

PEGGY TOWNSEND

The Solitaries

Adapted from an upcoming novel

The Father of the American Hereford was a bull named Anxiety 4. I don't know why anyone would hang a name like that on a Hereford. Getting worried was not something a Hereford was known for. In fact, the breed had a reputation not only for its ease of gaining weight, but also for its ability to remain calm in the face of windstorms and cattle drives and Texas heat. I guessed Louie had gotten a double dose of those genes. He was about the most peaceful being I ever met.

There were times when that calmness came in handy, especially for the Solitaries, which were what I called the nights my father, Digger, disappeared. He would be having one of his spells—days when even his clothes didn't seem to sit right with him—and he would slam down his whiskey, stare out the front window into the evening shadows, and then drive off in that rusty old pickup of his. “Don't wait up,” he would holler as he went out the door, a cigarette hanging loose in his mouth.

It would give me an empty feeling sitting in our house with the darkness pressing all around or the wind moaning through the window cracks, and after a while, I would head out to the barn, where I would find Louie lying in the straw like an Egyptian sphinx. Even though the barn had only three sides and enough holes in those boards to look like somebody had used it for shooting practice, it was better than staying in that empty house. I would clean Louie's pen and braid his tail, and sometimes I

would wash him with Ivory soap and water and then use the curry comb to make beautiful designs in his coat. It helped me forget about how I didn't know where Digger was, or if our dangerous secret had gotten out and he was never coming back.

The only reason I knew there was some dangerous secret in our lives was because one day I'd heard him and Mom fight about it. She'd dragged him into their bedroom, which had a roof so low she always said she could have put on a hat and dusted the cobwebs with her head, and when I heard them yelling, I snuck through the kitchen and the living room and stood just outside their closed door. I heard her shout things like, “You ruined our lives” and “You can't hide it forever,” and Digger yell back, “Do you want me gone? They're still out there, you know.” The anger and fear in those words made me want to listen and plug my ears at the same time.

I kicked at the door to try to get them to stop, but both of them shouted for me to just go the hell away. And when I asked them later, “What can't we hide forever?” they shook their heads like I'd made the whole thing up.

When Mom died, I hoped the Solitaries would be over, but they weren't. In fact, one time, Digger didn't come home for thirty-six hours. I was so panicked, I moved my quilt, a flashlight, four books, and a cache of peanut butter sandwiches down to the barn. It seemed like the only thing standing between me and orphanhood was Louie.

Pretty soon, I was telling him how worried I was that Digger was gone and how Mom's dying felt like having a leg or arm amputated. I'd read somewhere that people who'd had a limb cut off would swear it was there until they looked and saw it was gone. Which is exactly how it was with me. Some mornings, I'd wander into the kitchen with my hair all bed-headed and yell, “Mom?” before I caught myself. The emptiness that came back to me after that one word was the loneliest sound on earth.

I also told Louie about us losing our hay contract, which might be our ruin even if Digger came back, and about the way the girls at my new school avoided me like a bad smell, and before I knew it, I was wrapped in my quilt and blubbering into his hide like it was that Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. People who don't have cattle can't understand the strength you get from just being with one of

MARI
KLOEPPEL

*Las Lomas
Longhorn*
Oil on Linen, 38 x 38 in



courtesy: Winfield Gallery, Carmel

those animals. Standing there with my face pressed into Louie's big warm belly was like being in the presence of something that took whatever awful truth you gave it and loved you just the same. It seemed like he knew exactly what I was thinking and exactly what I needed. He turned his great white head and blew some of his sweet alfalfa breath into my hair, and it felt like he was saying that no matter what happened, he would always be there for me.

I read that Aristotle believed animals didn't have souls, but in that particular case, I think he was wrong. I think animals do have souls. I think they know about fairness and bravery. I think they know about love. I think they know about lifting up somebody who needs lifting.

I think anybody can see an animal's soul if they just look for it.

I've seen it in Louie about a million times.

Peggy Townsend is a longtime newspaper and magazine journalist who has won numerous state and national awards for her work, including a Casey Medal for Meritorious Journalism and two Best Writing awards from the California News Executives Council. She is the author of the novel *Safe Landings*, which will soon be released as an audio book on Audible.com. She divides her time between Santa Cruz and Lake Tahoe and writes regularly at peggytownsend.blogspot.com.