

Counting Horses

We always planned to leave by sunrise. We are loaded into the baby blue 1968 Dodge Charger an hour after the sun appears. Four kids packed tightly into the back seat with the left side even more crammed due to Daddy's 6' 4" need for extra leg room. Momma has economically packed bologna sandwiches, Wise potato chips, and Chek soda for lunch as well as neatly fitting all our clothes and personal items in suitcases in the trunk. The cause of our lateness fell on Daddy's broad shoulders. (A "time challenged" person who on Sunday mornings came out to the car carrying his shoes and holding his untied tie, and still the family walked into the church half way through the priest's opening prayer). No one complained, of course, since we all carefully maneuvered the explosives around our Daddy's big temper. Tread lightly, speak rarely. I suppose Daddy was in charge of getting the Charger road-ready and mapping out our route although these two details never yielded results as smooth as Momma's packing and planning did.

This early June morning we have traded our usual Pensacola, Florida beach trip (just 10 hours from our Louisiana home) for a much longer drive up to Deerborne, Michigan to visit cousins who owned a tree farm. Why we exchanged our one week on the white sand beaches for several more days of driving and tense times and near catastrophes is a mystery only Daddy knew the answer to.

I hug the left side arm rest for the first hour of our drive and stare out my window. My five year old sister, Annie, sits to my right and has been annoying me since the day before. I vow not to let any part of my body touch any part of hers. Then Daddy says, "Why don't ya'll count horses?" "Counting Horses" is a super lame game he invented to protect us from boredom and

arguments on long car rides. Usually two people play and each claims one side of the road. You basically just look out your window and count any horses you see. This game works best on smaller country roads, but in these olden times before Gameboys and DVD players we played it on any highway. Players are totally on the honor system and our biggest challenge is to distinguish between cows and horses from a distance. Mules and donkeys count as horses. Once we reach our destination, the person with the higher number, wins. (Duh! I told you it was lame.) Sad to say, my sisters and I used to “count horses” when we drove to visit our MaMa and PaPa just 20 miles from our home. We would drive on the same Hwy. 13 every week, so the rural landscape did not change. Why in the world did we ever feel competitive when the outcome of this counting game was a foregone conclusion?? Boredom more than stupidity I cling to as an answer to this why question.

So my 7 year old sister, Geraldine, and I half-heartedly start a game of Counting Horses until Annie distracts me by singing “She’ll be comin’ ‘round the mountain” to her Midge doll and having Midge make summersaults until she lands on my lap and I swat the doll to the floor. Now Annie kicks me on her way to the floor to rescue Midge.

“Quit it!” I hiss and I return the kick as she’s squirming at my feet.

“You quit it,” Annie retorts and inadvertently elbows the back of Daddy’s seat.

“You girls better hold it down back there,” he warns.

“I see 3, no 4 horses!” Geraldine announces. “I got 14 now!!” She reaches over my older brother, Claude, who is reading a Superman comic and she makes 1..2..3..4.. counting smudges on his window.

“Hey! Idiot!” Claude complains.

I switch my attention from Annie at my feet to the vast empty fields out my horseless window when suddenly a farm comes into view and I see animal shapes. Goats? Sheep? Calves? Could they be ponies perhaps? I wipe my glasses on a corner of my shirt tail and hope a cleaner lens will change a bovine into an equine; however, my score still stands at 13. So I give Annie a small kick as she tries getting off the floorboard to squeeze back on the seat between me and Geraldine. But Geraldine has tucked her feet under her butt to sit up higher and get a better look out Claude's window because he has slapped his comic over part of the window to punish her for getting into his space to count her last 4 horses. When Annie plops into her former place, she partly plops on and twists Geraldine's left ankle. Annie's "Hey" is drowned out by Geraldine's "EwwwOwww!" which mixes with Claude's snort of laughter, and as I innocently gaze out my window, Daddy's huge hand at the end of his long arm of justice reaches into the back seat.

"Dammit!! I told ya'll to settle down!!!!" The slap goes from Claude to Geraldine to Annie and to me. Bam, bam, bam, and bam.

Of course, Annie is the only one to start crying. So Momma stops reading her Erma Bombeck book. She goes from a harsh, "Oh, Reginald," to a soft, "Annie, baby."

Since Annie's whimper got her more than she thought, she lets out a yowl as she puts a pudgy hand over a reddish cheek and she reaches for Momma who has turned around to grab her youngest child and pull her over the seat onto her front seat lap. Daddy frowns at Momma and Annie slyly cuts her eyes his way as he mutters, "Just spoiling them, Helen."

So 56 minutes into a 10 hour drive we mostly settle into our separate thoughts as Momma hums comforting sounds for Annie. The miles slip away until noon and we stop at a rest area for a pick-nick lunch and a bathroom break.

On the way back to the Dodge, I call the back seat window for my afternoon nap. As I mold myself into the slightly curved, a bit too-short, back car window, I feel the sun's warmth on the back of my neck, my butt, and my calves. Now my siblings have a bit more seat room for a couple of hours, and I have my favorite safe and cozy spot in the car, above pesky sisters and out of reach of Daddy's discipline.

In my dreams I'm counting horses (and winning!) as our car crosses the Missouri border. I feel a slight jerk and my body is forced closer to the car's back window. My eyes slit open and I realize the car is slowly ascending a very tall bridge.

"Goddammit to hell!" Dad exclaims and tension fills the car as the Dodge seems to struggle to reach the top of the bridge.

"Dear Jesus," Momma whispers loudly, and my siblings awaken from their own naps.

"Get outta that damn window, Ginny!" Daddy barks.

Then everything turns to slow motion as our Dodge starts descending backwards down the bridge. Dad is "pumping" his car horn in short bursts and somehow the cars behind us switch to the left lane as we slowly roll down the bridge. Only one other car honks angrily as it begrudgingly switches lanes, and somehow our Dodge coasts all the way down onto the highway's shoulder at the start of the bridge. Momma has been saying Hail Marys as all 4 kids watch our slow-mo backwards ride in slack-jawed silence.

"Get outta the car now," Daddy demands. "On Claude's side."

Three hours later as we kids utilize the backyard area of a good ole full-service station to play freeze-tag and hide & go seek, Momma returns from her walk to a Frost top with an unexpected treat of hamburgers and root beers.

By 6 p.m. we are back on the road to hopefully make it to a Motel 6 in Illinois for the night. We have about 40 minutes left of daylight. Since Annie and I are sitting in the middle, Claude challenges Geraldine to a Counting Horses game, and after 17 minutes the score is 7 to 9 in my sister's favor. Then lucks visits Claude in the form of Lucky Lou's Thoroughbred Ranch. Geraldine is so angry at the updated 17-9 score, she starts to suck her thumb as the sunlight fades. "I quit. My stomach hurts," she announces.

Momma and Daddy exchange quick, nervous glances, and just 7 minutes later it's "Pull over! Pull over!" from Geraldine. Annie jumps in my lap to get further from her greenish faced sister. Geraldine soon pucks in the grass where Dad found a safe place to pull over. So now we all go through our well-known family routine of tending to Geraldine's carsickness issues and she moves to the front with Momma who has found a paper bag just in case. And we all know Geraldine will have to throw up again in about 15 minutes. And this will continue because once Geraldine starts vomiting she can't seem to stop.

But what we kids don't realize is that our sister's sudden nausea will keep Dad from driving all the way to Evansville and the Motel 6 with a decent-sized pool. Now we have to stop at the first motel we see. After one more "pull over" moment, Geraldine is now pale gray and Momma soothes her with soft humming.

Then Claude helps out with, "I see a light, Dad. Motel ahead."

"Right-o, son."

We are ready ourselves for the unexpected stop, but I'm the first to realize Dad's mistake.

The Rocky Road Inn has no swimming pool!

"Daddy! Daddy! We can't stay here," I explain. "No pool."

He ignores me and the obvious flaw in our accommodations. I inwardly curse my sister's weak stomach as we pull into the 15 room rundown motel. Without the distraction of a night time swim, staying in one room with two beds, one bathroom, a t.v. that gets two channels, and a puking sister will be as much fun as counting horses.