

(check to be sure calves are in right places)

Jim JUST GAZING STARE  
LOOK

Dum-dum

From the store porch, the three men watched the strange car come, out of the south and blue like the tweed highway was blue, but not like the sky was blue, not *that* blue.

The car slowed for the railroad tracks that crossed east to west or west to east, depending on the direction of the trains passing through the dried-up town each morning, evening and night. It was morning now and the tracks ran parallel to the south side of the two-story peeling white building built like a box. The <sup>A?</sup>pecan shadetree threw still flocked shadows onto the new blue car roof and slid off the trunk as it bucked and dipped over the shined double rails and didn't pick up speed again which meant it was going to stop by the store.

The driver had the window up with the air conditioner running—engine hum always gave that away—you could tell it every time. He <sup>looked out</sup> just sat there for a minute, looking to his right and down, maybe taking money from his wallet on the car seat, maybe writing something, maybe listening to the radio or hiding a pistol.

At last, he opened the door and stepped one foot out <sup>as if</sup> like ~~he was~~ testing the spotty grass and gravel with his polished brown loafer. Then spinning round on the seat and bringing the other foot out and standing, closing the door.

“Hot already, ain't it?” said J.C., raring in the stout chair, right side of the wide doorway. Belly strutted so that the egg stain on his blue shirt stood out and read like a menu. He might have been 60, might have been 70; he was so fat you couldn't tell. Smells of cottonseed meal and fly paper or cane syrup spirited out of the dim room and mixed with the heating tar of the highway.



✓ Somewhere, a rooster crowed just to be crowing. A dog barked. A small faraway bell dinged, mimicked by a mocking bird in the chinaberry tree across the highway at the start of a dirt road flanked on the right by orange flower bushes. The shady dun road, this side of the hedge, was jamb-up straight as the sun-streaked railroad tracks.

✓ "I guess it is hot," the stranger said, stopping and gazing up at the dome of sky, then all about at the little town set down in the midst of the Southeast Georgia pinewoods. A few <sup>NEAT, SMALL</sup> ~~modest~~ frame houses, each side of the road, a white voting house the size of a playhouse, north of the store, the two separated by a strip of split-tipped smut grass, knee-high to a man. One house, centerwise on the right, was bigger and of red brick. The same everywhere you went, home of the town's bigshot.

The tall stranger stepped up the wide concrete step with smut grass growing through a long jagged crack like a doormat for cleaning your shoes.

"How y'all boys doing this morning?" he asked, packing his fine white shirt into his charcoal gabardine trousers.

"Can't complain," said Mr. Winston, a thin decrepit old man with a cane, seated to the left of the doorway.

The younger man next to him had longish curly brown hair and looked soft. "Reckon you'll be wanting a cocoaler?" Cleaning his nails with his pocketknife, he snapped it closed and put it in his pocket and heaved up from his chair with both hands on his knees.

✓ (you) The stranger didn't fool them with that "y'all" talk. He'd likely just passed through so many of these little towns in South Georgia and North Florida that he'd caught on. Funning with em maybe.

"Something cold *would* hit the spot," the stranger said, taking his white ironed and folded handkerchief from a hip pocket and mopping his jowly neck. No sweat, and his black beard had been



shaved down to a shadow. His jutted square face appeared one step ahead of his trim body, and you could comb your own hair using his glossy black hair for a mirror. He smelled of lemons or oranges—  
✓ <sup>odd</sup> strange smell for a gussied-up man, but not all that bad.

“You just passing through?” J.C. said and walked his chair out from the board wall away. The chair legs were splayed from the weight of his body. His hair was flossy and white and looked like a wig set atop his head and tugged forward.

The stranger seemed to be wearying of this waste-talk and didn't care much what they thought when he turned from the waist to take in, at a single roll-eyed glance, <sup>with the eyes</sup> this view of their sorry town.

✓ ✓ Single brick house included. Why would anybody do other than just pass through?

“Guess you heard about our president getting shot?” Mr. Winston said.

The stranger froze, long manicured fingers in the waistband back of his fine creased trousers.

“You're kidding me, aren't you?”

Mr. Winston didn't answer. He was not kidding.

“That was six months ago,” said the stranger. “But yes—the answer's yes. You'd have to be from another planet not to have heard that.”

“Shore bad, wadn't it?” Mr. Winston said.

✓ The small bell they'd been hearing faraway was growing closer, keener, as if somebody was walking, shaking it. Calves <sup>bellering</sup> blating and somebody yelling “Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie!” every breath.

“Here he comes with them calves,” J.C. said.

✓ The <sup>straw</sup> man stepped up onto the dusty but swept hardwood floor and into the stale cellar coolness of the store. Shoe heels clicking smartly.

Usually by now, the men would have told a stranger their names, asked his, to be neighborly, and asked what he was selling—shoes probably. But so far he'd proven to be unfriendly, and dense.



Mr. Winston said, "Looks like Cranford'd go on and take that bunch to the cow sale."

"Price is down, he says." J.C. rocked to the floor so he could see beyond the voting booth the skimpy herd of scrawny red calves—could have been donkeys, could have been goats, but it was cows—following the tall tow-headed boy. Middle of the road.

"Good thing ain't much traffic through here this morning," Mr. Winston said.

The stranger was now standing in the doorway, guzzling from a bottle of Pepsi. A Pepsi man. To each his own. They glanced at him then back at the boy and the calves.

✓ One calf loped off to the sideyard of the brick house and began snatching clothes from the line with his mouth, wooden clothespins snapping free and ~~dotting the mowed lawn~~ *dropping to the mowed lawn*

"Looks like your wife's wash day's bout to start over," Mr. Winston said to J.C.

"Looks like it," said the town bigshot.

The boy began alternately chasing the calf and picking up the clothes, hanging them on the line again, eyeing the side screen door and the stout woman standing there shaking her head. *You could guess*

✓ *that her purpose in life was feeding J.C. & you'd guess right,*  
All five calves looked to be about six to eight months old, and all were furry but bony, like

✓ wormy dogs with thick dull coats hiding their <sup>ribs</sup> bones. The only heifer in the herd had perfectly round

✓ white spots, *little moons* polka dots, across the saddle. Another was wearing an old felt hat belonged to the boy's

dead granddaddy-- as fine a man as ever lived in this county. The calf wearing the tarnished brass bell

✓ on a rope around his neck had a *bobbed tail* bobtail like a bulldog's. All had hay or grass bellies, but one looked like

he might burst; his legs were so short his belly almost scrubbed the pavement. The one called Dum-dum

✓ looked almost normal, if you didn't know better. Problem was, he didn't know his head from his tail. *close to*

"Old bull about needs doing away with," J.C. said.

The storekeeper Dean yawned, standing next to the stranger in the doorway. Dean stepped down and moseyed past Mr. Winston to his chair on the end of the porch. "They don't give them old bulls



✓ away, you know?" He gathered his brown pant legs at the knees and sat. The pants looked made of some kind of pajama material, not fine but worn and soft as his <sup>pale bald skin,</sup> ~~body.~~ <sup>haggard skin, Bald skin</sup>

"Well, somebody around here oughta up and offer to swap. Alton Fender maybe—he's got a bull been with the same herd going on five year now. They could swap out."

"That's a thought," said Mr. Winston. "Only Cranford and Alton are kind of on the outs."

"How come?"

They hatch up some reason, notion, story, seeming already to have forgotten the stranger, or not to care, except occasionally J.C. would scratch self-consciously at the dried egg dribble on the belly of his shirt. Looking down so that his neck folded to a raw fleshy cowl.

✓ An old old black woman came poking with a stripped magnolia stick down the road by the railroad tracks. Her black <sup>WITCH</sup> hatchet face looked almost blue in the hollows of her eyes, the seams of her mighty nose and mouse mouth. She was wearing a long rose print dress and a black shawl with fringe about her stooped shoulders and her hair was knotted back—what was left of it.

"Here comes Miss Glory," Mr. Winston said.

"After her Moonpie and R.C.," Dean finished for him and laughed.

At the highway she stopped, shaking her head and her stick at the capering calves now scattering out into the yards each side of the road. Them blatting and the boy yelling "Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie!" and chasing after them.

It took her several minutes to labor on across the road, over the apron of gravel in front of the store. Up the steps, wheezing and covering her mouth with a red rag.

"How you, Miss Glory?" J.C. said loud.

✓ "No good," she said, finally looking up. Spying the stranger in the doorway, her smeary nickel-colored eyes latched onto him.



"After that Moonpie and R.C.," Dean said. "I declare, if you people ain't crazy bout them R.C.s."

"You a mess, yo'self," she said to Dean. "Ain't he, y'all?"

"A mess," the others agreed. All but the stranger who only nodded, smelling maybe her sharp musky scent.

"Guess you heard about our president getting shot," said Mr. Winston.

"Hesh yo' mouth!" The woman clamped the red rag tighter over her own mouth.

"Yeah, over there in Dallas, riding in his car."

"They get de shooter?"

"Yes ma'am. They got him."

"Sho nuf." She hummed, shaking her balding head. "A good man, Mr. Esienhower. Do a world of good for dis country."

Nobody corrected her. The stranger quickly searched their faces: maybe they didn't know either that it was Kennedy who got shot. Dean got up and went into the store and she followed, pecking out a rhythm on the solid concrete porch floor and then the hollow wood floor of the store. Like doing her part in a rhythm band made up of the cowbell up the road, regular and rapid, meaning the calf wearing it was on the run, and the boy yelling "Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie!" which meant he was trying to get the attention of the brain-dead blatting calves.

J.C. rolled his eyes at the wall behind him. "Miss Glory, you bout to burn up in that 'lil ole shack of mine back there off the railroad?"

Her voice came muffled. "Bout to."

J.C. was speaking so loud the stranger had to ~~take a~~ step away. "Well you tell them granboys to quit busting out the screens and I'll fix em so you can open up your winders, hear?"

"Yahsuh, I tell em."



“Yeah,” J.C. said low to himself, “like last time.”

✓ The stranger stepped <sup>into</sup> the doorway again. “You boys ever hear of civil rights?” He checked each face to see if they had. Not a flicker.

Miss Glory eased out to the porch, almost stepping on the dipped hem of her rose print skirt, carrying hugged up <sup>me</sup> in bony twisted arm a banana Moon pie and her stick, the other knobby hand curled around the neck of an R.C. bottle. Sipping. The stranger had stepped to one side for her but she didn't even see him now.

Slow across the porch to the doorsteps and down, she said weakly, “Behave yo'self, Mr. J.C. Don't, I take dis stick to you.”

✓ J.C. let out a yelp, <sup>whomp</sup> rocked the front legs of the chair to the floor, guffawing and stomping both heavy work boots as if to chase after her. “Old lady, I'll take that stick from you and whip you good, you mess with me.”

“I hear you,” she said, stopping and repositioning till she had her stick going in her right hand, poking at the grass and gravel, the R.C. going in her left, and then her feet in walked-down black shoes. At the highway, she looked right and left for traffic, and on the left saw the boy chasing the calves about the yards. <sup>Dipped up</sup> Energized by her R.C., she called back, “I do wish they get shed of dem no-count cows. Gib me the heebie-jeebies.”

✓ <sup>Then</sup> “Don't look, you old hag,” shouted J.C.

The men on the porch laughed, all except the stranger.

✓ Drinking the last of his cold drink (hands looked soft as a lady's) he watched the boy and calves, now <sup>out</sup> darting about the mowed and raked dirt yards, nibbling petunias and zinnias and morning glory, <sup>the</sup> one purple-flowering vine <sup>was</sup> about to be ripped from the lattice trellis at the end of one of the porches. The woman of the house in a white apron came out on the porch with a raised broom and swung it at the calf



✓ as if to strike him. The calf just kept on eating at the vine, unraveling it from the lattice to his mouth, while Jim slapped him on the rump, hollering, "Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie!" The calf never looked ✓ behind but gradually began to back away, following Jim <sup>in reverse</sup> out toward the highway and the other four calves, gazing up and about like the stranger.

"What you think about that?" J.C. asked the stranger, who had finished his Pepsi and was now going inside to place it in the rack.

He came back to the doorway. "Inbred, huh?" He took his white handkerchief and wiped his mouth, then checked it for stains.

"That Pepsi'll leave a stain," Mr. Winston said.

The man glared at him. "You fellows must be Democrats."

"No, Masons," said J.C. and cackled out. "Yaa lordy!"

The boy had the calves grouped and going again now. His cheeky face was red and his blond curls looked darker, damp with sweat. He had on a navy T-shirt, the white letters FFA screen-printed inside a circular logo, and faded blue jeans with split and fraying knees. He was tall for thirteen—grew nearly a foot since last year. His bare feet showed no signs of quitting growing. They looked like sleds.

"Boy, put you some shoes on them feet and they'll quit growing," Dean called out when the boy got within hearing distance.

The boy looked down at his slab feet, bruised and dirty with hoof prints. "Naw," he said, "I'm wanting to see how much they'll grow. Size twelve already and I'm hoping to make it in the Guinness Book of World Records."

"Makes sense to me," J.C. said and laughed. "Yaa lordy!"

"Guess you heard about our president getting shot," Mr. Winston said.

"Daddy said something about it."



The calves were trotting alongside and behind till the boy got to the doorstep and stopped. Then they milled about like fish after bait and began butting at his groin and rump. All tails twitching except the bob-tailed one. The boy sat on the right end of the doorstep and the calf named Dum-dum sidled up to him, <sup>bellows</sup> blatting on high-volume.

“Wants a cracker, I guess?” said Dean and got up again and started through the doorway, holding to the stranger’s right shoulder for support and squeezing it. “Watch this,” Dean said, sniggering and stumping on into the store.

The stranger looked at his shoulder as if to see a stain. Like the one J.C. was working on, on the catch-all belly of his blue shirt.

They heard the clinking of the glass lid on the cookie jar, then watched as Dean came back and handed the cracker to Jim. He waved it before the calf’s walled brown eyes, then under his moist leathery nose, all that had any calf-like gloss to it except for his grass-buffed patent-leather clogs. All that showed the calf might have come from good stock, somewhere along the line, was a slight bow between the eyes to his otherwise flat face.

“Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie!” the boy yelled, almost yodeling.

The calf wheeled, full rotation, presenting his rump as if to take the cracker in through his brown puckered buttonhole.

The men on the porch whooped and beat their thighs and even the stranger had to smile at that.

The boy patted the calf’s left rear haunch proudly—pityingly?—got up with the cracker and walked around to his face and, hand under the calf’s chin, began feeding the cracker into his mouth like a baby. Catching the cracker crumbs in his dirty hand for the calf to lick clean with his pumice tongue.

“Boy’s heart’s as big as all outdoors,” said J.C. “Ain’t nothing like a big heart, my mama always said.”



"Yes sir, boy," said Mr. Winston, "don't think the Lord up above don't see you out there, morning and night, leading them calves out to the pasture, then back to the barn, to make them eat."

"Didn't, they wouldn't come," the boy said. "Besides, Daddy'd take his belt to me." The boy sat again, same spot, elbows ditched on his knees, and pushed at the rump of the calf. "Go on, Dum-dum." The calf's hooves clattered and brattled the gravel as he trotted away.

"That's the truth," they all agreed.

While they swapped boyhood stories about incredible beatings with switches, belts and razorstrops, trying to top each other, the stranger wandered out to the edge of the porch and leaned up on one of the rotting square posts above the doorstep, talking to the boy about the calves. Well, sort of—the boy did most of the talking.

An old white and rust pickup truck slow-motored toward the store, heading south. It was loaded with girls ranging from what looked like maybe eight to eighteen years of age. None pretty, none ugly, but J.C. made a big show of yelling, "Hey, Mr. Will, you need anymore baccer help, let me know.

✓ Danged if you ain't for the prettiest gals in the county!" The girls, poised on the fenders of the truck  
✓ bed, giggled and waved. "And the most gals in the county," Mr. Winston shouted, laughing. Two of the calves gathered at the tailgate when the truck stopped for the railroad crossing, and the girls hopped up and leaned over patting them on the head. The truck went on and the calves came back, girls forgotten, and the boy went on talking about the calves.

J.C. sneezed and the stranger butted in on what the boy was saying to say, "Bless you," to J.C., though J.C. doubted the man would spit on him if he was on fire.

The stranger pointed to the calf munching gravel along the edge of the road before the store. The one wearing the hat with ragged holes cut for his ragged ears to poke through, the one wearing the hat like he wouldn't be seen without it. "How do you get him to wear a hat like that?"



✓ "Who? Knob?"

✓ The boy laughed and got up and sauntered out to the calf, who looked up but kept wallowing the gravel around in his mouth, against his teeth. No matter that between the north end of the store and the voting house, close to a half-acre of green grass was so rich and sweet you can almost smell it. The hot sun seemed to draw the smell and the grass teemed with unseen locusts set to buzz on automatic. The purring of a way-off farm tractor competed.

"Bald as a baby's behind." The boy lifted the cap so that the twitchy tips of his ears were all that held it aloft above the calf's head. No hair, not a sprig, just a knob of waxy white flesh like a scraped hog's. "Burn up in this heat without no hat."

The calf named Pussel-gut—guess why?—had now ambled up to the doorstep and was lipping the stranger's hand. He crossed his arms. The short-legged calf placed both front hooves on the step, like a goat, and craned his neck trying to reach the man's face for a kiss.

From northwest of the store came a broken rumble, growing solid and loud and mean as thunder.

"Train's coming," said Dean, "better run go get Polka-dot and Bobtail off the tracks." He said it slow as if saying it might come up a shower this afternoon. Yawning and tapping his mouth with his hand.

✓ *the boy*  
Jim took off running with the other three calves trotting and swinging their anvil heads. In less than a minute, all five were on the tracks and the train was coming on, now a dull trundling braced by a bright whistle and triple toots. The boy was yelling, "Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie." But it was too late—the calves were strung out and excited, blatting and prancing east and west along the tracks with the boy stationed somewhere in between.

✓ "Let's go help him, boys," said Mr. Winston and stood with his cane, poking out. *got HUBBLING*



Spry Dean jumped off the end of the porch nearest the tracks and ran with his elbows pumping, while J.C. rose from his chair and waddled out, holding to the porch post across from the stranger.

Who only stood cross-armed and grinning, listening to the train charging <sup>up the tracks</sup> like wild fire.

Following three of the calves, the boy and Dean disappeared from view behind the store and along the western section of tracks, head on toward the screeching train, trying to brake. J.C. had the calf called Knob by the tail and was twitching him off the tracks to the dirt road running in front of the store where Mrs. Glory had earlier dissolved into the shadows with her R.C. Mr. Winston was swinging his cane at the calf wearing the brassy bell, chasing it into a patch of tasseling corn—somebody's garden—westside of the road, south of the tracks.

The freight train passed, tooting, whistling, screeching, and the engineer in his square billed gray-striped cap, waved and shouted. Not a friendly wave and you couldn't make out what he said for the racket of the train but didn't have to be real intelligent to figure it was one more warning to keep those dad-blasted calves off the tracks.

The train rumbled out, fading along the sun-streamed tracks east toward <sup>Jacksonville</sup> Deansville, Florida, and the red-faced sweating boy walked around the side of the store nearest the tracks. Dum-dum <sup>Queret</sup> and Polka Dot following close; the latter with a blooming vine of purple verbena caught in the hinging of her mouth.

Mr. Winston <sup>hobbled</sup> across the track hazing the calf wearing the bell with his cane. JC crossed the road to the store, brushing his hands on his khaki pants. The stranger now saw that he was wearing brown suspenders, which he hadn't seen before because they'd been buried in the saddlebags of flesh under J.C.'s arms. Knob, whose tail J.C. had been holding to like a rope, was now grazing from the hedge of orange flower bushes at the start of Miss Glory's road.



The sun was almost overhead now and the locusts sounded as if they'd picked up buzzing where the rumbling of the train left off, but you knew they'd been there all along and it was a settling sound following an earthquake, seemed like.

Dean stepped up suddenly on the south end of the porch, scrubbing the soles of his short brown unzipped ankle boots on the floor. "Aye, lordy! If I ain't about wore out running them calves!"

The boy was now standing at the steps again, before the stranger again. He sat at the stranger's feet, wiping his forehead and eyes with the sleeve of his navy-blue FFA shirt and staring down at a line of red ants toting cracker crumbs to their sandy mound. His calves wandered off, two to the north side of the building, grazing the rank grass like normal. Or were they munching locusts?

Everybody else was now seated in their chairs, discussing the close call with the train, which naturally led into other close calls, some closer than others.

"Wadn't that Ralph Harris had a cow hit by the train awhileago? Sued the railroad?"

"Got two-hundred-fifty dollars, they say."

"Thy lord in heaven!"

"You know, boy," said J.C., laughing disgustedly, settling into his practiced chair, sweating, "you oughta think about that."

✓ The boy looked around at him. "Naw," he said, switching his eyes to the calf <sup>ant</sup> ~~across the road,~~ Dum-dum, alongside Knob, <sup>been</sup> grazing sweetly from the orange flower bushes as if he'd just figured out what his mouth was for. "Couldn't do nothing like that." But he looked tempted.

The stranger crossed his slender, polished loafers. They had tassels like the wrecked corn in the patch across the tracks. "What'll you take for them?"

The porch full of men got so still you could hear the drink box humming and rattling inside and even the calm calves slipping grass heads north of the store.



Blue eyes glaring in his sun-pinked face, the boy stared up at the stranger. "What? My calves?"

"Yes." The stranger stood straight, pocketing his hands and jangling change and keys—could be bottle caps.

"Hey!" said J.C. "What's a man like you wanting with a bunch of crazy calves?"

"Yeah," said Mr. Winston.

"Sideshow at the fair in Macon," said the stranger, watching Dum-dum toddling <sup>back</sup> across the highway to the doorstep and <sup>hollering at the boy</sup> turning his narrow rump to the boy for a cracker.

"Go on, Dum-dum," the boy said and <sup>pushed him away</sup> slapped him on the rump. His tail <sup>The calf turned</sup> wagged side to side, <sup>to hide his drunken</sup> slapping the boy in the face. He held it down until it tucked and stayed <sup>between his legs</sup> between his legs.

"Here now, what did you have in mind?" said J.C., sitting forward in his chair. "How much?"

"Ten apiece," said the stranger without turning.

"Shoot fire! They'll bring more than that on the sale, low dollar."

"Okay," the stranger addressed the boy. "I'll make it twenty."

"Hey now," said Mr. Winston. "That ain't bad at all, at all."

"Cranford'll be glad of that," said Dean. "And you won't have to nurse them day in and day out, boy."

The boy rubbed his blonde curls forward. They sprang back into place. "I don't know. Ain't no tellings what-all they'd do to them in no fair."

"Look at it this way," the man said. "They're not going to mistreat an investment, are they?"

"Yeah," said J.C., "And we ain't gone be running em off the railroad tracks every morning and evening. Eating up gardens and clothes off the line. I'd take it and run, boy."

"Naw." The boy held out both long corded arms and examined his filthy hands.

"What you mean *naw*?" J.C. spoke up. "You better talk to your pa before you go saying *naw*."



*Back  
Girls on truck poby fem at calver  
Boy pretends he been I see her  
Will's*

"Yeah. Listen, boy, you get shed of them calves and that ill ole prissy gal <sup>up the road's</sup> liable to come around."

"Naw. She ain't studying me."

"Final offer." The stranger stepped down from the porch to the step where the boy was sitting. Dum-dum turned and plucked at his pants with his lips. The stranger pushed at his head. He slung it and butted at the stranger's groin. He stepped onto the porch again. Out of reach.

"He's taking a liking to you, mister," said Dean. "Look yonder, boy, Knob's back in Miss Jeanette's corn again."

The boy leaped up and ran and they all watched him walking on the sides of his feet along the hot highway and tip across the tracks to the pecan shade, <sup>he took</sup> take up a brittle stick and cross over into the broken corn and gently tap the calf till it tiptoed like a woman in high heels back across the tracks. At the corner of the store porch, the boy kept walking around the south side of the building and shortly showed again on the north side with a square edged shovel and began scooping up patties of manure and bearing them over to the orange flowering bushes along Miss Glory's road. When he could locate no more cow patties, he came back to the doorsteps, <sup>stand</sup> leaning the shovel against a post, and sat at the farthest end of the step away from where the stranger was standing so he could look him in the eye.

"Thirty each," he said.

The stranger laughed, started out toward his car with Dum-dum and Knob swinging their heads, following. He had to <sup>push them aside</sup> push them away to get into the car; they <sup>lay moans</sup> lipped and breathed circles of vapors on the window glass. The man started the car, air conditioning humming, laboring the engine, lowered the window staring into the wall eyes of the two calves with their heads suddenly, magically inside.

"Nice meeting you folks," he said and put the car in gear and motored out slow to keep from running over the two calves now trotting out from the grass patch north of the store.



They all followed, trotting. Brake lights flashed red. The car began to back up slowly with one of the calves backing and the others turning, following the car to its parking spot before the store.

“What you reckon he’ll offer now?” Dean said.

“Fifty, seventy five,” said J.C.

“Could be a hundred, man like that.”

The stranger hummed down his window. He laughed. “Looks like they’re hellbent on following me anyway.”

“Do, we’ll have to call up the shurf.” J.C. laughed but he wasn’t joling.

✓ The stranger was looking ~~staring~~ at his car dash, listening to the radio, turned low.

“Lee Harvey Oswald got shot,” he reported.

“Who?”

“Man who killed the president.”

“Don’t say? Who shot him?”

“Jack Somebody.”

“Jack, huh?” said J.C. “All we care, it ain’t no Jack from around here.” They all laughed.

“Forty apiece,” the man said suddenly, speaking to the boy.

“Fifty,” said J.C. “You give the boy forty, means they’re worth fifty to the fair.”

“Good point. Fifty it is—final offer.”

✓ “Sixty?” the boy asked. The calves had switched back to their loyal master, gathering. The one wanting a cookie rubbing up to him and ~~blatting~~ *bellering*.

Much mumbling on the porch. Somebody said, “That’s three-hundred dollars!”

“Fifty,” said the man.

“Still that’s two-hundred and fifty dollars,” said Dean.



✓ "How come that man name of Dean <sup>Jack</sup> to kill that Oswald? They say?"

"Crazy," said the stranger. "Like everybody else."

"Huh," said Mr. Winston. "Bet he didn't like the notion of somebody shooting our president."

✓ "Sixty," the stranger said, switching off <sup>the</sup> his radio.

"Hey, boy!" J.C. slapped his fat knees. "We got it going now! Somebody go get that calf a cracker, will you?"

"I gotta talk to Daddy first," the boy said. "Leave your telephone number and I'll get back to you."

"On the road. Heading for Macon. Can't do that."

"Boy, take him on up to the house to talk to Cranford right now before he backs out."

Dean handed the boy the cracker and he began waving it before Dum-dum's crossing eyes for him to see, under his nose for him to smell, waiting for him to turn and try to take in the treat from his hind-end; instead the calf played out his pink tongue and tasted the cracker, then gobbled it whole from the boy's hand.

"Well, look at that, will you!" J.C. boomed. "Ten minutes ago that calf didn't know his head from his tail, now he's normal as me or you. Tell me old Dum-dum here don't learn fast!"

"They don't have no bottom teeth, mister," said the boy. "You know that?"

✓ "Make up your mind," the man said. "I've gotta get on the road." He looked at the gold watch on his dark-haired <sup>left</sup> wrist.

~~OK~~ <sup>left</sup> ~~arm~~ <sup>instead of the right?</sup> "Your daddy'll have a fit, you pass up a deal like that. Three-hundred dollars'll buy a fine new <sup>Nrauel JC</sup> bull." <sup>Nobody answered & he never expected then to.</sup>

"Yeah, and when the fair comes down to Valdosta, in November, you can see them calves all you want."



✓ "Daddy's gone to town." The boy cracked another <sup>bobtailed</sup> calf on the head for biting his big toe. "How you aim to get em up to Macon?"

"Same way you'd get them to the sale," said Mr. Winston. "Ain't that so?"

"That's so." The man now had his brown leather wallet out, taking out bills. One hundred, twenties, fifties, and fives. Mouthing till the money totaled up to three-hundred dollars. He fanned the stack out the window at the boy.

The bobtailed calf walked over and tried to eat the bills. The stranger tapped him on the knob of his head.

From the porch somebody said, "Don't never name a cow, boy. They liable to up and die on you."

✓ The boy crossed over to the car and took the money, holding it high. The stranger opened his hand to shake, and the boy, already heading toward the porch, turned and <sup>grabbed</sup> it, pumping earnestly.

They all waited while the man, still inside his car, wrote out a bill of sale and a receipt for the money. He passed it to the boy along with a ballpoint pen and the boy placed it on the sun-flashed car hood and leaned over signing carefully while the calves rambled and butted him in the rump and nipped at his faded jeans.

The boy handed the papers back to the man, holding the pen high to keep Dum-dum from grabbing it between his lower gums and top teeth.

✓ "I'll be back in a week or so with a <sup>trailer</sup>," the stranger said.

"They'll be here." J.C. laughed out.

The car pulled away, with the calves trotting behind, and the boy following at some distance, calling "Whoopie, whoopie, whoopie" for them to come.

J.C. said, "That's a sad thing, giving up calves you raised."



Mr. Winston said, "That's a sad thing, our president getting shot."

*might stay here*

"Got him some money in his pockets now though," said Dean.

"Boy learned a lesson today," said J.C.

"What was it?"

"I couldn't say exactly," said J.C. "Any of y'all ever get the man's name?"

All agreed no, they hadn't gotten his name. Mr. Winston said, "Could be what the boy learned today. Likely it was on them papers he wrote out."