

Contents

Prelude: Winter Light xi
Introduction: Hantavirus 3

PART ONE

Moving Water 17
Town Owl 25
Blue and Gray 32
Burning Fields 35
Reliquary 37
H₂O: Use It or Lose It 47

PART TWO

Joe's Mesa 65
Two Chairs 73
Wild Currants 85
Bonita Bacchanalia 95
High Plateau Blues 101
The Mighty Blizzard of 1995 115
Drowning 117

CONTENTS

PART THREE

South Wind from the West	131
National Monuments	135
In Loving Memory: The Good Water Dump	141
Bob's Truck	144
Clementine	149
The Hayrack	151
House Rules	159
The Egyptian	168
Burning Elvis	175
To Remember What Is Lost	179
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	186

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL
NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION

Introduction

H A N T A V I R U S

I ROUGH-FRAMED THIS SHED WITHOUT USING power tools over one snowy and two clearer but windy days in March 1988. I was twenty-seven and really had no idea what I was doing. The reason I chose to put up a shed was monetary, or rather the lack of monetary. The shed was to become a summertime honeymoon shack. My fiancée, Dora, and I were going to start work on a cabin following our June wedding and needed a place to live. A tent wasn't going to provide enough comfort. I checked into used travel trailers, but after living in one for eight weeks, we'd be stuck with a used travel trailer and no way to pull it away. No, I figured that with about \$300 worth of lumber, some tools borrowed from my father, and a little time and trouble, I could construct something that would at least keep the rain out. Another plus was that it reminded me of a Talking Heads song. I wanted to find myself living in a shotgun shack.

It wasn't exactly roughing it. The shed stood on an acre and a half within the limits of Good Water, Utah, population 126. Electricity was provided by a construction post that featured two outstanding twenty-amp circuits. A frost-free hookup to the municipal water system furnished all the spring water a person could drink, and with a hose and a utility sink baling-wired to an old pole fence, we could wash clothes, dishes, and hands. A wooden table, a canvas tarp for a sun shade, a propane camp stove, lawn chairs, loud music as needed, a cooler, a short walk to the Arm and Leg General Store—all these conveniences made it almost civilized for modern-day homesteaders.

Good Water is located on a broad, lightly sloping expanse called Poverty Flat on the map. The town's first name was Poverty Bench. This moniker was subsequently changed to Bonita, which was an attempt to put a smiley face on the poverty. Later it gained the appellation Torrey, either from John C. Fremont's botanist or one of Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, one Colonel Torrey, depending on whom you believe. Later still, the several-named town became Good Water for transparent reasons.

I dug a hole for an outdoor commode and used cast-off squirrely new boards and several bad old planks to enclose it. Open to the south, it offered an estimable view. There were no neighbors in that direction. I filled a Kmart kiddie pool with water each morning, covered it with clear polyethylene during the day, and by evening the water was warm enough for a dip. I took my bath, naked in the field. Dora showered at the Arm and Leg Kampground.

The shed, eight feet by twelve, was not much smaller than Thoreau's digs at Walden Pond. The bed was a platform four feet off the floor. The shed was never meant to be more than temporary lodging while we built a proper domicile. Since we only had eight free weeks to dig a foundation, build floor and walls, put the roof on, install windows and doors, and get the cabin closed in, we were under a great deal of pressure to get things done.

This was called a working vacation. This should have been called a bad idea. Pressure led to physical exhaustion, tension, and trouble. But hey, you're only young once, although you may be foolish many times.

Dora and I built half a house together but our marriage eventually fell apart.

The first Good Waterite I met was a woman in her eighties named Jet Smith. She lived on the property just north of our homestead. I was digging the outhouse hole, down deep in my work, aiming for China, when I heard a shrill voice, looked up, and saw an elderly woman leaning on the sheep fence, wielding a cane. She resembled an owl.

"What you doin'?" She said it in a curious, nonthreatening way. She poked at the grass with her cane. She introduced herself, Dorothy Jenette Hickman Smith, "but you can call me Jet."

I told her I was just digging a hole.

"Well, you'll need plenty of those."

We got to talking. Jet had grown up in nearby Grover but had moved to Good Water around 1920 with her husband Walt. They lived twelve years in a 20 x 24 building that they built themselves, a garage really, and raised their two sons, Dow and Wayne. I had bought our lot from Wayne.

She told me that they raised livestock. At first they had sheep, then later cattle—fewer but worth more. They had grazing allotments on the east end of Boulder Mountain for the summer and out on Beas Lewis Flat in the winter. They owned the whole parcel from where we stood to the Fremont River, which they used for pasturing and hay. Eventually they were able to build the larger house that Jet still occupied, a winsome ranch-roofed structure surrounded by tall spruce, with a porch that opened onto the Good Water Canal. The house was sided in red and green to match the landscape.

Walt had worked for years to install the municipal water system and served several terms as mayor. The current mayor, Jay Chestnut, was “a no-good pup” who had always taken credit for Walt’s work. Walt had passed away just a few months previously. I told her I was sorry. She said, “He was getting kind of old at the end.” He had died at ninety-six.

Jet looked around. Her bottle-bottom glasses magnified her gray eyes. “You know, Good Water’s the prettiest town in the *whole* country. There’s a red cliff up there on *my* mountain, and when it rains it looks like it’s covered with diamonds.” She made an ample gesture and then continued, “Walt and I traveled around quite a bit after we retired. I say *we* because Walt wasn’t a bad man—he just worked me nearly to death. Work, work, work. If you’ve got the livestock, why, then, you’ve sure got the work.

“We seen Washington, D.C., New York City, other places. Went to the Chicago World’s Fair. Those places are fine, but Good Water’s the prettiest. But the people,” she said, looking down at her cane, “whew!”

She told me I could stop by anytime and left me to my work.

Sometimes I hate this shed and want to tear it down, reuse what I can, and start again. Recycle it. It’s not that I regret having a shed. Everyone needs one for storing junk and tools, but the design bothers me because it’s too simple, too primitive, too back then, and the way I built it leaves room for improvement and space for mice.

Deer mice and field mice have called the honeymoon shack home. Mice are carriers of hantavirus, an affliction that begins with flulike symptoms and can lead, if untreated, quite quickly to the cemetery. Hantavirus has been found throughout this part of Utah as well as the entire Southwest. People are infected by hantavirus by inhaling spores from mouse turds and dried urine. One

of the easiest ways to inhale deadly spores is by cleaning out sheds and other unventilated, seldom-used buildings. The precautions are widely known and easy to follow: spray the offending areas with a mixture of bleach and water, wear an OSHA-approved mask, and don disposable gloves. Putting out mice or rat poison, too, is a good preventative measure.

Mice wiggle their way into the shed, set up shop, and leave toxic party favors that resemble caraway seeds. Some of them die from the poison, and I discover their dried remains behind things, smelling them first. In this way, as in many others, the shed has always been a place to locate things I might not want to find.

The worst part is that it's nobody's fault but my own. The design, I mean. The way I threw up the shed and cobbled it together. Construction is bad that way: you build your mistakes right in and have to look at them always. If I knew then what I know now . . .

Still, to tear down a perfectly useful shed seems a bit extreme, and building a dreamland shed would take time and money I don't have.

Because this shed houses certain regrets of personal history, it's a regrettable shed of regrets. It sheds and keeps the rain off my regrets, keeps them dry, if mousy. Many of us have both a regrettable shed and a shed of regrets. Even when we move away we leave these sheds behind.

A mask, gloves, and Clorox work on mice waste, but will they work on memories?

—

What is trash and what is junk? What do you save and what do you throw away?

In the early days you took your household trash to the city dump yourself. There was no weekly visit from the county's waste transport truck. The Good Water dump, located on a little knoll

south of town, was notable for several reasons. The site offered a bracing view: right down the gullet of the Fremont Gorge, to the bulge of Miner's Mountain, over the tops of the Waterpocket Fold, and to the Henry Mountains beyond.

Visiting was always an adventure. With half a century of refuse there, it was nearly always possible to find something of interest at the dump, particularly the farther east you roamed. The dump had its own wildlife, primarily ravens, *Corvus corax*, as well as a few feral cats. The ravens could be seen flying over Poverty Flat in the late afternoons and early mornings. Ravens are social birds and enjoyed their communal visiting no less than their rotten vegetables. The birds scavenged widely but must have known where they could find reliable and safe sustenance.

The nocturnal dump bonfires, lit in flagrant violation of several ordinances, provided special effects, particularly when someone had brought in an old corral, fence, or shed and it was possible to see the twenty-foot-high flames from town. The illegal burning of garbage and whatnot obviated the need for more landfill space.

Human scavenging was winked at, even smiled upon in those days, back when Poverty Flat was still poor. Sure, it might be embarrassing to be seen loading up some old posts for firewood or discarded sheep fence or whatever, but almost everyone did it. I got most of the material for the roof for another outbuilding by scooping up and hauling back cast-off wafer board pieces from the construction of a local motel, the Egyptian.

Decentralized recycling was in full swing at the old dump. There was a special section where you could leave useful items for others: old furniture and primitive computers, outgrown bicycles, boxes of books or clothes, no-longer-needed shelving, and so on.

As for carbon-based things that were not directly recyclable, the flesh pit provided a place for those: cows, horses, sheep, dogs, cats, llamas, and goats in various states of decomposition. A parade of horrors.

Finally, there were a great many free and pretty rocks at the dump, rocks that could be used to build an unmortared rock wall or decorate a garden. Jet Smith used to watch me bring back loads of rocks and remark, “Lard, we spent years haulin’ them rocks out of that pasture. And now you’re haulin’ ’em back!”

Recycling.

Five generations of my family have lived in Utah along the Wasatch Front, from Cache Valley on the north to Utah Valley on the south. My great-great-grandparents, all of them, crossed the plains in the 1850s and 1860s as part of the Mormon migration from the dispossessed classes of Europe, mainly English but also Danish and German. Although not among the first wave to settle Salt Lake City, and therefore not among the Mormon royalty, nevertheless they founded or settled some towns, most notably Logan, Smithfield, and Richmond, and their roots were sunk in the agrarian towns that grew at the foot of mountains where there was plentiful water and deep soil.

None of them had any inclination to settle sunburned southern Utah. Few others did.

Whether Good Water is located in Utah or in its own special vortex is the subject of some debate. Torrey’s Knoll is widely known as the Cosmic Navel of the Universe. It even shows up on GPS as such.

I remember when Leon Chappell referred to visiting Provo as “Driving up into Utah.” As far as that goes, Wayne County has always been a bit off the beaten. To drop into the county there is the choice of three mountain passes over 8,300 feet or the snake-twist route through the Waterpocket Fold.

This country was settled lightly and late. Good Water was first inhabited in 1888, exactly 100 years before I built the shed and cabin. Far-flung County.

Good Water has always been marked by its outlaw past. The homesteader who first claimed this side of town was Robert Lee, son of John D. Lee of Mountain Meadows Massacre fame. John D. Lee was the “fall guy” for this atrocity, in which, by ruse and trickery, over 120 men, women, and children—members of a California-bound emigrant train—were murdered by Mormon settlers at Mountain Meadows in Iron County. (Another interesting connection: John D. Lee had also served a mission and converted the “notorious” Wild Bill Hickman, one of Brigham Young’s hit men and Jet Smith’s great-grandfather.) Robert Lee (the Lee clan came from Kentucky) had two brothers who found small-time trouble with the law, Charlie and Rains Lee, though Charlie Lee, known as Char Lee, later went straight and even appears in Wallace Stegner’s *Mormon Country*.

The openness to diversity extends to this day: no one faith has a majority in Good Water. The buildings of three different denominations stand in town: Latter-Day Saint, Southern Baptist, and Catholic, a rarity in tiny-town south-central Utah.

Coming at the very tail end of the hippie reinhabitation, I immediately sensed that this place was well beyond the gray blandishments of the Zion Curtain. Mayor Jay Chestnut explained, “There’s a lot of us around here can’t seem to make it to Sunday school, son.”

Things have changed. I remember the early days when the cemetery was not surrounded by two motels, two convenience stores, an RV park, a go-cart track, and a B and B; before the art galleries and gift shops; back when the fly fishing boutique was actually a gas station; when the town dump was not prime real estate; when the Clean and Quiet Motel still sported a large windmill out front from its salad days as the Little Holland; and before the annual Red Rock Women’s Music Festival, now a major stop on the alternative Euterpean circuit. No, I arrived before this Old West turned new and there still existed some remnants of the frontier culture.

—

Twenty years have passed since I built the shed. This is the right time for some dedicated purging. I'll be able to fill the property-of-Wayne-County-do-not-remove-under-penalty-of-law black poly dumpster on wheels with some of the stuff, but it's clear that one or two loads of bulkier junk will have to be hauled to the new county landfill, located in a sagey, windswept hollow uphill from Loa, twenty miles away, no scavenging allowed. I'll pile the stuff in a small utility trailer hitched to the back of the big beautiful Dodge. I'll try not to look back to see what might be left scattered on the road.

Years of living here off and on can amount to quite a collection of personal detritus: various and sundry guano that has accumulated on the platform that once served as a bed.

I need storage space for my splendid selection of American-made power tools. I've been working on the cabin again and need a dry, secure place to store the tools until I can tackle the next project, a little hut for my son, Christopher.

—

The key to purging, as with so many monotonous and essentially physical tasks, is momentum—rhythm and mojo. It's the same way you climb up the sandstone around here. You get on a roll and go with the mo. You best not stop. *I hope that flake don't break.* Here, too, it's easier to be hard-hearted and less sentimental when you're tuned up and rocking. Don't think, just toss.

My paternal grandfather, William Jonas Holdsworth, used to save nails. He worked as a mail carrier—after many lean years—and also worked a few acres of poor land, but he was frugal, not to say stingy, as anyone from his generation, Jet Smith's generation, learned to be. I recall times when he would accompany us to my father's cattle ranch in Indianola, Utah. My grandmother Isabel

would pack a lunch bucket that featured Depression sandwiches: thin-sliced Spam with mayonnaise on homemade cracked-wheat bread and Cragmont sodas bought by the dozen from Safeway. After lunch, Grandpa Bill would use the bucket to collect bent and cast-off nails and junk. He pattered on various small construction projects, especially in a large building we called simply the Big Barn. Invariably he would bring home a pail of nails. No old board was safe from him. We'd hear the squeak of the crowbar or thud of a hammer and the tinkle of another treasure in the bucket. The nails Grandpa Bill brought home would be transferred to other buckets of nails in his dusty barn, and the junk would be stored for some unknown future use.

My father, Jay, was also a secret storer of nails, though I know he tried to keep the hoarding from my mother, for whom everything about the cattle ranch was disgusting, unkempt, and dirty. I know he saved them, though. I remember two buckets filled with rusty bent nails that he kept in his own shed beside the carport. Jay had seen his father spend an hour at a time—no more, and only on a rainy day, since there were always things that needed doing—straightening those nails against the future. How could the future be rosy when the past had included the crash of '29, Hitler, and that darned socialist FDR? As I say, my father stored buckets of old nails, but I'm not sure that he straightened them.

It is for this reason, among others, that I have a hard time throwing things away. For one thing, it's twenty tedious miles to Loa and the hardware store when you need a special flange, mounting escutcheon, manifold coupler, or flux capacitor, and when you don't have one, or can't figure out a way to make do with what you have, nothing interferes with the mojo more than the drive to Loa. Loa, just say no-a.

Busy and impatient, my father never seemed to have enough time to do all the jobs he made for himself, but he persisted with

a kind of sweaty-browed perversity just to show whatever he was battling who was boss. If I didn't inherit his practicality or his devotion to work, I follow his lead in this way: despite long bouts of indolence, when the mania kicks in, it's difficult for me to let go of it. So kindly get out of the way and don't ask any questions.

So it is with junk. Sawn-through extension cords, cracked irrigation boots, first-wedding photographs, outdated correspondence, broken ski goggles, a fan encrusted with mouse turds, dish-drying racks, gummed-up paintbrushes, bent nails, stripped bolts, cans of old paint, dead mice, papers from school, papers from work, papers papers papers—all of it gets tossed in the utility trailer.

Some decisions are simple. Others are tough. Old Red doesn't pass the test. A mountain bike from the Ordovician Period, Old Red was in sad shape when I got him secondhand, with slightly bent front forks and not the best of brakes. Still, there are as many memories as pieces of duct tape on the trusty red steed: the time I carried Old Red for hours—yes, hours—hopelessly lost in the thick aspen above Chris Lake; the time friends Bob, Joanne, and I rode, pushed (and also simply steered while walking behind and trying to hold on) down the steep and rocky “trail” off the south slope of Thousand Lake Mountain, a day that led to Joanne's voluntary early retirement from high-adventure mountain bike “riding” and should have led to mine.

I will lash Old Red on top of my dump-bound pile, where it will be an anchor for the rest. At the dump I'll toss Old Red in with the furniture and tree branches and old carpet, and I will not look back. Seeing the sorrow in my eyes, my lovely wife, Jennifer, promises to buy me a new bicycle, a so-called comfort bicycle. A two-wheeled way to form a bridge between long-lost youth and the golden years. Golden years? Don't let me hear you say life's taking you nowhere, Angel. The only good place for “middle age” is in the dump, too. Well . . .