

Rapture

Johnny Townsend

PATTY LOU SAT ON HER GREEN VINYL SOFA, her legs crossed, and thumbed through the daily Brookhaven newspaper. She glanced over at Robert, her thirty-year-old grandson, sitting on the brown vinyl sofa, reading the Jackson daily newspaper. It was a ritual they performed every time he came up to visit from New Orleans, three holidays and two extra visits a year. This was one of the extras, in the middle of the summer, so it was hot, with just a fan blowing, but at least no one else was around. It was peaceful and quiet, just the sound of insects buzzing outside and cows lowing on the neighbor's dairy farm.

Patty Lou read of a factory just outside of town laying off twenty workers, and she worried about her son, Henry, who'd been laid off at the railroad five years now and only had jobs he hated ever since. He didn't complain much, but she could tell he was unhappy. Of course, with that awful wife of his . . . But Patty Lou tried not to think of Lydia and her petty lies. She'd been in the family seventeen years now, and at least she'd calmed down a little since they'd adopted a boy through the church nine years ago. Now, though, they'd taken in Lydia's brother's baby after the brother and his girlfriend had both been put in jail for drugs and stealing. The boy was a terror, but Patty Lou hoped he'd be okay one day. As it was, the boy's behavior always gave her daughter, Cathy, something to complain about, and to act superior about, too. Cathy, with four children of her own, did have reasonably good children, the oldest fourteen, all on the honor roll, but they had their moments as well. Lydia certainly pointed it out whenever she could.

Patty Lou looked again over at Robert, one of her two grandchildren from her oldest daughter, Annie. Neither of them had turned out real well, the girl divorced, with a son who'd failed the seventh grade three times, and with a nursing degree she refused to use to find work, borrowing money from Patty Lou instead. She lived with a man in his house, leaving her fifteen-year-old son alone in her own house for days at a time.

And Robert. Patty Lou looked at him again. He was sweet enough,

but two years ago he'd told her he was gay, and, well, these things were just too confusing. The church said he was a sinner, but she liked him. He was the only one in the family who ever asked her about her life, always taking notes when she told him stories. He also made negatives of all the family pictures and gave copies to everyone in the family for Christmas, even giving every family an extra copy in case they had another child.

Robert turned to the last page of the newspaper, and when he looked up, Patty Lou said, "Ready to switch now?" She laughed, though she didn't know why, and she stood up to trade papers. Soon, they'd finished reading the second paper, and now it was time for their next ritual.

"Do Mormons believe in the Rapture?" she asked. For seventy-four years she'd lived as a Methodist, and only in the last four had she been a Mormon. Annie had started it, joining the church with her family over twenty years ago. Then teenage Cathy had become interested, and both Cathy and Patty Lou took the missionary lessons. But Patty Lou's husband, Webster, who was a Baptist, had come home one day with a six-pack of beer and said, "The day you join that church is the day I start drinking." So she hadn't joined, but Cathy had when she turned eighteen, and a few years later Henry and his wife had joined, too. Then, after Webster died of lung cancer from smoking, Patty Lou waited another couple of years and decided to be baptized. She'd asked Robert to do it, as he'd gone on a mission to Italy. Cathy's husband was the only other one in the family who'd been on a mission, his in Norway, but Patty Lou didn't like him enough to let him baptize her. Robert had told her she ought to ask her only son, Henry, to do it. Later, when he told her he was gay, Robert explained he couldn't baptize her because he'd just been excommunicated, but he hadn't wanted to tell her right as she was becoming converted.

She didn't know if she believed in the church or not. She just wanted to make sure they all went to the same place after they died, and with her daughter Annie dead from leukemia two years before Webster died, she knew which one she wanted to see again most. Not that Webster had been all that bad. He'd been faithful, not like that man on the neighboring farm, and he'd rarely yelled at her. But still, it was easier to be close to other women. She wondered if that was why she liked Robert. She'd hinted for him to tell her if he was the man or the woman in his relationship, but he said they were both men, so he must not have understood, and Patty Lou couldn't bring herself to ask more directly. Robert was like a woman in some ways, wanting to talk about important things rather than sports or tractor pulls, so she enjoyed his visits. She liked being with him, even when she did run out of things to say. She always ran out of things to say, but she still liked when her family visited. But if the church wasn't true, that meant she wouldn't be seeing Robert again. Joining the

church might have been useless.

"No, Grandma," said Robert. "The church doesn't believe in the Rapture."

Patty Lou sighed. He said that every time she asked. Why couldn't the church change its mind? She had, as old as she was. "I listen to the preachers on the radio," she said, "and they talk about how bad it's going to get. I'd sure like to go before it gets bad."

"It's already bad."

"But it's going to get worse. How long do you think it'll be before Jesus comes back?"

"I really don't know. Could be just a few years. But it might not be for fifty more."

"I don't know if I want to be here for it or not. It might get real bad first."

They were silent for a moment, Patty Lou thinking about growing up without water or electricity, about seeing planes and rockets and computers all develop during her life. And she knew there was going to be a big nuclear war before she died. She did wish she could die before that happened.

Her sister Nelda, two years older than she, died six months ago, of lung cancer, though she'd never smoked a day in her life. That wasn't fair of God. He could give her cancer if he had to, but why lung cancer? That wasn't right.

Nelda Sue would call Patty Lou during her treatment, whispering into the phone that their youngest sister, Lucinda, wouldn't take her to her appointments unless Nelda gave all her property to Lucinda in her will. Nelda had already promised most of it to Patty Lou to give to her grandchildren. Patty Lou and Webster had had 200 acres together, and Patty Lou had another sixty acres of her own, so she didn't really need it, but it was the idea. Lucinda was the baby of the family and always got everything she wanted. Even when Annie was lying in the hospital bleeding to death, Lucinda had asked her for her books to read. Annie could hardly talk by then but did manage to stare right at Patty Lou and say, "Don't you give her *anything* of mine." Annie had died two days later, going into convulsions from a brain hemorrhage during Patty Lou's shift at her bedside.

Lucinda had terrorized Nelda Sue for the past forty years, ever since Nelda's marriage ended after a week, and Lucinda moved back into the family house. The house had been in Nelda's name, but Lucinda acted like it was her own, raising her own family there and making Nelda Sue do most of the chores. Patty Lou knew that she was almost as meek herself as Nelda Sue was, but sometimes, sometimes, she wanted to shake Nelda and scream, "Slap her!" It was too late now, of course, and Patty

Lou wanted to slap Lucinda herself, but she could never even manage to say something mean. Patty Lou just smiled and spoke nicely as she always did. It made her mad, but what could she do? After seventy-eight years, how could she say what she wanted to say?

"You know," Robert said then, "the last days don't have to be as bad as we think they'll be."

"What do you mean?" Patty Lou wanted to hear something to believe in, so she quickly tuned back in.

"The scriptures say there'll be wars and plagues, but that doesn't mean *everywhere*. We have AIDS, but the world keeps going on. We have terrorist attacks, but life doesn't really change. The scriptures say the sea will die and all the fish, but really, couldn't the prophets just have been seeing a few oil spills? Some of those spills go on for miles, and they *are* bad, but life still goes on. It doesn't necessarily have to get much worse than it is now."

"You don't think so?"

"Well, I don't know, but it could be. There's really just a handful of prophecies that haven't fully happened yet, and only one of those, the last one, is *really* bad. So that might happen only at the very end."

"But y'all don't believe in the Rapture?"

Robert smiled and shook his head, and Patty Lou sighed.

"The preachers on the radio are always talking about Israel. You don't think they'll get us in a world war?"

Robert shrugged. "It hasn't happened yet. It might not. The preachers don't always interpret things right, do they?"

"No, that's true."

But still, wouldn't it be nice if it was all over? To be taken up in the blink of an eye. Her mother had had a stroke at eighty-seven and lingered on miserably for another year. Patty Lou's older brother, too, at eighty-five. Annie had suffered just five weeks, but they were a miserable five weeks. Webster had been sick a year, but it was really only the last month he suffered, and only the last two days of that when he had to go to the hospital. And of course, Nelda Sue had suffered quite a bit, too. Even Henry, healthy now, had had his ribs torn loose when that car broadsided him a couple of years ago. Patty Lou remembered how ribs felt—she'd had two broken when she was eight and a half months pregnant with Cathy, in that terrible accident that had knocked out two of Henry's teeth and cut up the whole family at that very same intersection thirty-five years earlier. Patty Lou didn't want to suffer any more. And she didn't want to have to watch anyone else suffer, either.

"What does Jimmy think about the church?" she asked, thinking of Robert's friend.

"He's Catholic, and he really doesn't believe in any religion. He used

to, but you know how it is for us. I'm always amazed so many gays still do believe in religion."

"Is he . . . ready to die if he has to?" She really wanted to ask if he was healthy, but she didn't know how. The two had been together for almost three years. Would they know yet if they were sick? She'd been afraid at first that Robert would give AIDS to the other grandchildren, but then she read up on it and learned that wasn't likely. But she still worried for Robert.

Robert shrugged again. "He talks about suicide sometimes."

"Really?"

"His first cousin killed himself right before Christmas. He was depressed because he was out of work, though he still had a pension. They'd grown up together and dated sisters in high school. And you know Jimmy's last lover died of an aneurysm. They'd been together eight years. And his grandmother died last year. Jimmy really loved her. I think the only reason he stays is because of his mother. She has such a jerky husband, always threatening to kick her out. Jimmy wants to make sure she's provided for, but if he dies and leaves everything to her, he thinks her husband will somehow manage to get everything and still kick her out."

Patty Lou nodded. "Well, that happens," she said. "But doesn't he worry about leaving you?"

Robert gave kind of a twisted smile. "I guess we've resigned ourselves to losing people."

Patty Lou nodded again. "Eight of my brothers and sisters are dead now. Just two of us left. And Cathy's youngest is so sickly, you never know what to expect. They had a TB outbreak at her school."

They were silent a few moments. Then Robert shifted on the sofa. "We both had blood tests a couple of months ago," he said, and Patty looked up sharply. "We're both still negative, and you know we're monogamous."

"That's good," she said. After a moment, she added, "I hope I die in my sleep."

"I hope you do, too."

Patty Lou sighed. Robert was the only one in the family she could talk to about death, and it was comforting. "What do you think about suicide?"

"A friend asked me how to do it painlessly, and I gave him the information."

"Did he do it?"

"No, he hung on as long as he could and then just died on his own." He smiled and shook his head. "That was Christmas Eve a year and a half ago. Goodness. Time flies."

Patty Lou looked at her thirty-year-old grandson. Annie had only been forty-four when she died. And Patty Lou had a great-grandson who was fifteen and already dating girls, so soon there'd be a great-great-grandchild. She loved her family but wondered why the thought of their procreating felt so empty to her. Of course, Henry's children weren't really his, though she loved them, too. And Cathy's, well, Cathy's children did give her some hope, the only ones who were really being raised in the church, though Patty Lou knew that Cathy and her husband were having problems. She suspected he was gay, too, like Robert. Robert had certainly hinted about it enough. If that marriage broke up, though, would those kids stay in the church? And Cathy? Would they be able to believe anymore? It was so hard to believe. Why did God make it so hard? It wasn't as if Patty Lou were bad and deserved it to be hard. She'd always tried to believe and do what was right. Seventy-eight years of that wasn't enough? What more did God want? What if she gave up at the age of eighty-two and was doomed to hell because of it? That just wasn't *fair*. So she kept trying to believe.

"The preachers say the Lord will be merciful to us in the last days and shorten the time," said Patty Lou. "Do you suppose that means time really is faster? That all the clocks and orbits and everything are faster, so we can't really tell, but that it's all going by quicker?"

"It could be, Grandma," Robert said slowly. "It could be."

But after a moment, Robert asked about the pace of life back in the 1920s and 1930s, and Patty told him a few more stories. She had a list she kept between his visits, so that every time she remembered a story, she could jot it down and then tell him when he came. She knew she remembered the same stories often, but she always threw in a couple of new ones. She could tell by the way Robert took his notes.

After a while, they fell silent, and when Robert went to stand on the porch, Patty Lou got together some table scraps from the kitchen and went out to the barn to feed the dogs. She'd tripped over one and sprained her wrist a few years ago, and she never had gotten full use of her hand back. So she walked carefully to the barn and back, joining Robert on the porch and looking over toward where the neighbor's land started. He had a gay son, too, who'd tried to kill himself rather than tell his parents. Just how many gays were there? Patty Lou had never even known they existed until she was almost forty. Was this a sign of the last days? There hadn't always been that many gays, had there? The neighbors weren't very pleased about their son, but their oldest boy was schizophrenic, on medication, and their youngest, only twenty-two, was already divorced. Patty Lou guessed parents couldn't be too choosy these days. Kids did used to be better, didn't they?

Patty looked at Robert, who was looking off into the garden where

the vegetables were planted. Robert was about the only one in the family who liked her cooking. Lydia's son told her that his mother threw out the jars of food that Patty Lou put up for her, but Robert always gladly accepted them. The last year or so, he'd also been bringing up desserts from her recipes, but she still liked to cook for him, too, so there were always too many desserts. But he didn't have a garden, so she always loaded him up with fresh vegetables when she could.

It wouldn't be long now. He never stayed overnight anymore since he and Jimmy had moved in together. She missed his staying for a few days at a time, but Cathy and her children came from McComb for up to a week at a time, and her great-grandson stayed for two weeks earlier this summer. She worried about him, but he did mow the lawn for her, trimmed the bushes so she could see if anyone was hiding around the house, and he painted the living room. He might turn out okay. But she still wished he'd finish high school. Even Patty Lou had had one semester of college back in 1934, until her father died unexpectedly.

Patty Lou and Robert talked about the dog and the cat on the front steps who were always so friendly and loving to each other, and soon Henry stopped over on his way home from work and fed the three horses he kept here. It gave him a chance to check up on Patty Lou, and she enjoyed seeing him without Lydia. Henry was the last one in the family Robert had told he was gay, and Henry didn't like it but accepted it, always asking about Jimmy if Jimmy didn't come, and that made Patty Lou feel good.

"Shall I warm up supper?" asked Patty Lou around 6:00.

Robert nodded, and after she asked him to say a blessing on the food, they ate in silence.

And too soon, it was time. They really had very little to say ever, but she still worried every time he left that she might never see him again, that she'd die before he could come back. And there was *something* she always felt she should tell him first, but she could never quite figure out what it was.

She loaded some food in bags for him, and he thanked her and put them in his car. She looked again at the beautiful flowers Jimmy had painted for her hanging on her walls, remembered how they'd both come up for her last birthday and planted flowers where she could see them from the porch, and she hoped Robert would be okay. Jimmy, too, of course. Was he family now? It was just too confusing.

Robert came back to the porch and gave Patty Lou a hug. She knew he had to force it on her because she never had been able to initiate a hug, but though she couldn't do it very well, she was glad he insisted.

"I love you, Grandma," he said. "I'll try to come back soon."

She waved from the porch as he drove off, watching the dust from

the gravel drift into the air. After a few moments she went back to sit on the sofa, looking through the screen until it was too dark to see any longer. And then she closed the door.