

THE COWBOY

Someone had spread an elaborate rumor about me, that I was in possession of an extraterrestrial being, and I thought I knew who it was. It was Roger Lawson. Roger was a practical joker of the worst sort, and up till now I had not been one of his victims, so I kind of knew my time had come. People parked in front of my house for hours and took pictures. I had to draw all my blinds and only went out when I had to. Then there was a barrage of questions. "What does he look like?" "What do you feed him?" "How did you capture him?" And I simple denied the presence of an extraterrestrial in my house. And, of course, this excited them all the more. The press showed up and started creeping around my yard. It got to be very irritating. More and more came and parked up and down the street. Roger was working overtime on this one. I had to do something. Finally, I made an announcement. I said, "The little fellow died peacefully in his sleep at 11:02 last night." "Let us see the body," they clamored. "He went up in smoke instantly," I said. "I don't believe you," one of them said. "There is no body in the house or I would have buried it myself," I said. About half of them got in their cars and drove off. The rest of them kept their vigil, but more solemnly now. I went out and bought some groceries. When I came back about an hour later another half of them had gone. When I went into the kitchen I nearly dropped the groceries. There was a nearly transparent fellow with large pink eyes standing about three feet tall. "Why did you tell them I was dead? That was a lie," he said. "You speak English," I said. "I listen to the radio. It wasn't very hard to learn. Also we have television. We get all your channels. I like cowboys, especially John Ford movies. They're the best," he said. "What am I going to do with you?" I said. "Take me to meet a real cowboy. That would make me happy," he said. "I don't know any real cowboys, but maybe we could find one. But people will go crazy if they see you. We'd have press following us everywhere. It would be the story of a century," I said. "I can be invisible. It's not hard for me to do," he said.

“I’ll think about it. Wyoming or Montana would be our best bet, but they’re a long way from here,” I said. “Please, I won’t cause you any trouble,” he said. “It would take some planning,” I said. I put the groceries down and started putting them away. I tried not to think of the cosmic meaning of all this. Instead, I treated him like a smart little kid. “Do you have any sarsaparilla?” he said. “No, but I have some orange juice. It’s good for you,” I said. He drank it and made a face. “I’m going to get the maps out,” I said. “We’ll see how we could get there.” When I came back he was dancing on the kitchen table, a sort of ballet, but very sad. “I have the maps,” I said. “We won’t need them. I just received word. I’m going to die tonight. It’s really a joyous occasion, and I hope you’ll help me celebrate by watching *The Magnificent Seven*,” he said. I stood there with the maps in my hand. I felt an unbearable sadness come over me. “Why must you die?” I said. “Father decides these things. It is probably my reward for coming here safely and meeting you,” he said. “But I was going to take you to meet a real cowboy,” I said. “Let’s pretend you are my cowboy,” he said.

Sometimes we all need a Roger Lawson in our lives to point out to us our alien, as it's only afterward that we can recognize a soul's journey. The specifically human gift of joy's generous grief.

- Ben Estes