Driving Cattle

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Jim had been transporting cattle for more than half his 57 years. He'd drive the beasts from their stinking stockyards in Coalinga down Highway 5 through country quilted with farms, then vineyards, then a federal prison. He'd leave the cows at a stinking slaughterhouse near Chino and go back for more.

He'd learned the best places to get a good steak, take a shower, and have a nap or a piss. The cab of his truck had become his second home, filled with pictures of his wife, Karen, and grade-school photos of his son. His son was in college now—the first in his family to attend—but he liked to remember Jimmy Jr. when he was small and malleable, a squishy ball of potential.

Before Jimmy Jr., Karen would ride with him. Not for the scenery, obviously, but because they didn't like to be apart. They'd talk, make plans for the future, or listen to Robert Ludlum books on tape. She continued even after they had Jimmy Jr., who'd sleep between them on the bench seat or sit on Karen's lap, watching the outside whizzing by. He loved having his whole family with him in the safe capsule of his cab, shooting down the highway together. As soon as Jimmy started walking, he didn't want to sit in the cab all day. For a while, Jim kept in touch with his family by phone. He'd call throughout the day to find out cute things Jimmy had said, what was on the table for dinner, and just to hear Karen's voice. But then it started to feel as if he were bothering her. After he said, "Hello," Karen would say, "What?" as if he needed a reason to call her. Once he called to tell her about a sunset that had turned the grass so orange, he'd mistaken it for wildfire. "That must be nice," she said. Now Jim would only call at night, right before dinner or bed, just to let Karen know he was alive. She was so busy though. His nightly calls were beginning to seem too often.

Jim picked up a load of Holstein cows early this morning. He liked to be on the road by 6:00 a.m. to avoid the heat. It wasn't even noon yet and by the shimmer of the highway, he could tell it was blistering out. He decided to pull over at the Buttonwillow rest stop to stretch his legs and get a Coke. He hoisted himself out of the frosty, air-conditioned cab into air that felt thick and fuzzy. The skin on his bare arms prickled in shock. He pulled up his jeans and walked past his trailer, a long silver bullet punched with rows of holes that framed pieces of the cows milling within—a white circle, a black circle, a piece of tail, the number that hung from the cow's ear, and finally, a moist black eye staring back at him.

"Is it hot in there?" he asked the eye.

The Coke machines were out of order and the bathrooms were filthy, so he walked out into the field behind the building and pissed there. He'd cross this rest stop off his list. This was a perfect example of what was wrong with America. This rest stop used to be one of the nice ones. The toilets were flushed, the floors weren't covered in used paper towels, and the counters were dry. After he used the facility, Jim would wipe the seat and sink and make sure his garbage made it into the can in order to leave it nice for the next guy. Nobody cared about the next guy anymore. People didn't take pride in anything. Jim suspected it was because most of the people in California weren't from California. They had no ownership. He headed back to the cab. The cow eye was still watching him.

"What?" He stood on his tiptoes to see the cow's number. "2456. What's your story?" 2456 blinked. Jim could see his own reflection in the eyeball—a distorted, fish-eye view of his face.

Jim sat in the air-conditioned cab and watched several families herd their eager kids back into minivans, probably headed for Disneyland. He'd never got around to taking Jimmy, although in retrospect, he could easily have combined a trip there with work, stopping in LA on his way back with the

empty trailer.

He wondered if his son would have wanted to go to Disneyland. He never understood the kid. He didn't play sports in real life, just on the computer. When Jim was home, his son's head would be bent over a book or a phone screen or a video game. There was a time when Jim was proud of how bright Jimmy was, humbly joking with his teachers how glad he was that Jimmy didn't get his brains from him, but the joke wasn't funny anymore. Either Jimmy got everything from him, or he got nothing. Jim was leaning toward nothing. He had wanted a second child, but they couldn't get pregnant. Karen's body was done having children, and Jim was left wondering if that son would have shown an interest in things Jim was good at. If that unborn son would have wanted to go hunting with Jim, or watch him change the oil in the family car.

The families walked back to the cars, buckling kids into their seats, and pulling snacks and drinks from coolers and arranging them on laps and cup holders. Jim waited until they got back onto the highway before he eased his big rig out of the parking lot.

When Jimmy was a senior in high school, his last year at home with them, Jim asked him if he wanted to go out on the road with Jim during the summer. He offered to pay him to be there, even though Jimmy wouldn't really be working, but learning. When this idea had come to him, he'd been so excited he pulled onto a shoulder and phoned Karen to tell her his plan.

"You'll have to ask him."

She put Jimmy on the phone and Jim told him his plan, upping how much he'd originally planned on paying him. "I'll teach you about driving a big rig, not that you'll be following in my footsteps, but just for fun."

"I don't know, Dad."

He was shocked his son hadn't jumped at the opportunity. "Who wouldn't want that kind of money just to sit in a semi?" he'd asked, trying to keep the anger he felt out of his voice.

"It's just that I'd feel bad knowing I'm driving those animals to their deaths," Jimmy said.

Jim felt as if his son had punched him in the gut. Jim's own father had told Jim how to vote, what jobs were acceptable, what union to join, and Jim rarely questioned him. He did what his father suggested out of respect for him. What Jim was offering Jimmy wasn't hard, or permanent even. He wasn't asking him to become a truck driver. He was asking him to spend a little time with his old man, and the rejection felt personal.

"Those animals are what pays for your video games and college applications," he'd said hotly. "And it's what they are raised to do."

"I know, Dad." He'd said nothing else, and neither did Jim. Jim hadn't called to argue with his son. He never meant to argue with him, but their conversations just naturally flowed in that direction, like a force of gravity.

The next time Jim was home, Karen served a meatloaf for dinner that was so unexpectedly awful, Jim spat his bite back out onto his plate. "What's wrong with this?"

"It's vegan, Jim. I made it with soy. Jimmy doesn't eat meat anymore. Besides, it's better for us. I've lowered my cholesterol 30 points. God knows what yours is like." Karen glanced at Jim's belly.

There was a word for this, Jim thought. The fact that beef is what paid to put God-awful tofu on the table. Irony. That was the word.

Jim pulled into the slaughterhouse around four, where a guy directed him to a pen on the left of the main building, and he backed the truck into position, then got out and lowered the ramp.

"End of the line, boys," he yelled into the truck. The animals shifted and turned and lumbered down the ramp single file.

They instinctively knew what they were supposed to do, as if they'd done it before. Maybe they had. Jim smiled to himself. *Maybe they just keep getting reincarnated over and over again to always have it end back here.*

2456 was the last out of the truck. At the bottom of the ramp, just before he entered the pen, 2456 swung his big head around and stared at Jim.

A wind blew and Jim shivered, sickened by the smell and suddenly desperate for a shower and a beer.

"That'll be it, then," he called to the foreman, and jumped back into his cab.

Jim headed for the Flying J, where he could have a warm shower before he bedded down in his cab. He decided to check in with Karen first and get it over with. She answered on the third ring.

Jim filled her in on his itinerary. "I dropped off my first load and am heading east now to pick up another. Any news from Jimmy?" He was in his second year at Berkeley.

"You could call him yourself."

"He never picks up."

"Then text him. That's what I do. He declared his major. Environmental studies."

"What does a person do with a degree in environmental studies?" Jim asked. In Jim's mind, people went to college to study business or to become a doctor, even a chiropractor.

"I don't know what they do. Save the world, I guess. He's interested in climate change and the impact of global warming, earth resources, and stuff like that."

"I don't know," Jim mumbled. "We're spending a lot of money on that school. I'd like it if he learned something useful, something that will earn him a good living."

"We want him to finish college," Karen said. "It's important. And we will continue to support him."

"The more money I put into that kid, the weirder he gets." The payoff didn't seem worth it. Jim had worked his tail off

to educate his son right out of his life, to places Jim didn't understand.

"Try harder, Jim. Read the books Jimmy gave you."

Don't Even Think About It: Why Our Brains are Wired to Ignore Climate Change and Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are? were both sitting in the bottom of his overnight bag, spines intact. At the end of the day, he'd rather watch the news or a ball game, not crack open a book, especially ones as depressing as these sounded.

"I'm going to be late for my yoga class."

Jim pictured Karen leaning against the counter in their kitchen. It was a nice tract house in Modesto that they'd bought brand new fifteen years ago. Jim was proud of it, and a little sad he didn't get to spend much time there.

"I can't believe our town has a yoga studio."

"We have a dozen yoga studios, Jim. I go to the one by Thousand Oaks Park."

"Across from the drive-in? I was thinking about retiring as soon as Jimmy's done with school. I could go to yoga with you. Can you imagine me doing yoga?"

"I really have to run, Jim. Talk later." She clicked off.

Following Jimmy's lead, Karen also stopped eating meat, and she began losing weight. Every time Jim came home, there was less and less of her. "My incredible shrinking wife," he'd say. Secretly, Jim missed the old heft of her, reaching out for her solid, soft form lying next to him in bed. Where he'd once thought of her as a lush flower he could lose himself in, she was now a prickly cactus, bony and sharp. Retired, he'd probably have to stop eating meat too. He looked down at his belly and patted it. "Days are numbered, old friend."

Jim showered and shaved in the Flying J bathroom, then decided he'd walk to town to get dinner. There was no shortage of Mexican and Thai restaurants, but he was in the mood for American food, so he headed for the Perko's at the end of the street. They had changed their name and look since the last

time he was there. They were now called Perko's Café & Grill, and the vinyl red-and-white checkered tablecloths were gone. The tables were made from slabs of what looked like redwood, and the booths were clad in a leatherlike material. He opened the menu and was relieved to find the food and prices were nearly the same. They'd added a Thai salad, which seemed ridiculous since a person could walk next door and get the real thing. He ordered the special—rib-eye steak, baked potato, vegetables, and strawberry pie. His waitress brought his plate. This is the kind of food Karen used to cook. He cut into his meat and red juices ran under the potato. He used a piece of bread to sop them up. When he was finished with his meal, he walked to the nearest bar across the street.

It was dark and nearly empty. Three women were sitting at a table in the corner and one guy was sitting at the bar, where Jim joined him, leaving a stool between them. The guy looked about Jimmy's age and was wearing a trucker's hat, but it was impossible to tell if he was in the business since it seemed to be the style now. The guy had olive-colored skin and dark hair. Nobody looked like Jim anymore. He was often the only white-skinned, light-haired person in the room. *Who's the minority?* he thought. He ordered a shot of Jim Beam, his dad's drink.

"How's it going?" the young man asked. Jim listened for an accent. If this guy had one, it was very slight.

"It's going fine," Jim answered.

"What do you haul?"

"How do you know I haul anything?"

"You have the look—you hold that drink like a steering wheel. I move furniture for Ethan Allen. Pick it up in North Carolina and deliver it all over the Western states." The young man was drinking beer. "My name's Eduardo, but everybody calls me Ed."

"You look too young to be called Ed." Jim stuck his hand out. "Jim. My son looks about your age."

"You look too young to be my dad."

"I move cattle from where they were born and get fat, to where they get slaughtered—the whole circle of life thing." Jim lifted his glass in a toast.

"Live freight. Messy."

"It's not so bad. They are amazingly cooperative, those animals."

"Is your son in the business?"

Jim paused. "Nope. He's in college. Berkeley." There was an edge in his voice that he hadn't meant.

"Berkeley is a good school. Hard to get into. You must be proud."

"He's studying the environment."

"What's that?" Ed asked.

"Good question." Jim upended his whiskey into his open mouth and smacked his glass onto the bar. "You want another?" Jim motioned to Ed's glass and Ed nodded.

Jim flagged down the bartender and put in their order.

"Turn on the Giants game while you're over there," Ed called after the bartender.

"You a Giants fan?" Jim asked.

"Yeah. The one thing I hate about this job is I can't get to the games."

"Who's your favorite player?"

"Bumgarner. I miss Lincecum."

"The freak," Jim said. The bartender set the drinks in front of Jim and he slid the beer toward Ed, who picked it up.

After baseball, they talked football, then rest stops. "It's hard to believe you're the same age as my son. He and I have nothing in common. Do you get along with your father?"

"I don't know. My dad died of a massive coronary when I was nine and he was 39. My mom made me promise I wouldn't smoke."

"Did you like your dad?"

"I guess. From what I remember."

"What do you remember?" Jim asked.

"Throwing the ball. Helping him change the oil in his truck. Bringing him a beer after he finished mowing the lawn."

Jim was getting misty-eyed. He realized, too late, that it had been a mistake to drink tonight. "Do me a favor. If you meet a woman and have a baby, quit this job. Learn how to build houses or fix cars so you can stay home and see your kids." Jim blew his nose with the napkin from under his cocktail glass, but it was damp and fell apart, leaving a fleck of white behind on his cheek. "Where were you born, Ed?"

"Stockton," Ed said, sipping from his beer.

"I mean your people," Jim said, wadding up the napkin into a tight ball. "Before California."

"I know what you meant," Ed said tartly. "I was starting to like you." Ed pulled out his wallet.

"I'm not racist," Jim said.

"Sure you're not. Nobody is."

"It was an innocent question. Just conversation. You look like you're from someplace else."

"Thanks for the beer, Jim." Ed slapped a ten on the bar. "I stop at two. My old man taught me that. Have a good night." Ed grabbed his coat and walked out, leaving his unfinished beer on the bar.

Jim looked around. Except for him and the bartender, the place was empty. "Slow night, eh?" Jim asked him.

"We usually shut down about this time, actually." The bartender turned away, picked up a damp rag, and began wiping down the bar.

Jim looked at his phone. It was only 8:30. He'd already called Karen. He dialed his son, but it went straight to voicemail. As he waited to leave a message, a text came through from Jimmy. "Can't talk. I'm at the library. Is something wrong?"

Jim typed back. "Just wanted to say hi. I'll call tomorrow." It was just as well Jimmy didn't pick up. What did he have to say to his son? That he'd met a new friend, a man Jimmy's age, and promptly insulted him? Jimmy wouldn't be surprised. He would have given Jim a lecture on race, the same lecture he'd given last Thanksgiving. Jim put his phone back in his pocket and pulled a twenty from his wallet, leaving it on the bar. He walked outside into a warm, dark night and was comforted to see the Big Dipper and the North Star above it. Even when he couldn't see them, he knew they were there, reliable and constant. Jim thought sadly that his son probably had a book that would tell him otherwise.

He walked back to the Flying J's parking lot, which was lit up like a Christmas tree, the metal of his rig reflecting all the lights. He hopped up into the cab and laid down on the bed behind the driver's compartment. He wasn't anywhere near sleep, feeling anxious and itchy.

Ed was wrong about him. One of the ranchers he picked up cattle from was a Mexican, and Jim and he would have coffee together. And he regularly chatted with a Black driver he ran into at his stops. It pissed Jim off to be falsely judged and misunderstood. His son did it too, calling him closed-minded and conservative, like "conservative" was a bad word. Wait until Jimmy had to start paying taxes! He'd see then how much the government took and how little we got in return. The boy was naïve. Jim rolled onto his side. Karen used to agree with him. Now he suspected they laughed about his ideas when he wasn't around, like a third wheel. He dug in his bag for the books Jimmy had given him. The first book he pulled out was the one about why his brain was wired to ignore climate change, which felt like just another way of Jimmy calling him closed-minded. He put the book back and pulled out the animal one. A hardcover, the binding creaked when he opened it. He scanned a page: "We go through a long process of watching our animals, being intrigued and surprised by their actions. Consider the related question as to whether animals say goodbye as well as hello." *Oh, geez*, he thought, tossing the book back into his overnight bag. Karen must have already read this one. She'd hired a cat communicator when her tabby had gone missing last year. The

lady told her that Winslow was nearby and pissed. Jim could have told Karen that. He could have told her anything, because people hear what they want to hear.

He used his foot to slide open the curtain covering the tiny window at the end of the bed, revealing a square of dark sky. No matter where he was, he was always looking at that same sky. It felt like he never really went anywhere. He sat up and saw his reflection in the dark window and thought about 2456, the steer he'd seen earlier in the day, the way he turned around at the end of the ramp and looked back at Jim. Maybe Jim didn't understand any of it. Was the steer trying to tell him something? Had he been missing the signs all along? An idea floated up from the murky depths of his brain, a catfish coming up for air. He climbed into the cab and started the engine, feeling the hum and rumble in his bones.

He smelled his breath. A slight whiff of alcohol, but he'd only had two whiskeys on a full meal. He felt sober and clear-headed, purposeful. Sometimes you had to muddle up your thinking with a couple of pops to let a thought get through.

Twenty minutes later he could see the glow of the slaughterhouse on the horizon. He pulled the rig onto a side road near and hopped out of the cab, zipping up his coat and setting out across a choppy field toward the light and smell.

Jim didn't want to be seen and ducked as he got closer to the buildings, walking around to the back, where the corrals were. He hoped he wasn't too late. The cattle were close together in one corner, and the way the mass shifted and undulated, it appeared to be a single, huge organism.

Jim eased open a gate and walked into the mass, looking for 2456. It wasn't easy because the mass of cattle stood with their heads hanging down, staring at the shit beneath their feet. It was how they were built: spines parallel to the ground and those thick, stiff necks, not made to turn toward the big black sky and find the Big Dipper, but built to look from the earth to the butt of their neighbor and back again. Jim supposed it was just as well they didn't know what they were missing. This didn't make him feel sad, as he had expected. What was it that he felt? The same feeling when he watched Karen joking around with Jimmy, when he saw some guy in a rest stop yelling after his kid to get him a soda. Neutered. He moved forward with greater urgency, but not so fast that he'd upset the herd. He's pretty sure what he was doing was illegal, but he wanted 2456 to feel what it was like to be free, and Jim imagined the call he'd make to Jimmy telling him about the mission, how he'd watched 2456 run across the field, his coat glistening in the moonlight.

Jim waded into the sea of animals, searching and pushing each steer aside. He'd been in for 15 minutes when he found him: 2456. "Friend," he said. "We're going to break out of here." Jim walked out of the pile, pulling 2456 by his ear tag, bumping into the other steers and waiting for them to shift their girth to let Jim and 2456 pass. He reached the gate, unlatched it, and slapped 2456 on his rear. The animal snorted, turned around, and walked back to the others.

"No," Jim whispered. "Not that way." He pulled the steer back through the gate, then ran back and closed it. 2456 just stood there, waiting to be let back in.

"What the hell is wrong with you? Go! Be free!" Jim waved his arms. "Head for the hills."

2456 stood by the gate patiently. The grass under his nose and the rump in front of him was all he could imagine. That was this poor creature's life—head down, cud in cheek, moving forward to the next station.

"The next stop is the end," Jim said, holding an imaginary gun to his head. "This is your chance." 2456 didn't heed Jim's words; just waited at the gate to be let back in and join his brothers.

Jim opened the gate and 2456 sauntered back in, steadily and nobly. "You let me down, boy," he said. 2456 didn't look back as he disappeared into the mass.

What would Jim tell Jimmy now? He had no story. He kicked cow pie off the bottom of his shoe. Jim realized that would be his story, that staying the course, no matter how bad the outcome, was the harder but sometimes nobler thing to do. That's what he'd tell Jimmy.

He inhaled, thinking how quickly he got used to the smell. He hardly noticed it.