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The Lonely House

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On Jackrabbits, Mice, Doublewide Mobile Homes, Family, and Strangers

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The lonely house saw them coming.

On any other day - any normal day - seeing them would have made the house glad. It loved company. This should not surprise you. Like most homes, the house wanted people to live inside it. It is, in fact, what it lived for - as a general rule, houses want people to fill them up like people want food to fill them up. Most people don't enjoy <u>feeling</u> empty. Most houses don't

enjoy being empty. You will find houses all over the world wired this way, and since this house was no different from any other house and had been mostly empty for a long, long time, it makes sense that it desired company.

It was so lonely it would have settled for just about any kind of company - other than the rodents. The house had more than enough rodents to talk to, from the noisy, smelly mice living in its walls to the scrawny, half-starved jackrabbits lounging underneath it. (When it comes to rodents, more than enough means too much.) The house had so much rodent company because, unlike traditional homes built on foundations buried underground, doublewide mobile homes like the lonely house balance aboveground on jacks and concrete blocks - and nothing says "Welcome Home" to rodents like a mobile home parked in a remote valley going nowhere fast with lots of available space below it.

Some of you may have never seen a doublewide mobile home before. You may have trouble imagining what one looks like, so maybe this will help: Picture an old-fashioned station wagon parked in the driveway of a mechanic's house, raised up on jack stands.

The reason this image works is because old-fashioned station wagons were so big people called them "houses on wheels." For example, you could stuff a mom, dad, two kids, grandparents - both sets - and the family dog, as well as everyone's luggage, into a 1971 Ford Country Sedan and still get the doors to close. Some car companies said their old-fashioned station wagons were big enough to carry an entire baseball team. In uniform. They said silly things like this because the car companies wanted to convince every American family they didn't need a car. They needed a mobile house. And now you see the connection: House + Station Wagon = Mobile Home.

The one thing you would notice right away about the old-fashioned station wagon on jack stands is that you could see the axles, wheels, and all its underparts, including the wide-open space below it. (It would be the same size of the vehicle or, in the case of the lonely house, a three-bedroom house.) If you hung pretty curtains from bumper to bumper to hide the jack stands, axels, wheels, and the wide-open space, you'd end up with a station wagon that kind of looked like a mobile home.

Because mobile homes do, in fact, have wheels, you might think you can get behind a steering wheel and drive one around. (Just like old-fashioned station wagons.) But you can't. Mobile homes do not have steering wheels or engines for that matter. You can move them. But you can't drive them where they're going. You tow them behind semi-trailer trucks. That's why people call them "mobile." After a mobile home finds a place to go, it's parked there and off come the tires. It sits on jack stands and concrete blocks and goes nowhere anymore until you want it to go somewhere else again. A lot of the time, mobile homes never go anywhere else again. They end up staying where their owners parked them and never leave - exactly like the lonely house, which brings us back to the rodents who lived in and around it.

Out of all the animals that occupied the house, the jackrabbits had it best. When compared to traditional jackrabbit homes (nasty old holes in the ground), the lonely house offered the perfect, most protected place for them to live, a veritable jackrabbit castle shielded from sun, wind, rain, and snow. Having a whole three-bedroom house as a roof gave the jackrabbits plenty of room to stretch out, relax and make more jackrabbits. And even though the shriveled up, boney corpse of at least one family member lay on the sandy ground under the

house - a testament to the animals who lived there, no matter how hard they tried to ignore it - in this corner of Southern Colorado high altitude plain, the jackrabbits lived like royalty.

The mice didn't have it bad either.

But try talking to animals like that - like mice, for example. It takes real effort, exhausting body and mind. Why? Because the only thing mice talk about is food and where to store it. They do not talk about anything else. Ever. There is nothing more boring than having a conversation with a mouse. The house knew this from up-close-and-personal experience, after all, having talked with the mice living in its walls. Years of fruitless conversation led it to a simple, accurate conclusion: Mouse brains - and, in fact, all rodent brains - were a taco short of a combination plate. Why? Because all they talk about is food and where to store it. They do not talk about anything else. Ever.

As to the jackrabbits, arguing bigger brained rodents guarantee improved rodent conversation - a fancy way to say <u>better company</u> - is total nonsense. Bigger brains don't help. Why? Because: Rodent! You need a lot of patience when you talk with one. Even worse, jackrabbits are rude. For example, let's say you were chitty-chatting away with a jackrabbit while visiting the lonely house, talking about something fine and tasty like, say, Marmite on buttered toast with bacon and eggs for breakfast, a regular staple on the family's breakfast table when they stayed there. (And something the lonely house wished it could have experienced.) Right in the middle of your conversation, as the words fell out of your mouth, the bigger-brained rodent would have run off, scampering to its castle under the house or jam-cramming its bendable bones into the cozy and warm engine compartment of a car parked nearby. The point being: Conversation over. Why? Because: Rodent!

The house had little patience for the company or conversation of jackrabbits and mice these days. It wanted people company. Human company. The kind of company meant to live inside it and fill it up.

People were coming, it's true, but not the kind of people the house had in mind, the kind which made it feel content, giving it purpose and meaning. It would never see them again. It wanted to - more than anything else in its whole-house world - but the family had said goodbye and so had the house and that was that.

Nothing gets more final than "and that was that."

It was sweet, tender and over in a heartbeat - fast, as goodbyes go. They shed tears. They laughed. They said goodbye. One family member gave the house a final, lingering caress. Then they walked to their cars.

That last touch had felt good, so very, very good - if the house were a cat, it would have curled itself into the caress and purred. But it wasn't a cat and it couldn't purr and they all got in their cars and drove away. None of them looked back. The house kept looking (and waving) until it couldn't see them anymore. (It always waved when the family left, waved and waved and waved until it couldn't see them anymore.)

This means the people coming were strangers. The thought of strangers excited the house a little. It also sent shivers down its floorboards.

It studied them as they came, a line of rusty, grubby trucks, six in all. Two of them pulled flatbed trailers. A skid loader and an excavator were strapped to them, lashed down with chains. The truck in front had a metal arm in its truck bed. It stuck straight up and bent at the elbow. Its

forearm hung over the cab and a metal hook attached to a cable dangled from it like a fishhook on a line.

A crane of some sort, the house realized. Heavy equipment. Made for demolishing things, no doubt about it.

The trucks bumped up-and-down and wobbled side-to-side as they sped along Eddy Grant Avenue, a dirt road more than a half mile away.

When they first appeared, the house thought they looked like ants marching out of the hole at the top of an anthill, lined up, one behind the other. The house thought this because the trucks had crested a hill. The road dipped below its field of vision, following the contour of a long, straight and steep incline that led to a crossroads at the bottom. The house couldn't see this part of the road, but it had studied maps the family had left out, so it knew what lay beyond what it couldn't see. If you turned left at the crossroads and drove for a little while, you'd run into the paved highway. It led to the small town of Coppercliffe, fifteen miles to the north.

A wall of shortgrass grew along the roadside, high enough to conceal the lower half of the trucks. Thick clouds of angry dust hid their top halves. This created the illusion of invisibility. Intermittent flashes of spinning rubber tires, rusty metal, and windshield glass seen through the spaces in between stalks of grass and whirling dust revealed the truth. They were in there somewhere and they were coming pretty darn fast. The dust had a red tinge to it, so deep and dark it could have been Martian. Or blood, and once it blew up and away from the convoy, it left a cursive trail in the pale blue sky, evidence the Bone Valley winds had taken the day off and the strangers were coming. But even if all the grass and dust somehow made them invisible for real, all you had to do was look up. The clouds of red dust written in the sky gave them away.

The truck in front had a crack in its windshield. It went from one side to the other like a zigzagging lightning bolt and caught the early morning sunlight, refracting it. This made the house squint and it did it the way it always did - like Clint Eastwood. (The house loved a movie called Paint Your Wagon, a musical western starring Eastwood as a young man. The actor squinted a lot in the movie, as he often did, and he sang a pretty song called "I Talk to the Trees." When the house squinted, it often hummed the tune. Sometimes it squinted so hard it didn't hear its humming or know it hummed at all. It did it without thinking, an unconscious habit it created after years of being alone.)

The house peered through its Clint Squint now, sharpening its vision. It saw the strangers and their trucks better and decided then and there it did not like the look of them at all. It did not feel like humming "I Talk to the Trees."

But this came as no surprise. It knew they were coming. It knew their intentions - prepared for their arrival, let's say. Or as prepared as a doublewide mobile home can be for such a thing. It had guessed they might look like what they do - not that they were bad people because of it. They were men and women who worked hard to make a living, that's all, and the line of scratched-up, dented-up, used-up trucks it saw coming its way proved it.

As they got closer, the house had a sudden and startling thought. Maybe it wasn't prepared for this. When the time came - not long from now, it figured, shouldn't take too long - maybe it wouldn't be prepared enough. Maybe it couldn't be prepared enough, no matter how hard it tried.

That thought shook the house to its axels and concrete blocks.

It had to get a hold of itself. It had to get a grip. It did not like feeling sorry for itself. The family would not have approved and, frankly, neither did it. It would rise above fear. It would face the strangers and their intentions and put its trust in the Good Lord Almighty, creator of doublewide mobile homes, the strangers and everything else. (The family had told it so and the house believed them.)

It took a deep, steadying breath. It steeled itself for their arrival.

The Bone Valley

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Before the house saw the strangers and their trucks, the world around it stood so still the countryside looked like a landscape painting. (Nothing stands stiller than that - other than maybe Living Statues. Ever seen one of them? People pretend to be statues. They try not to move a muscle. They do it for a little while - as long as they can before their muscles give out - and then they have to take a break.) No trucks plugged along rutted dirt roads. No handlebar-mustached cowboys on horseback tended cattle. No ranch hands zoomed around on noisy ATVs, kicking up dust. No birds flew. No bugs buzzed. No wind blew. Nothing seemed to move at all.

A stillness like this is uncommon in the Bone Valley. When it happens, it's so warm and comfortable the valley slumbers - it's as if it's in bed and does not want to get up. It might even try to wish itself to sleep, pulling the sheets up around its head. If the alarm clock rang, it would

do what you do when you want to sleep in: Press the snooze button, turning it off so it could get an extra ten minutes of stillness in before it had to get up, make coffee and go to work. For the valley, and anyone who has slept in like that, it is absolute bliss. Since it doesn't get to do it very often, profound and satisfying tranquility comes with it.

If you ever get to experience a day like this in the Bone Valley, soak it in. Enjoy it as much as possible. That's what the valley does and that's what the house did, and that is exactly what it was like before the house saw the strangers and their trucks. Still tranquility prevailed over miles of empty, treeless, grass-covered plain. The wind would return, of course, and when it did, it would ring like an alarm clock (without the benefit of a snooze button), blasting the tranquility to smithereens.

As you may have guessed, the Bone Valley does not get a lot of rest from the wind, and now you may wonder why. It’s not the wind’s fault, really. Blame it on the valley’s shape. Have you ever seen a halfpipe? Snowboarders ride on them and do cool tricks. The tricks have cool names too. “Double Frontside 1080,” for example, a difficult trick snowboarder Chloe Kim absolutely crushed on a halfpipe. The Bone Valley is a natural halfpipe. The northern and southern winds blow through it like competitive snowboarders. They do tricks like the “Tornado Funnel Double Frontside 1080 With A Hurricane Twist,” “Backside 10^{100}," and the "Haakon Williwaw Flip In A Halfpipe So Big It's Crazy," to name a few. The Bony Valley even has a famous trick named after it. Cattle ranches dominate the valley floor, which means thousands upon thousands of cows live there. Because it's open range land, the cows roam wherever they want. When one of them dies, days and even weeks can pass before a ranch hand finds it. This gives the wind time to do a trick the ranchers call "The Bone Valley Cowabunga." By the time

someone finds the carcass, the wind has peeled the skin from its bones. In fact, an astonishing assortment of windswept bones litters the valley floor. Take a walk anywhere and you will stumble over the bones of cows, coyotes, gophers, ravens, and on and on.

A natural halfpipe it may be, but the valley is not flawless. Unlike a sculpted halfpipe for snowboarders, the floor of the Bone Valley is not smooth and uniform. It has wide parts. It has narrow parts, and the narrow parts help kick the wind speed up. (Wind has to go faster to get through narrower places.) The ground has something to do with it too. If you stood where the lonely house found itself parked, you'd see that the valley floor appears to roll west to east or vice versa. (Depending on which way you look.) It goes up and down and up again like heavy swells on the ocean - except this ocean is made of rocky stuff like siltstone, sandstone, conglomerate and lava deposits. Turns out, ground shaped like that is snowboard wax for the wind. It makes it go even faster.

If you look east, the rocky "swells" on the valley floor appear to roll into a gathering of hills called the Weeping Mountains - the eastern wall of the halfpipe. They act as a sort of breakwater that stops those rolling plains dead in their tracks and they can roll no further. The Weeping Mountains rise from the eastern prairie on the southeast end of the Central Colorado Volcanic Field, foothills to the mighty Rocky Mountains.

On the other side of the halfpipe - the western wall - the swells roll into Los Ángeles de la Guardas, a mountain range made of hard siltstone. It has ten snowcapped peaks over 14,000 feet, decorated with thousands of aspens and evergreens.

When you put all that together, you end up with the Bone Valley, an enormous natural halfpipe that produces almost (but not quite) constant high-velocity wind. Thanks in large part to the wind, it's also a boneyard.

To the house, the Weeping Mountains looked like a lumpy plateful of Granny's freshly baked homemade scones, after you wet them and then squashed them together with your hands. They're covered in trees (the Weeping Mountains, not Granny's scones), but the pinyon and bristlecone pine never have a chance to grow tall because the high altitude keeps them short. Then the ruthless Bone Valley wind goes to work on them, twisting them into origami pretzels. (Some trees look like people turning away as they try - and fail - to shield themselves from the wind.) A tree line marks the place where the Weeping Mountains end and the Bone Valley begins. No tree crosses the line. They stand shoulder to shoulder like soldiers ready for battle, glaring at the siltstone giants that tower above them on the other side of the valley.

The Rocky Mountains stretch about 3,000 miles, north to south. They set out from Alaska, stomp through Canada (two territories and two provinces) and end up all the way down in the American southwest (trampling through seven states in the contiguous United States, one of which includes Colorado). The second longest mountain range in the world, they pride themselves on being some of the most impressive, gigantic mountains on the planet.

The Los Ángeles de la Guardas is part of that giant family and the house (and the Weeping Mountains) knew they were real giants, wide-awake and watchful. The house also knew they were dangerous. Why? Because: Giants! Even so, it sensed they were, by and large, good-natured. Yes, you had to be very, very careful around them and treat them with a great deal of respect - the house was certain about that - but it trusted them. Having them nearby made it

feel safe too. They were so big and beautiful, the house found itself looking at them all the time. It had all sorts of questions about them. Did they dream? Did they eat? Did they think about doublewide mobile homes? (The house doubted it.) Did they see the Weeping Mountains like it did, as a mound of squashed up, gooey scones? (If so, perhaps that explained the rumblings that came from them every once in a while. They were hungry giants.) Did the Weeping Mountain ghosts scare them? Or did the scary stories make the giants scoff and say what (almost) everyone else said: In the summertime, the Weeping Mountains generate heavy rainstorms with howling wind and it sounds like people weeping, which explains their name.

The house had heard otherwise, of course. The family told an older story. It explained how the Weeping Mountains really got their name. The house believed it.

It went like this. Listen:

Long ago, pioneers traveling from Kansas in horse-drawn wagons fought their way up the eastern side of the Weeping Mountains, a caravan one hundred wagons long. There were no roads to follow back then, so they broke trail with machetes, ropes, mules, horses, and bare-knuckled human strength. When they got to the top and looked into the narrow valley below - and saw what lay on the other side, a series of giant-sized mountains stretching as far as the eye could see - the pioneers dropped to their knees and cried to God for mercy. You might wonder why they did that instead of jumping up and down for joy. They got to the top, after all. Yay! Going down should have taken them half as long as it took them to go up - but, no. Sometimes it simply isn't as simple as you might think it should be and here's the proof: The climb up had been long and perilous, taking many weeks to accomplish. Men, women, and children had died. Livestock and provisions had been lost. To complicate matters, their timing (and planning) could

not have been worse. They arrived in late fall, which meant winter weather would arrive sooner and not later.

When they got to the top of the Weeping Mountains, they carried all that terrible knowledge with them. And then? They saw the mountains on the other side (known today as Los Ángeles de la Guardas).

In a way, the Rocky Mountains were the physical manifestation of truth - an absolute truth that crushed their spirit and broke their hearts. The sheer size and weight of all that impossible geology shattered whatever hope they had left. It utterly convinced them that nothing, no human or animal or wagon train, could get over those mountains - certainly not before snow fell. (The thought of crossing the Rockies in the dead of winter did not enter their minds.)

What in the world were they to do? Staying on top was out of the question. Winter would not have allowed any of them to survive. No, they had to go down, one side or the other. Into the unexplored valley, a shorter journey, or the way they came up, a much longer, much more dangerous journey because the way they came up would be far more dangerous to go down. Even worse, it meant they would pass the graves of the recent dead, a bad omen, to be sure.

If you were a pioneer stuck on top of the Weeping Mountains and had to choose, which way would you go? Return the flatlands of Kansas or gamble on the big valley?

Now, as you know, the valley is a natural halfpipe. As valley's go, however, it isn't very big in the sense of width, but it does run for miles and miles, north to south. What it amounts to is, it's a looong halfpipe, which makes it seem bigger (or wider) than it is. If the pioneers had given it half a chance, they would have discovered the valley was plenty big enough for all of them, and not only that, perfect for high altitude ranching and farming.

As it turned out, they did not make one choice. They made two.

A handful of pioneers chose to risk the journey into the valley. Those who did fared better than the friends and family they left behind. It’s true some of them died of illness and accident on the way down, but most survived. And like the rolling plains themselves, they went no further. Those pioneers - about 100 in all - set deep roots in the valley. Their decedents still live there.

The pioneers who refused to gamble on the valley - the second choice - numbered about 400. They said they had had it, and having had it meant they died on top of the Weeping Mountains or on the way down the eastern side - every single one. This means the mountains house 400 graves. (That we know of. It's an estimate, but covered wagons typically carried the belongings of five people.)

By now, you may have guessed how this story ends. (This was the house's favorite part.) When the wind blows from the east during a rainstorm in the summer, the sound you hear blasting through the trees on the hillsides is not the sound of wind at all. It's the wailing of the dead pioneers. It's 400 screaming ghosts!

That’s the true story of how the Weeping Mountains got their name.

If you asked the house, it would have told you - without a bit of a lie - it had heard their eerie wailing many times. It had seen their ghosts wandering the hillsides. It had felt their howling wind beat against its walls. Yes, it had seen and heard many strange and unexplainable things over the years in the Bone Valley. The wailing ghosts of the Weeping Mountains were not close to the strangest and most unexplainable. But they were the most constant.

Strange and Unexplainable Things

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The Weeping Mountain ghosts may have had the monopoly on scary ghosting, but four nice ghosts haunted the house and the land around it. They were the spirits of deceased pets and the house found their company very pleasing.

Whose pets were they? The family's, of course.

They often brought their pets with them when they stayed at the lonely house. On four occasions, the pets died there. These were terribly sad moments for the family. As you have no doubt heard, or may have even experienced, losing a beloved pet is like losing a member of your family - a brother, a sister, a mother, a father - and so it was with Zeus, Thor, Tonka and Rudy. The family cried when they died (and so did the house). They buried them on the land and built cairns over their gravesites to honor them. (Tonka had a cairn to mark his gravesite, but the

grave did not have a body in it.) The family never saw their ghosts, but to the delight of the house, it saw them all the time.

Three were dogs: Zeus, Thor, and Tonka.

Zeus never moved. Or rather, the dog moved only when it had to, something it tried not to do as often as possible for its entire life. Because of that, when the house first saw the old, fat, shaggy Golden Retriever, it mistook him for a stuffed animal. (Even as a young dog, Zeus looked old, fat, and never moved.) Thor, on the other hand, had lots of bulging ropy muscle, an active, lean and mean-looking Rottweiler. The family nicknamed him “a muscle of love” because Thor did not have a mean bone in his body and would have much rather been a lap dog. The devilish pug, Tonka, had bulging googly eyes, wonky back legs (they started to give out when he got old) and polyphagia (from birth), a medical term for “excessive appetite.” Never not hungry, Tonka had no shame about it. He would have sold his doggy-mother for a scrap of fake bacon, and he would have done it repeatedly and without hesitation, if given the opportunity. And, finally, Rudy, the Fire Mouth Cichlid - six inches long with incandescent red, blue and green scales, a beautiful freshwater fish, perfect for a small tank you carried around. Rudy went everywhere the family did during his rather short but wonderful life.

Zeus and Thor died of old age. Even though their deaths happened years apart, they died at the lonely house in a similar way. One afternoon, they pulled themselves up, stretched their long canine spines, shook the dust from their hair, said goodbye to each family member with a cold muzzle nuzzle or a lick, and went for a walkabout (as the Aussie’s like to say). They sniffed and dug and peed in all their favorite spots, then curled up for a lovely afternoon nap and never woke up.

Like Zeus and Thor, age had caught up to Tonka, but he did not die of old age. Tonka died of owl. One moment, the happy, old pug barked away like mad as he hobbled after a poor, skinny Jackrabbit. Next moment, the pug went silent and vanished from sight. For half a second, the family (and the house) did not understand what had happened. When they heard his yapping coming from the sky above, everyone looked up and could not believe what they saw. The sun had set, but the last bit of twilight revealed Tonka in the talons of a Great Horned Owl, the sole owl in the area. The owl flapped its enormous wings - woosh, woosh, woosh - and disappeared into the night, no doubt anticipating pug for dinner. The little dog dangled below its talons, snarling and fighting every flap of the way. No one ever saw Tonka again. (This explains why his grave had no body).

Rudy's death had an even more unusual element to it. When he arrived at the lonely house (in a round fishbowl), the fish swam upside down. His swim bladder - the thing that kept Rudy buoyant and right-side-up - had somehow moved from where it was supposed to be to where it wasn't supposed to be at all. The fish could swim and eat, and stay alive, but he remained upside down the whole time. It seemed clear to everyone that the fish felt and struggled with pain. After a somber family discussion, they decided Rudy's time had come. They wanted to do the right thing and put him out of his misery in the most humane way possible. That meant: No bashing his fish head against a rock (as lots of people who catch fish do - it's common and considered humane because it kills the fish quickly) and no chopping his fish head off (which kills fish even faster). Nothing like that would happen. Why? Because the family had prepared for this moment by investing hours of valuable lifetime researching the Internet on "how to kill a

small pet fish in the nicest way possible." Thus, they knew precisely what to do, and so this is how Rudy the fish finally died:

The Internet told them to place the fish in a plastic bucket filled with a small amount of fresh water, so they did. Then they took the bucket with the fish in it outside (in case Rudy got excited and splashed around - nothing to worry about, it's normal, part of the dying process, the Internet said). Once outside, they added alcohol to the water, preferably a pricey vodka. The family hadn't brought any vodka with them on this trip, but someone had packed a gallon bottle of sake. (For those of you who don't know, sake is a Japanese alcoholic drink made from rice. It's served hot or cold and tastes like bitter wine. In other words, it tastes as good as licking the bottom of your shoe after you stomped on a pile of dandelions.) The Internet said alcohol would make the fish tipsy (another word for happy) as it suffocated to death. You cannot get more humane than that.

Rudy did not agree.

The fish did not like swimming and breathing in sake at all. He thrashed and fought for his life (upside down), and the more he thrashed and fought, the more the family felt compelled to pour sake into the bucket until they emptied the entire bottle. This meant Rudy swam in 10% water and 90% sake and it led to a violent, ugly and upsetting death for Rudy and the family, so upsetting, in fact, one family member (a parent) could take it no longer and reached into the bucket, pulled Rudy out by the tail and bashed his head against a rock. When the fish did not die, someone ran to the kitchen, grabbed a carving knife and chopped off his head. Even then, it appeared as if the fish still lived! Its mouth opened and closed. Its tail - separated from its head by at least six inches - flapped back and forth. This absolutely horrified the family and, at that

point, no one knew what to do. Tonka did, however, and saved the family (and poor Rudy) from any more pain. (The house secretly helped too. It opened the door and let the voracious pug out.) Freed from the house, Tonka ran to the family to see what all the fuss was about, saw two pieces of tasty fish flapping on the ground and gobbled Rudy down in two seconds flat.

And that's how Rudy died and came to haunt the house with the dogs.

Zeus and Thor haunted the house when the family showed up in the summertime. They greeted them by barking and jumping. The family never felt or saw any of this, but they... sensed it. Tonka showed up sometimes, coming from wherever the owl had dropped his body after finishing him off, the house assumed. Rudy's appearances were rarer. When he haunted the house, he swam through the air upside down. He had a whole body (not two separate pieces) and the house thought it had never seen a happier fish.

If you were a lonely house and you were haunted, you couldn't ask for better ghosts. But they were ghost pets and ghost pets aren't like living pets. Why? Because: Ghosts! Strange and unexplainable things happen to things that are dead. Sometimes they're here. Sometimes they're not. Sometimes they're see-through and sometimes they look normal. Ghost pets are unpredictable and elusive, at best. That's why they do not make very good pets. (Try petting one and you'll understand.) And, worst of all, the house could not have a conversation with any of them. It could hear the dogs bark, but when the house tried to talk to them in a deeper, more meaningful way, they tended to disappear. Sometimes they'd be gone for a long time. This left it feeling as lonely as ever, which is how it felt all the time, not at all unusual or unexplainable.

That the house witnessed strange and unexplainable things like this makes sense. Popsie - the eldest member of the family and the one who put the house there - parked it in one of the

most isolated and empty places anywhere, and places like that have real power. It can crush the most stoic among us - just as the sight and weight of the Rockies crushed the spirit of the pioneers. People who say they put their hands on their hips, throw their heads back and laugh in the wide-open face of loneliness? Crushed like empty Coke cans. They end up feeling more isolated and empty than ever before, and given enough time, they'd start to see and hear strange and unexplainable things too. Not because they were driven crazy, which happens sometimes to people left alone for long periods of time in isolated, empty places - but because the kind of isolation and emptiness the house lived in was so isolated and empty it revealed hidden, secret things you didn't know were there. Real things. Like weeping ghosts wandering through shadowed hillsides. Like ghost pets.

Now, some of you might assume living in the middle of the valley, exposed to... everything the way it was, helped make the house feel the way it did. How could it not be lonely? This assumption is incorrect, even though it is reasonable to think it might have thought this way. The house, in fact, loved where it lived. Or perhaps a better way to say it is, it took a little while for it to realize just how happy it was living there and when it did it was never unhappy about living there again. Not that unhappiness had consumed it from the beginning or anything like that, but a few years after it came to life it realized the wind hardly ever stopped blowing, especially in the summer, the winters were cold, harsh and endless, and more often than not it found itself empty of people. The house understood loneliness from a young age. Despite that, one morning it imagined the family inside it cooking eggs and bacon on the gas stovetop and brewing strong coffee. (A dark French Roast, the house's favorite. It smelled like a campfire

with an old mattress smoldering on top, a smoky, acrid smell the house adored.) From then on, the house knew it loved where Popsie had put it and could not imagine living anywhere else.

It's fair and right to say it was born to be there.

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Knowing all that, you would think the trucks with the strangers in them might have made the house feel a little less lonely.

But, no. Not today.

Living in the middle of the Bone Valley is better than living with the wailing ghosts wandering through the trees on the Weeping Mountains, the house said to itself. (Since it had no one to talk to, it talked to itself, of course.) And having windblown fields of wild shortgrass all around is awful nice too. The grass is so beautiful.

The house did not lie and it did not exaggerate. If it said it found the grassy fields around it beautiful, it meant it. In fact, the house loved the grassy fields and could not remember not loving them. When it learned their various names, it fell in love with them too: Big Bluestem. Buffalo Grass. Switchgrass. Blue Grama Grass. Rolling fields of wild grass laid out like Amish quilts for no one but God to see. (Or anyone in a plane.)

But such a mixed bag of shortgrass! the house said. And, if you think about it, it's all pretty darn tall for shortgrass too.

It made an old joke. As usual, the house laughed at it, but in a way it hadn't laughed in a long time. Loud, and it all came from the belly. Rich, satisfying and pleasing laughter, deep in tone and - in the moment - pure and undiluted as laughter can be. (If you had been there and listened in the right kind of way, pressing your ear to the vent in the floor, you might have heard

its laughter echoing through the ventilation ducts.) There were carefree notes in it too, free of irony, so its laugh sounded the way it used to when it was young.

I mean, boy oh boy, I bet the shortgrass this summer is, what, four feet tall? Ha, ha, ha! Shortgrass all my window-eyes and Betty Martin!

For those of you who don't know, that's a funny old saying. The house loved the funny, old sayings people said. It adapted them to fit its reality. In the case of "all my eye and Betty Martin," a peculiar saying the family often used, the house quite naturally picked it up. It added "window" to "eye" because, of course, its eyes were its many windows. It made "eye" plural because it had 360-degree vision. (Most houses do.) It had no idea who Betty Martin was, but since her name came with the funny, old saying, it said her name just like the family. Did the family know a Betty Martin? The house didn't think so.

With its many window-eyes looking at the fields of shortgrass now, it saw millions and millions of golden stalks standing straight up. They bent at the tops - just a little. Most days, the wind bent them so far sideways they very nearly touched the ground, but today a warm, tender breeze blew through the valley. It kissed their grassy tops and bent them - just a little.

It is a gentle day, the lonely house concluded and then fell into thoughtful silence. It watched the breeze snake through the (tall) shortgrass. It felt a moment of real contentment. Under the circumstances, a pretty amazing feat. Yes, and that's good. A gentle day. As it should be on a day like today.

The house filled with a sudden sense of wonder and thought it might write a poem. It did that sometimes. When you spend most of your life alone in a solitary place like the land where the house lived, the mind tends to wander, filling the loneliness with whatever it wanders into.

For the house, it often wandered into poetry. The family called poetry sentimental and stupid, and they were probably right, but the house wandered into it anyway. Frankly, it had little control over it. The house had a poetic soul. That being the case, it thought it might compare the gentle wind blowing through the (tall) shortgrass to sun-drenched ripples in a pond. That is what it thought it looked like: Golden, shimmering, sun-drenched ripples blown by the wind.

Naturally, a poem began to form.

Shortgrass, shortgrass
You grow so tall
Why do they call you
Shortgrass at all?
You bend in the wind
Like a golden reed
You're so dang tall
I think you're a Swede!

Before it got any worse, the house decided to stop. It may have often wandered into poetry because it had a natural inclination toward it, drawn to the poetic muse like a bee to a flower, but that didn't mean it was any good.

'A Swede?' Really? Dang it.

It sighed. If it had shoulders, you would have seen them rise on the inhalation and then drop down on the exhalation, as if heavy boulders balanced on them and pushed them down hard and fast. An airy sound would have come with the exhalation, from deep within its house-lungs. Some of you have seen a sigh like this before. Charlie Brown sighs like that in his cartoons.

After it sighed, it turned from the east and what was coming - the strangers in their trucks - and focused on the wall of 14,000 foot mountain peaks. That simple act - turning and looking and seeing the Colorado Rockies - brought it down to an even quieter place than it had been

before. It silenced every thought, including its bad poetry muse. The Los Ángeles de la Guarda Mountains do that to you. They'd been doing it to the house ever since its birth, twenty years ago (or so).

A lifetime ago, the house thought.

Popsie, Granny, and Lifetime

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Twenty years (or so) may not sound like much to you, but in doublewide mobile home years, it's a long time. Do the math. Convert doublewide mobile home years into human years. You see? The house was an octogenarian! (Well in its eighties.) Popsie, the oldest member of the family, was also an octogenarian. When he died, he and the house were about the same age. The two of them had a deep, familial connection, a prime example of the wonderful, mysterious bond that can form between people and nonpeopley-things.

Popsie had wild white hair. It grew out of his head like strings on a wet, heavy-duty mop - after a jolt of electricity shocked its way through it. (Mop-head strings shoot out and wiggle when electricity passes through them. Popsie's hair shot out and wiggled all the time.) The house

loved his hair, but it loved his face even more. It thought he had the kindest face it had ever seen. A considerable hooknose sat right in the middle of all that kindness and a trim white mustache hung below it like a welcoming pub sign. His nose and mustache worked so well together, the house wondered if he'd been born with both. (It scoured his photographs, but never saw baby Popsie with a mustache.) He had piercing eyes - and not in a bad way. Nor did he want his eyes to pierce anyone. Had someone told him they did, he would have pressed his lips together in a generous smile (without showing his teeth). Laugh-dimples would have formed on the sides of his mouth, so understated you might have questioned whether you saw them at all. (But you did, of course, because you remembered seeing them.) And then he would have dismissed the whole silly idea by looking away, toward the mountains. He stood a little shorter than medium height, having lost an inch or two because of his age. (Granny said time had gathered itself around him and shrunk him like Shrink Wrap.) He had a slim frame, lean as a stovepipe, but a small, round tummy stuck out like a cast iron potbelly stove. His hands were extra-big and hard-work calluses lined his palms. He had Snickers Bar fingers, each one square and thick. Soft-spoken, slow to anger and even slower to speak, as you might suspect with a person like this, his generous (and quiet) smile often formed under his hooknose and mustache. It happened all the time, a reflection of his gentle nature. His smile calmed everything around him.

One day, during a rare moment of solitude, the house saw Popsie outside, leaning against a post. (When the family stayed at the house, they spent every minute together they could. There weren’t many opportunities to spend time alone, let alone find a moment of solitude.) He chewed on a stalk of (tall) shortgrass, rolling it between his fingers. He did this in a slow and meditative manner - the Rocky Mountains had his full attention, you see. This explained the wistful look in

his eye, which would return again and again over the years. The house saw it every time he stared at Los Ángeles de la Guardas. (Those wakeful, watchful giants called to him.) But the house saw the wistful look for the first time when, all alone, Popsie leaned against the post. It didn't know how long it watched him. It had lost its sense of time. It remembered the sunset. The mountains had turned a coal black and the entire sky above their serrated peaks burned as if it were a forest on fire, an intense orange with floating sparks in it. His eyes burned with the same kind of light. Popsie's irises glowed with internal fire, and it took the house's breath away. At that moment, it understood two things about itself and Popsie: 1.) It looked at him the way he looked at the Rocky Mountains. And 2.) All he needed was a hat and a horse and he could have ridden into the sunset, a cowboy born under a wandering star.

The house never forgot the moment or the image. It thought of Popsie as a wistful, wandering cowboy (with fiery eyes) from then on.

Granny, the Great Maker of Scones, had been married to him for over 50 years. Like Pospie, she had a full head of white hair but cut short in an up-do like Audrey Hepburn, a beautiful movie star from the 1950s. The house convinced itself Hepburn and Granny were distant relatives. They looked alike. Age did not and could not conceal the delicate structure of her face, which the house believed gave Audrey Hepburn a run for the money in the beauty department. Granny stood at an even five feet. In her youth, she had the petite frame to go with it. Time, life and a gaggle of children altered that, and bit by bit she turned into the Granny the family knew and loved: A tiny grandmother with a round, cuddly middle and arms and legs as thin as toothpicks.

If Popsie had the kindest face the house had ever seen, Granny had the biggest heart it had ever known. Her love fell as easily as a rain shower in springtime, one that never stopped. It soaked into everyone and everything, including the house and even her food. (Granny's food didn't taste delicious. It tasted so good you fell in love with it.) When she stayed at the house, she brought the kitchen to life and enriched the lives of everyone lucky enough to partake in her cooking. The house wished it could have sampled some of it, like her scones, for example.

Oh, but I have been blessed, it said, and a flood of happy memories rushed in and swirled around its heart.

It remembered how well the family had treated it. It remembered all the things they did to it to make its life better.

For instance, they made it a wooden jacket, designed to protect it from the Bone Valley wind and weather. (Even though Popsie had picked the perfect place to park the house - on a giant, strong slab of rock that gave it a solid foundation and an awe-inspiring view of the Rockies - he and the family built the deck for extra protection, which the house appreciated very much.) The deck went all the way around the mobile home. Popsie rounded its corners because he didn't like sharp, sudden edges. Its corners were like him, gradual and bendy. He set railroad ties on the deck every six feet. Stood them up like tent poles. They helped keep the deck down (during high winds) and hold the deck roof up. (Have you ever seen the rectangular pieces of wood underneath train tracks? Railroad ties. They hold the tracks together. They're thick, strong and very heavy, and trains chew them up and spit them out like awful tasting candy. Dents and gouges cover every inch, the visual evidence of the grinding and crushing pressure of train teeth. Popsie used old ties like that to strengthen the deck and to landscape the house.) The deck's

southern corner had four bleached-white cow skulls with horns, hanging on the railroad ties. The family called it "Skull Corner," even though it wasn't a real corner because the deck didn't have any.

The house remembered the day the family painted it. Its original color (antique white) made it stand out like a swollen, sore thumb. Talk about feeling out of place, parked in the heart of the Bone Valley the way it was. The family wanted it to look less like a house from a suburban neighborhood and more like it belonged there. They chose a redwood stain from Wal-Mart, the cheapest they could find. At ten bucks a can, it would have to do and did because they could not afford to pay more. They had one day to paint the house and paint it in one day they did - all hands on deck, from the oldest to the youngest. Some painted "outside the lines" and splattered the windows. (The house didn't mind.) When they finished, it looked great - from a distance. When you got up close and personal, dried up trickles and splashy drops of redwood stain here and there might have caught your eye. They painted its roof tiles green.

The house wished it had had a mirror to see what the finished product looked like. It didn't have one - let alone one big enough to show its entire reflection - but it did have a powerful imagination. It used it to see instead. It peered into its imagined mirror and saw a doublewide mobile home painted in a gorgeous redwood stain. It wore a sturdy winter jacket around its waist and an elegant green hat on top of its head. It saw a little bit of Granny in its features, that undeniable, long-lasting beauty time cannot hide or destroy. It loved the family so much for making it look so beautiful and like it belonged in the Bone Valley.

It remembered when they filled it up, putting an end to its emptiness. One day, two couches the family didn't want to throw away arrived, one puffy and green, the other slim and L-

shaped. It fit in a corner and turned into a bed. (So clever, the house thought). Lots of mismatched chairs came after. Then Popsie built an extra-long, extra-wide and extra-thick dinner table out of scraps of railroad ties. It took up most of the kitchen. Big beds for big people, bunk beds for bunk bed people. Dressers discovered at the Salvation Army went into the Master Bedroom and the two smaller bedrooms. Soon thereafter, family photos were hung on every wall, and paintings too (some by Granny, most of them watercolors), and drawings by the children. Someone put a glass-framed poem about how family is like a circle (or how a circle is like family) in the kitchen. (The house loved the poem, one of its favorites.) Granny wrote Bible verses on sticky yellow Post-it notes and stuck them by the windows. When the doors were open and summer wind blew through the house, her notes fluttered like puddling yellow butterflies. Books were everywhere, including a stack of ghost stories. (The house loved it when the family read from them, even if they frightened it sometimes.)

Summer after summer, they filled it up with keepsakes and stuff they didn't want to throw away but no longer had a use for - until, one day, the house had a warm, inviting lived-in look and feel. (The family never lived there, of course, but it looked like they did. And strange as it may sound, the house could live with that because it felt lived-in, even though it wished it had been.)

Oh dear, the house said, oh deary, deary, dear.

Its remembering came to a sudden stop.

It did not want to remember anymore, not with its walls so barren and its rooms so empty. Its floors exposed, carpet and tile removed. Not with everything the family had put inside it, all the things it loved to remember, taken away. Not a painting, not a Post-it note Bible verse, not a

curled glass kitten candleholder propping open bathroom doors, not a patched-together-pillow - none of it remained inside. Or anything outside, for that matter. Popsie's wraparound deck, Skull Corner, all gone.

The house felt cold and naked.

I'm like the day I was born, it said.