

Men in my America

The roads curving through central Kentucky carve up the farmland into sheltered towns and expansive estates. The horizon is all rolling hills, and the road bends to flow with the countryside. Oaks and pecan trees arch over the road, waving at drivers with leafy hands or, in the winter, with crooked fingers. The only straight line in sight, besides the farmhouse scattered in the tree line, is the occasional pine tree. Among the soft curvature and irregular angles of the Kentucky landscape, the strict vertical of a solitary pine tree appears almost sinister.

It was a pine that killed my cousin in February of 2019. The bending road must become more perilous, maybe nefarious, in the nighttime, especially for a 20-year-old driver with more piss and vinegar than blood in his veins. Dead on impact, no suffering. At least that's what the doctors told us.

We got the call late on a Thursday night and drove up the following weekend, winding along the same roads framed with the same oaks and punctuated with the same pines.

We — my entire family and many others mourners from out of town — crammed into a creaky wooden house on a hill in the most rural county in one of the most rural states in the country. This white clapboard house in Owenton, Kentucky belongs to my uncle, a cattle farmer and father of two. His hair had gone greyish silver by then, although there are still some strands of chestnut brown in his handlebar mustache, which he periodically waxes into curls throughout the day. Despite never graduating from high school, let alone university, Greg Cole resides and operates a ranch that belongs to the University of Kentucky. He assists in agricultural research but mostly he does what all his neighbors do. He wakes up at dawn to feed cattle, bail hay, and put out the dozens of figurative (and occasionally literal) fires that pop up on an unwieldy farm.

He drinks coffee in the mornings and beer in the evenings. For dinner he eats steak and potatoes while watching the local news or puzzling through advanced level sudoku books. Greg Cole, agrarian in the most Jeffersonian sense, has rarely roamed beyond the triangle of countryside between Lexington, Louisville, and Cincinnati.

Last fall he sent his oldest son to veterinary school at Auburn, where he's training to care for the cattle on his father's farm.

The spring before he sent his younger son, my cousin, to a morgue for organ harvesting. His young heart would pump in someone else's chest.

Life for American farmers, even in the booming beef industry, is characterized by exhaustion and insecurity. A lifetime of working dawn to dusk and living according to the whims of the meat market has hardened my uncle. At his son's funeral, he stood before a couple hundred of his closest friends and neighbors in crisply starched jeans and time-worn cowboy boots in the county high school gymnasium and shed slow, sparse tears. He shook a hundred hands and gracefully accepted a hundred condolences. He got up the next morning and fed the cows.

In the high school gym, where community volunteers had set out a crowd of foldable chairs to accommodate funeral services, a grandfather grieved his grandson. JW Cole ('Jay Dubya') had raised Greg Cole, trained him in the cattle business and worked alongside his son for decades. Greg and JW would talk on the phone at least a dozen times a day, discussing calf prices and Holstein weights. I've never heard them talk about much else besides the cattle accounts, but they talked *a lot* about those accounts. Wyatt, my cousin, had been next in line to join the family business of cattle-driven phone calls. The dream — three generations of Cole men, buying and trading grade A American bulls — trampled out on a rainy Thursday night.

JW's life had been entirely intertwined with the Kentucky hills and the cattle that grazed on them. Although a man of few words, JW will recount endless narratives about the various farmhouses and Protestant churches and shuttered general stores from your passenger seat, if you are kind enough to drive him from his retirement home to the stockyards. From his office behind the stockyards, he makes his phone calls to various livestock dealers. Sometimes his Kentucky drawl, thickened to molasses with age, makes his dealings sound like a different language, or maybe like a warped VHS recording, in which the tape runs slow and perpetually down-pitch.

But JW has been running Kentucky cattle all around middle America for a lot longer than the past 20 years. Long before he was a grandfather, he was a father of three. Back when he was still married to my grandmother, he was buying and selling cattle. Different digs, same hustle. In the 1970s, when my grandfather had three kids at home and worked almost every day of the year, cattle auctions worked quite differently than they do today. They didn't start bringing in the merchandise until early in the morning, and as it turns out, rounding up cattle into lines takes most of the working day. They didn't start auctioning until the early afternoon, around 3 or so. Then the auctioneer would be rattling off numbers and prices, pointing around the audience as men like my grandfather held up their hands to bid, till well into the evening. JW ate dinner at the stockyards many nights of the week, although my grandmother stuck to a strict dinner regimen of meat and potatoes, the only meal her husband would reliably enjoy.

He wasn't home very often during the working week, at least not at the same time as his kids were home, but he wasn't absent. JW has always loved to drive. (We couldn't convince him to give up his car until he was 85 and a menace on the road.) In the summers, he used to take his family for long Sunday drives along the Kentucky countryside, with all three kids piled in the

back seat of the 1976 Buick Wagon. One summer, JW loaded up his family for a road trip to the Grand Canyon, although the sightseeing was incidental to the hours spent on the interstate. He loved to be behind the wheel, but his kids resorted to a game called Jell-O, in which they let themselves slide around the backseat and crush each other at every sharp turn, to keep themselves entertained during the interminable drive.

My mom remembers him most vividly along these long drives. She also remembers, in excruciating detail, painful bouts of carsickness. My mother has always been chronically prone to motion sickness, which was not helped any by continuous games of backseat slip-and-slide, but that didn't deter her father from road trip family vacations. He just learned to keep a bucket in the back seat.

She related this all back to me while we set the table for dinner one evening. The father from her childhood worked at the stockyards, took Sunday drives, and suffered silently in his marriage until he finally filed for divorce, once he had "another woman lined up," to use my mom's words. JW moved away from the house in the hills where my mother grew up and into a trailer park in Lexington, but his new life still revolved around cattle. Buying and selling, morning and evening. His lifestyle, his intense focus on his job, could only be sustained with someone else at home, constantly accomplishing the little tasks necessary to keep a life afloat — preparing food, changing diapers, and washing the sheets. Even as the primary breadwinner, JW delegated bookkeeping to the women in his life. He cared primarily about trading the cattle, and his work's ability to support his life and his family's was beneficial but incidental.

My grandmother, Lenore Cole, managed all the family finances, a role that upended the traditional patriarchal power structure one might expect of a career-driven father and stay-at-home mother.

“It was clear from an early age that my mother called a lot of the shots.”

JW wasn't interested in power, in ruling over his wife and kids. JW's wife, then his girlfriend, and now his aides and nurses in the retirement home, serve to shield him from life — the actual logistics of living — as much as possible. This is not to say JW was uninterested in family or his kids, but he kept them at a distance, especially the women expected to furnish his convenience.

“He could never wrap his mind around the fact that it wasn't women's jobs to make men's lives easier,” stated my mom, matter-of-factly. When his long-term girlfriend died a few years back, JW asked his oldest daughter, my aunt, to drop her life as a doctor in Minneapolis and move back to Kentucky to take care of him, even though his son already resides within 50 miles. It became clear that JW was incapable of living alone after seven decades of being supported by one woman or another, and both of his daughters declined his requests to upend their lives and care for him. So, he moved into a retirement facility. At Windsor Gardens, he could depend on three square meals a day and devote his energy entirely to cattle.

We've inherited our parents' emotional distance from JW. This Thanksgiving break, I and JW's four other living grandchildren visited him in Windsor Gardens. It was a requirement, a parental enforcement placed on five grown adults, which was necessary to corral us all into a musty retirement home to make small talk with a 90-year-old practical stranger.

“Everyone, think of at least one talking point,” one cousin said in the long car ride from my uncle's farmhouse to Windsor Gardens, a drab orange brick building in the middle of

Georgetown, a forgettable suburb of Lexington. As you drive down from the hills of Owen County into the flat streets of suburbia, the curves that make backseat passengers motion sick gradually elongate into long, straight roads, littered with right angle intersections and red lights.

“Dibs on weather.”

“I would call dibs on cattle except I don’t know anything about it, so I don’t even know what questions to ask,” my brother said. Born and raised in the city, my brother and I don’t understand much of our grandfather’s world. The stockyards have always been a tourist destination, maybe an afternoon outing that inspires temporary vegetarianism.

My cousin Wyatt never felt that distance, never faced the prospect of painful, cramped small talk. Well, really, I don’t know how Wyatt felt about our grandfather; I never got the chance to ask him. But Wyatt knew cattle. He roped cattle all his life, even got a scholarship to University of Tennessee Martin for the roping team. A year or so before the accident he had started bull riding, a competition that many rodeo parents would tremble to watch their kids compete in, but not Wyatt’s parents. He was the same headstrong wild child his whole life, so his parents expected nothing less than him participating in the most dangerous rodeo competition. Flailing on the back of a bucking bull in some ways was tamer than many of his extracurricular activities. At least in the ring he was fully sober and had medical assistance on standby.

Although shocking and devastating, Wyatt’s sudden death did not strike the family as out of character. It feels difficult, treacherous even, to articulate the sense among his family and friends that his charming, bewildering, outrageous approach to life would not prove particularly sustainable. Everyone in that high school gymnasium — his hometown friends, his high school

basketball coach, his entire college roping team, old family friends — grieved with the pit of knowledge that Wyatt may have been born predisposed to a premature death. I think one of the speakers at his funeral offered a thought to the effect of “a flame that burns so bright often burns too brief.”

When we finally arrived at Windsor Gardens, we gathered around my grandfather in the lobby of the retirement home, perched in gold and blue sofas, all washed-out and positioned uncomfortably far apart, forcing each of us to speak loud and slow to across the expanse of ugly ornate carpet to ensure our grandfather could understand follow the conversation. Our circle included his aid, a nurse who sat silently throughout the 30-minute conversation, never saying a word and staring silently down at her folded hands, clearly listening intently. At first, we attempted to update him on our lives.

“I just started a new job in Minneapolis. Mom helped me move in last September,” offered one cousin.

“Okay,” my grandfather responded. His tone belied no hidden emotion or meaning. Did he not care, or did he genuinely have nothing to say?

“What’ve you been up to, Grandpa? Any big sales recently?” I said, trying a different tactic.

“Just run one up tuh Armour-Ekrich in Bourbon County. Big load uh bulls.”

“Oh, I think we went there. Great burgers,” my brother optimistically stepped out onto a rare, shared experience, but got only a blank look in return.

“A meat processing facility,” my grandfather eventually responded, then took a big slow breath before continuing. “Woman who started it used tuh work over in Fairfax, trainin’ riders. Went and started this new company with her husband. Done pretty well.”

“Oh.”

The silence stretched, the quiet made even more painful next to the riot that had been the night before. Back on the farm, where the family gathered for Thanksgiving dinner, none of us had to rummage for words to keep the conversation afloat. We sat around the tables (we needed two full tables to fit) and did the whole “what are you thankful for” around the room. A few years ago, the game of gratitude felt like a forced gimmick, but now we leaned into the rare break from the unspoken family rule to avoid outward expressions of love, which some embraced more than others. “I’m so grateful to have y’all, that we get to do this all together every year,” would be shortly followed by “I’m thankful we bought another few bottles of wine yesterday.” Greg, opting to go last, pushed himself out of his chair to a solid, stoic stance in front of the turkey. The general chatter petered off, as much as it can in a room already with a couple of bottles under its belt.

“So, y’all know we started up this fund after Wyatt’s death. We been raisin’ money, puttin’ on the rodeo, runnin’ some scholarships.” He paused to sip and stroke his mustache back into place. The chorus from my cousins started but quickly halted with a single raise of the hand. “Well, come about that we got more money in that account than we know what tuh do with. Obviously, we’ll keep up with the rodeo ev’ry year, and hopin’ to start branchin’ out with the scholarships. Already we got it in Owen County, then some in Scott and Franklin County, but we’re addin’ some down in UT Martin.” A round of nods passed around the room. “But now we got so much money from fundraisin’ that we gotta start planning for the future. That’s where y’all come in.”

He raised his hand to cut us off before he can start talking. First, he needed to get through his speech, his hopes for the scholarship fund born out of his son’s death. He told us of the board

members and the kids getting college scholarships. He told us of all the support and donations that flooded in. He wanted this to last for years. He wanted to make sure the roots he planted in the community would keep his son alive, long after he passed.

Greg Cole, a farmer through and through, understands the importance of laying down roots, of investing in a future and the community. He lives on the farm and works the land and sleeps in a house where they never lock the doors. The man who shoes Greg's horses always comes in for a beer after finishing up in the barn. His sons' friends come over for dinner once a week, even after one has died and the other has moved away to vet school. On urgent phone calls to the bank about a check cashed on a load of heifers, he always has time for a little conversation to catch up with the banker. In his work and his family and his life, he's always got his eyes on the horizon. My grandfather trods along through life, one foot in front of the other. The life of a salesman unfolds on phone calls, steady through all hours of the days, through all seasons.

JW didn't take any work calls the day of the funeral, although news had traveled quickly, so no one in a three-county radius would have phoned him. I imagine he woke up in the retirement home the next morning and went right back to work. JW and Greg have that in common. But for one day in a high school gymnasium, both men stepped back from their work to make way for grief. Greg stood in front of the memorial that took the place of a casket, shaking hands, accepting condolences, and encouraging people to donate to the newly created Wyatt Cole Fund in lieu of funeral flowers. The line to shake Greg's hand wound around the gym and out to the cafeteria. JW sat in the second row and waited for the run-off from the condolence line, allowing his old business partners to come to him.

When the line finally petered out, and the crowd of cowboys and farmers dissipated, my cousins and I helped fold all the chairs and stack them in the corners of the gym. We loaded bouquets of roses and lilies in vases shaped like cowboy boots and horseshoes into truck beds. Before we climbed into the truck beds for the winding ride back to the farm, Greg pulled each of us into his arms, locked us into his wet-eyed gaze, and thanked us. I'm not sure if he was thanking us for helping pack up the funeral or just for being alive.