

Storyhouse

by

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The farmhouse rests on a shelf of earth under the vast blue sky. It is like a book coated with the dust of time and filled with place and history bound forever within a frayed spine. From the prologue at the front porch to the epilogue at the back door, the house is more than a mere building; it is a storybook of forgotten people.

The faded cover of the house is imprinted with ghosts who have crept through its chapters, unveiling plot twists and character flaws. The entryways to each room are portals into another world. As we page through to the kitchen, the warm plot embraces us and reveals the theme.

We soon become lost in the subplots of all the usual suspects, from the dog to the antagonist. It's where countless hours are spent dressing chickens and putting up corn. Baskets heaped with chokecherries turn into steaming jars of jelly, and the smell of fresh-baked cookies dances along the margins. Lesser voices chatter about hail and skunks and pregnant cows. The breaking of bread pulls everyone together three times a day.

Sisters get dishrags to the face, and company comes to play card games like Pitch, Pinochle, or everybody's favorite, Potty on Your Neighbor. Men in denim and manure-covered boots huddle around the ample table while the coffee makes friends with the insurance man's suit. Remarkable tales from the Outlands are offered in response to the vanishing standards of the day. The ghosts don't bother to come in here.

The sewing room is the voice of the house. The Singer gnaws on dresses, slacks, and shirts; chomping on prints, stripes, and plaids. Hems are lowered and rips are mended. The

overstuffed buffet is the wise old woman, tucking away scraps of fabric, zippers, and extra buttons because all will be needed someday, somehow. Songs find themselves being introduced to fabrics, notions, and Butterick patterns. *In the Good Old Summertime* bounces off cheerful violets on the windowsill and explores the cobwebs in the corners. The ghosts lounge in the drafts quietly tapping along to the beat.

The deep-voiced rumble of the furnace blasts through the black grate on the floor in the dining room, setting the tone of the story. Workers and children spread wet gloves, shoes, and mittens over the grate. The family huddles around the heat source, bickering to *quit hogging* and *scootch over* while the children move marbles and blocks a safe distance from the dark abyss.

A more formal setting presides here, showcasing a bay window that invites guests to browse a newspaper featuring life on the plains: *E. K. Norwest was a Sunday dinner guest at the T. E. Petersen residence. Miss Jessica Anderson had a wedding shower at the Zion Lutheran Church hosted by Mrs. Carl Yates. L. J. Broman finished the last coat of paint on his new home.* Memories linger over Thanksgiving and Christmas meals shared around the table, stretched long with its leaves carefully placed in its belly and bridged with white lace.

The bathroom highlights the character development. The tiny washtub reveals the dirt carried in from the barn. It's the bravest souls or the punished young who engage in washing the large sink-full of stinking eggs recently gathered from the henhouse. Yet after eggs are dried and carted away, the same sink allows mischievous children on stepstools to steal a little Palmolive and blow bubbles into the water through straws, sometimes forgetting to blow and sucking up a mouthful of soap.

Conflict lurks in the living room. Games of Monopoly and Yahtzee throw some into hysterics. Arguments ensue over which program to watch on television. Ice cream and popcorn

sneak in during commercials. Kittens show up under jackets, filling the chapters with drama. Furniture is stomped and demolished—accidentally. Walls weep with spills from Christmas drinks slopped into corners. Fights over the window air conditioner fill the room like the smoke of a fire. The ghosts enjoy the show, but never interfere.

Mystery and mayhem hold secret meetings in the attic, as deep and puzzling as the straw-bale maze in the barn. Siblings tell creepy stories of things that go bump in the night. *Don't go in there after dark. The Hairy Arm might get you!* In the darkest hours, the ghosts play their ghostly games around antique dressers and boxes of broken toys, keeping the tension high and the outlook grim.

The bedrooms are those last few satisfying pages where all the questions are answered, and the storylines are put to bed. A flavor of emptiness remains to cradle the dead air. Thick-paged ghosts roam the shadowy rooms of the reader's mind, looking for something; they don't know what, continually wandering dingy and torn paper hallways.

Then the storyhouse quietly closes and lies to rest among other storyhouses on a shelf of earth under the vast blue sky.