

It's Kind of a Weird Story

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This is how you find out your family's farm may have been subject to UFOs in the 1970s. You're in fifth grade, a painfully awkward year if ever there was one. One year before braces, one year before the outright battlefield of middle school. It's a year filled with clumsy games of basketball and gangly limbs that don't quite fit yet. You're far from athletic, but your dad is coaching the girls' team, so here you are. Your school is as small-town as it gets, resources so limited that the girls' and boys' teams practice in the same gym, splitting the court.

After hours of gasping during ladders and heavy-toed shuffling, and one successful layup punctuating endless shots that go wide, you finally slug down a Gatorade and call it a night. But a surprise awaits you. As you emerge from the locker room, fresh-clothed but still red in the face, your dad announces that he promised to drive home two of the most popular brothers in school. Oh, the humiliation. Panic floods your veins and your eyes widen. Boys, riding with you and your father? While you're still wearing a sweat sheen from practice? This means certain hell. You can't find a casual way to reenter the locker rooms to douse yourself in perfume, so you shrug on your coat, sigh dramatically, and stomp to the car.

Minutes later, you're riding shotgun and throttling the seatbelt strap as your dad's white Oldsmobile chugs dutifully down the moon-soaked road. After some small talk about practice, an awkward silence descends. You refuse to break it. Instead, your father does. "You boys want to hear a scary story?"

They do. You don't. The wheezing heater and rumbling engine provide a soundtrack to the ghost story. But no, not ghosts.

Your dad begins the tale: Years ago, when your mom was only 19 years old, her family's farm ended up in all the local papers. One morning, your uncle, only in his twenties at the time, saddled his horse and trotted out to the pasture. He left the house in the early hours as usual, ambling past the out-buildings and sprawling hills, horse bouncing beneath him as they neared the pasture where the cattle grazed. Absent from the crisp morning air was the familiar bellowing of the cows. But your uncle didn't notice that. Not at first. He was distracted; once he reached the fence line, your uncle's horse refused to go one step farther.

The horse's eyes widened, breath coming in quick pants. Your uncle tugged insistently at the reins, murmuring assurances. His horse uttered a shrill whinny and reared up onto its hind legs, entering a full-blown panic. This had never happened before. Your uncle looked around and realized the farm dogs, usually so quick to tag along for chores, were nowhere to be seen. Like the horse, they refused to enter the pasture. He swung down from his saddle, goose bumps rising on his skin. He strode into the field alone, eyebrows raised and his steps slow. What he found ended up in all the local papers. What he found didn't make any sense.

"What did he find?" the boys demand from the backseat, voices eager. You're clutching the edge of your seat, wondering the same thing. Your dad turns on his blinker and continues the tale, baritone voice filling the car. You wonder how you will possibly explain such an odd story to the other kids in school tomorrow, but you don't pipe up, listening.

Your uncle, he explains, discovered some of the cattle had been killed and mutilated in a bizarre manner. Three cows lay dead on their sides in the grass. Their genitals had been removed, missing from the scene. Another thing gone were the cattle's jawbones, completely removed from the cow's skulls with bare bones whitewashed and bereft of skin. The bones were placed next to the carcasses, crossed over top one another. The rest of the herd was untouched, clumped together at the farthest boundary of the pasture, separate from the dead. After he took in this sight, your uncle ran.

Legs pumping beneath him, he blew past his horse still whinnying near the fence post, not bothering to ride, and sprinted across the fields and through the yards and past the driveway. He barreled into the farmhouse to alert his father and brothers, explain the situation to his mother and sisters. To try to describe something impossible, something that could not have been done overnight.

"What did the jawbones look like?" One of the boys interrupts the story. He speaks in an awed whisper. You were wondering the same thing, but didn't bother to ask. This couldn't be an actual story. Your dad must be making it up. How embarrassing. This couldn't be real. Why couldn't he have just talked about basketball?

"Twisted," your dad answers. "Almost into the shape of a T."

"An X?" the other boy pipes up hopefully, searching for more drama.

"No, a T," your dad insists.

"No way," the older boy proclaims. But not in a dubious way — incredulous, impressed. The boys fall into silence again, waiting for more. The car is still miles from their home. Your dad slows for a deer, honks at it a few times, prolonging the suspense.

Finally, he straightens his baseball cap and continues on. Your mother's family was puzzled, to say the least. They phoned the police, who immediately visited the farm. They, too, brought dogs to the site, hoping to pick up the scent of the culprits, to unearth any sort of explanation. But the police-trained dogs wouldn't so much as leave the cruisers. Like the horses, like the farm dogs, like the surviving cattle, they wouldn't go near the pasture.

The police had no answers — only additional questions. The mutilation was far from the only one reported in 1974. The press pointed fingers at a string of similar cases around South Dakota as well as Kansas and Nebraska, some more bizarre than others. This mutilation was unique, the only site in which the carcasses of the cows were found within sight of the house, and the only carcasses reported to be missing

jawbones. Other sites claimed a hodgepodge of absent appendages, some cows without lips or tongues or tails.

"Gross!" The boys in the backseat sing out, thrilled by the gore as only boys can be. "But, wait, so they never caught anyone? They never found out who did that?"

"Nope," your dad announces cheerfully, nearing the boys' driveway. You peer out into the path of the headlights and feel uneasy, wondering if the boys will be full of stories at school tomorrow about your family. You really wish the car ride had passed with stories of layups and free throws. Annoyed, you pull your sweatband away from your forehead and release it, the fabric snapping back into place with a slap.

The car reaches the boys' driveway, at long last. They thank your dad for the cool story, tossing you a quick goodbye and jabbering about the spooky dead cows. You breathe a sigh of relief as the car reverses from their drive in blissful silence.

Silence you break: "Thanks a lot!"

"What?"

"Why did you make up some weird alien story to tell them? Now all the kids in school will think we're freaks."

"It's not some story," your dad says. Once you're home, he unearths a yellowed newspaper clipping from the basement, laminated and encapsulating grainy, stomach-churning photos.

From an article titled "Mutilations Leave Area Farmers Jittery," you trace your finger over the passages that call out the farm, reading over the quotes from your mother twice to make sure it's not a practical joke: A carcass found within sight of the unsuspecting house, bizarre indentations left in triangular patterns around the body of the cow.

Some believed the acts to be the work of an unnamed religious cult; others insisted it was merely an animal predator. A few hysterics from surrounding states even spouted rumors of UFOs, only adding to the oddity of the 1970s. Despite the realistic point-of-view most took up, the officers insisted your family not permit any visitors or looky-loos to

visit the pasture; no need to increase the local panic. No one came up with an explanation, but all circled back to the same questions: How? Why? Who? Such an atrocity could not have been perpetrated overnight, let alone without raising the alarm of the family of seven sleeping in the farmhouse nearby.

It's not a story to repeat often, you decide. You put the article away in the drawer from whence it came, hustling to tattle to your mom about dad's storytelling in front of the boys. You shrug it off, as does the entire family for generations. Though there are no resolutions, the story is told less and less frequently over the years. Occasionally when the group gets together, your aunts and uncles might bring it up, the event creeping in inexorably. They swirl coffee, shake their heads, and one of them digs up the story with the same opening tagline: "That was just the weirdest thing..."