy. Some milkings the cream was six inches deep on a gallon. The
picture had come together like the cover story of *Mother Earth News*. With one exception: Daisy’s
calf was a male. A bouncing baby bull. We couldn’t keep him to inseminate Daisy, of course.
We couldn’t afford to keep him for a pet or sell him as breeding stock; his breed wasn’t desirable
for that. We would have to use him another way. We would have to fatten him up for a year
and buy a freezer.

“Let’s name him, uh, Chuck,” I said.