

Emma Hillier

It's Monday morning, because stage one always is. The second stage -the 'reading'- is three clear days later, time enough for your worry to climb.

We get behind the cattle, encouraging them forward. They're funnelled into a makeshift race, a channel of gates and hurdles one cow in width, lashed together with baler twine. It's meant to be a single file system but rarely is. Like kids in a lunchtime corridor, cows delight in getting themselves wedged, creating a logjam. The race leads them towards the crush, a metal frame that safely contains the animal. Ours is oxide red, resprayed in an effort to make it look newer than it is. Its wounds are welded each season. We mutter about replacing it for something newer. Never do.

Nick, who knows nothing about cows, is on the crush exit gate. Dan (knows much more but prefers to steer clear) is perched up on a wall, waiting to swing in like a gibbon if the situation is grim enough to require his expertise. My Jon is in the scrum, sandwiched in between the beasts, shover of the impossibly stubborn, shifter of the 'planted' cow. Outside is me, responsible for securing the gate at the back end, so that once the girls are in, there's no return. Irish vet Anna May is waiting: clipboard, syringe and scissors in hand.

A decent enough team. We know our jobs. Like the inner workings of a watch, if one of us stuffs up, the time this could take cannot be told. If cow decides, in her cow-mind, to become immovable as quartz this could take twenty minutes or two hours. Can't say which it will be until you start. Aristotle posited that time correlated to movement, that it was relative to motion of objects. Today it depends on cow-objects, who live and move in their own time.

First in, a brave heifer. Good girl.

*Snicksnip. Snicksnip.* Silver scissors clip bare two sections of conkerly hide on her neck. As above, so below. Using callipers, the thickness of the skin underneath the baldnesses is measured and recorded. Then, with a clicky pen double-snap, Anna May injects 0.1ml of tuberculin into each site- 'bovine' into the top, 'avian' into the bottom. The eartag number is scribbled down. If cow holds still, this all takes less than twenty seconds. If she thrashes, longer.

Then the countdown starts, for on the fourth day- the day of the 'reading'- we will know what the future holds.