

Counting

I ride in my grandfather's pickup through a field of green winter wheat, where Hereford and Black Angus cattle are grazing, tails swishing and heads down. Some of the cattle raise their heads to look at my grandfather and me as we roll past them. Those that look at us do so with deep watery eyes set into blank faces. The pickup idles along at a walking pace, while my grandfather counts the cattle. He asks me to count the ones on my side of the pickup, and I move closer to the door and press my nose against the cold hardness of the window. But there are so many cattle. I soon realize that I am missing some of them, and maybe counting others more than once. Only recently have I learned to count past ten, and I am uncertain of my counting skills. I hope the exact number is not too important to my grandfather.

My grandfather tells me there should be so many cows and so many heifers and steers and bulls, and so on. Although it is a little cold outside, we roll down the windows on the old blue Chevy, and my grandfather lights one of his Camels. He smokes out of habit, his hand reaching for a shirt pocket without his having to think about it. He started smoking when he was twelve years old, he tells me.

"Too young to be smoking, I can tell you that," he says. "I didn't see no harm in it at the time. They say it's bad for you these days, though."

Chilled air carries the sweet scent of cow manure through the open windows, where it mixes with cigarette smoke and the mustiness of the old upholstery in a way that is strangely pleasing. Warm air rises from the pickup's heater and the windshield begins to fog up a little.

I want to know, "What is a heifer?"

My grandfather looks at me to see if I'm serious. I just look at him, a little embarrassed to have asked. I don't want my grandfather to think I'm ignorant about important things. He moves his tongue around in his cheek for a moment.

"Well, think of cattle like you think of people." He looks at me to see if I'm following.

"Now, a cow is like your mother. She's had a baby calf or two, like your momma had you." He pauses to let this sink in, taking a long drag on his Camel and then blowing the smoke out his window.

He goes on. "Now, a heifer is like a cow, except she hasn't had no calves, yet. It's like if you had a big sister who was almost grown-up and ready to get married. A heifer is a girl calf that's pretty near to being a cow."

I nod, and am happy that I don't have a big sister. My grandfather starts using his hands to help him explain, moving them in front of him, now closer together, now farther apart. Cigarette smoke swirls from the fingers of his left hand and drifts out the window.

He goes on. "Now, a bull is like your daddy, a boy calf that's full-grown. And the bull is the daddy of all the calves and the husband of the cows, you see?"

My grandfather leans back in his seat and extends his arm out the window to rest a hand on the mirror. He's happy to have come up with such a nice way of explaining things.

He goes on. "Now, hogs it pretty much the same way. You got your boars, sows, shoats, pigs, and such. And horses, they ain't no different. There's fillies, colts, mares, stallions, and the like."

He smokes for a while, maybe trying to think of other examples. I want to stick with cattle.

I want to know, "What is a steer?"

My grandfather starts to say something, but then he pauses. I hope that he can fit steers into the story so that I will know everything about cattle. This will be good information to tell my brothers.

“Well... a steer is a boy calf, too,” he finally says. I wait for him to go on, but he remains quiet. He takes a sudden interest in the cattle again, looking out his window to tally a few more of them with a finger.

“But don’t boy calves turn into bulls?” I ask. I’m proud to show I was listening during the part about bulls.

My grandfather takes a final drag on his cigarette, and then blows the smoke through his nose with a breezy sound. The smoke flows over the steering wheel and billows onto the windshield in front of him. He places the tip of his tongue between his lips and spits out a final little puff of smoky air. He pushes his cigarette butt into an ashtray that is already full.

“Well... that’s mighty true, but steers is boy calves that’s been...” he pauses again, frowning and considering, like my father had done that time when I asked him the difference between Budweiser and Lone Star.

“Well, come to think of it, your daddy worked at the feed lot between here and Knox City for a while. He knows a good bit about cattle from being out there. Let’s ask him about them steers and see what he says.” My grandfather seems to enjoy the thought of this idea. He winks at me.

“Okay,” I say. But I am a little disappointed. My grandfather is always better than my father when it comes to explaining things. He is willing to take the time. My father is likely to say, “Well, you can figure that out when the time comes,” or “Why you want to know that?” But if my grandfather asks him, he will have to give an answer. I hope I can figure out how to put steers into the cattle family. I look over at my grandfather and notice that he is smiling and shaking his head a little. I think of the many times I have heard him laugh or seen him smile, and there are many more times than I can count.

Sometimes my grandparents will drive up outside our house without anyone knowing they are coming. If it’s near supper time my brothers and I will be excited and happy, hoping they will stay for supper. My mother will be less excited, because she will have to make quick changes to supper. Sometimes it works out okay and other times she is not happy and will say something about it to our father after my grandparents have gone. When my grandfather eats with us, he tells stories and says things that are funny, right there at the table. This is different from normal suppers, where my father is mostly quiet except to ask how my brothers and I did on the chores he told us to do, and to mention what he wants done the next day.

My grandfather eats slowly and looks around the table between bites of chicken and beans and cornbread. He will say “This sure is good,” to my mother. One time he says how much he likes the potato pancakes, and my mother tells him it’s rice, not potato pancakes. My grandfather laughs and says he never ate rice before in his whole life, and he admits he did think the potato pancakes were kind of unusual – “but good, though,” he says quickly when my mother looks at him. He says even this in a way that makes everyone laugh a little. My father seems happier and everyone is taking it easy.

My grandfather asks my brothers and me how we like school, and if we have learned to count, yet. We tell him a few of us can count already but none of us is old enough to go to school. He is surprised and says he can’t hardly believe that. He goes around the table asking each of us how old we

are. He is amazed when he hears us say our ages. "Five years old!" he says, and then "Four years old!" Then he asks my mother how old she is and she just looks at him and doesn't tell him.