

The Homecoming

Aaron Orullian

ELDER JEFF LEE JOHNSON came home on January 24 at 2:14 in the afternoon. The plane had made its way north all that day, stopping in Miami, then Atlanta before finally arriving six minutes ahead of schedule at John Wayne International. They had waited all day it seemed, waited by phones, waited in the car, waited at the terminal and then at the wrong terminal before finally being led back to the place where they had waited before, the management being so sorry, and couldn't they get them something to take their mind off the wait?

After the plane had landed, they were escorted to yet another place—a special place where they could meet him; not the best place, the airline person apologized, but a place where they might get a few moments' privacy—away from where other people were greeting sons and daughters and still holding out hope for the rest of their lives.

Lee and Cheryl Johnson stood alone by the casket of their son in that small, gray room under the United terminal and wept. Lee had been at the chapel a couple of nights ago conducting temple recommend interviews; Cheryl would forever wonder what she had gone into the garage to retrieve or why she went back to find it again after the call came.

Their stake president had laid out the facts as he had learned them himself from the mission president: Their son had been found stripped

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and beaten to death outside his *pension* early last Tuesday morning. He had retired to bed at 9:30 P.M. the night before, feeling sick, according to his companion, who had suspected nothing. It had been a simple, brutal act of robbery, nothing uncommon for that area. A local girl had gone nearly crazy with grief and claimed they were in love and had planned to get married soon. He had been at her house that night, as he had for several nights. She still wore his silver CTR ring. It was a small town, and his companion would be transferred immediately. That was all the stake president could tell them at that point. He was sorry, so terribly sorry. The body of their son and his things would be sent up soon. There was no need for them to go down there.

With the news, arrangements had to be made. There was no getting around it. They had wanted everything to be done quickly and quietly. Their hope was that the fewer details that went out, the fewer questions. The fewer questions, the fewer answers, and the Johnsons did not want to think of the answers. Their son had been killed, abruptly taken: that was the official line.

By next day, the whole ward was in tears. There was the news posting on the internet, the one the Johnsons wouldn't have seen but heard about when Sister Morton called. There was the brief message of condolence left mistakenly by Jeff's mission president in the clerk's voice mail, who then told his wife, who then told the Relief Society president, who then went over immediately to the Johnsons with the second counselor and sputtered and skirted and asked if there was anything they could do. They felt so terribly bad for them, they all felt bad when they found out—to have a son go forth with faith to preach the gospel—but didn't they at least feel so blessed with the assurance that now he would go directly to the celestial kingdom?

Lee and Cheryl Johnson had been married to each other for most of their lives and they had worked and arranged and compromised and held things together somehow on the thinnest threads of perseverance and faith. They had six children: four sons, two daughters. This is what the Lord had offered them and what they had offered the world.

They called Stacy first; she would know how they should tell the others. Jesse would probably cry and lose himself in his anxiety. Patrick would be difficult to read, and Lynn would have to call Steven. They would tell them what they had told everyone else, and nothing more. The rest they would pass on when the facts became clearer.

* * *

Elder Jeff Lee Johnson
c/o Johnsons
5169 Birch Woods Drive
Brea, California
U.S.A.

His two suitcases came a day early, anticipating his arrival. They pored over the contents and found what they had been looking for. There were two alpaca suits, beautiful suits that hardly seemed worn. There were sweat pants and a pair of jeans and t-shirts and six rolls of garments. There were letters from friends, letters from family, from them—precious letters that encouraged and joked and anticipated. And there was his journal (finally the truth!) and inside its last entry a small photo.

A girl of about twenty or younger stood smiling between an elder they didn't recognize and their son's companion outdoors somewhere. She was an amazing person, he wrote, and he desperately hoped others would understand, since he was in love and needed to be with her (they had felt the Spirit) and would they please please not be so sad and disappointed when he finally had the courage to tell them?

* * *

The funeral was held that Saturday morning at the chapel off State College Boulevard, the stake center having been previously scheduled for basketball tournaments every weekend to the end of the month. The stake president had offered to preside and the various auxiliaries and quorums had worked together quickly to carry out their assignments. Two beautiful floral arrangements flanked each side of the casket that lay just below the podium—the condolences and gifts of others spreading out from the chapel into the south foyer where Sister Gibson had helped Cheryl select and arrange a few artifacts and photos.

There was Jeff, crawling around in Kodachrome at six months, teeth too big for his face at eleven, smile too big for the world at sixteen.

There was Jeff at the dance, Jeff on that campout in Big Bear, Jeff on the couch lying so cute and asleep and unaware.

There was his Disneyland name tag and his Duty to God award and a letter from the president. There was his trumpet (look at Jeff play that trumpet at the game!) and the scrapbook of his Eagle project.

Jeff had never cared about sports, but he had liked the teams and

loved the girls who lingered and laughed and thought they knew for a few brief years what life was all about—friends who now, in their little black dresses and desolate faces, quietly filled the chapel.

And there were Jeff's scriptures and his mission call, enshrined in the center of all these things—the places where he had finally found sanctuary from the lush lies of all his many wildernesses.

* * *

Lee had smiled as he looked at the first question—one he had memorized years ago.

"Jeff, do you have faith in the Godhead? In God the Eternal Father, and in His Son Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Ghost?"

"Yes."

Jeff Johnson had come a long way in the six months leading up to his nineteenth birthday. His father had noted his progress and had delighted in his change. It had meant everything in the world to him that his son had turned things around and wanted to go on a mission. In the early stages of his son's conversion, Lee had worried that perhaps Jeff was repenting just to please him and that it wouldn't stick. That he would go the way of his oldest brother Steven who had served two years behind a mask of disbelief and resentment and then left it all to return to Canaan. But Lee wouldn't believe that of his youngest son. He knew it had never been easy for Jeff—Jeff of the wide smile and endless friends. He had been such a good kid, good person, in spite of his weaknesses . . .

Lee had sat across the table from his son and handed him the papers. Lee had had doubts in the past, strong doubts about this boy, but the only thing he could feel now was peace. His son had made the changes, and he was worthy. Lee wouldn't have signed those papers had he felt otherwise; he wouldn't have sent his son out alone into a dreary world with greater fear and love if he hadn't believed inside his heart that it was now completely out of his hands.

* * *

Stacy and her family arrived first; Jesse, Lynn, and Patrick followed in succession with theirs and joined them in the front rows reserved for immediate family. Lee and Cheryl stood in the foyer and accepted regrets as they greeted and smiled. It would have been wrong and selfish to sit and

wait and fall apart. It gave them satisfaction to go against their feelings; it made them strong.

There was kind-hearted Brother Hardin, and the soft-spoken Taylors, and Brother and Sister Collins who had health problems yet came to everything. There was Janice Taylor, Jeff's primary teacher who called her students her "kids" and never forgot them. There were the Reids, who had wayward children and held the best dinner parties, and the Hofstetlers, who told terrible jokes—he was Lee's second counselor. There were those they knew, those they didn't know; Jeff's friends, their friends, member and nonmember alike. There were those who said nothing, those who cried, those who looked about in vague discomfort, people who had never looked so solemn. Some needed drinks, while others had answers and smiled satisfaction through their mourning since the salvation of martyrs was assured. Jeff would join company with the Best Saints, they said. Parley P. Pratt had died for the cause. So had Joseph and Hyrum and the Apostle Paul and countless others. Each had been faithful to the end. And one could not wish for a better end, whispered Sister Jones, whose husband, she reminded them, had died of a heart attack in the temple.

By 10:30, the chapel had filled to overflowing, and the back partition was opened and additional chairs set up.

As Lee and Cheryl made their way through the heavy double doors into the chapel, Lee caught a glimpse of the back corner of the overflow. A tall, thin-lipped man in jeans jacket and tie sat next to another woman from the stake and her two restless children. He looked terrible in his mock best and long hair, his arms and breath no doubt still bearing the tokens of broken covenants.

Lee tried not to think about him even as his heart leapt out and would embrace him. He had hoped he would come, but he had learned to expect nothing from this child. He had not seen Steven in over six years, and Steven had not seen or known them in twice that. They had mourned him already, mourned him in anger and returned bitterness and near-hate; he had shown them the way. With words and choices, he had torn himself out of their family. Now he lingered on the periphery, and he was still alive.

* * *

*I believe in Christ,
So come what may . . .*

Cheryl Johnson sat alone next to her husband on the front row pew and wondered why the Lord had done this to her. It didn't matter that she had loved Him or served Him—obviously that didn't matter. And for that, it didn't matter that she had loved her son or taught him well or gave so much of her own faith and testimony to him that he couldn't help but believe (there were many times when she would have gladly given more); it didn't matter that he had done one right thing in his life or seventy—he had done this one wrong thing; and as the dark chaos of coincidence aligned with that choice, he was now completely, irrevocably lost from their family forever. The scriptures were clear about this: he would be cut off, having died in his sins; and there was nothing she could do about it. Absolutely nothing.

What the Lord giveth, he taketh away.

So come what may . . .

Lee's eyes moved over the words of the hymn without decoding, and he wished beyond himself that he had made Jeff wait to go until he was ready. His repentance had been too green, his desire to serve too eager. But sons' missions are never about sons. Four sons, four missions. Could he have lived with anything less than a perfect statistic? He thought about the thin-lipped man who sat in the back and bore his features yet none of their values and wondered if symmetry mattered at all when it ultimately didn't amount to anything. He followed the grain of the podium as President Ulibarri got up and spoke with tears and perfect delivery and commanded them to be comforted. Jeff had been such a perfect example to others; his parents were always such perfect examples to others. Jeff had been about his Father's business; they were always about their Father's business. Jeff would be called forth in the First Resurrection; no doubt they would be there to greet him.

The stake president spoke and wept, wiped thick tears from tanned checks and found his seat again on the stand next to the others who preached about faith and trials and approached sorrow with the curious distance of those never called to suffer, their lives so good, their sons all good. Lee imagined that the laws of opposition were so finely balanced that there was never any happiness or misery to spare—it was all cold rearrangement—and as he sat there and waited for this numb, earnest spectacle to end, he wondered who now was having the time of their lives at his expense.

* * *

*I know that my Redeemer lives,
What comfort this sweet sentence gives . . .*

Stacy spoke of her brother's life (what an example he had been!) and about the resurrection (how she believed!) and about her faith and things that made no difference at all. It was sad to see her up there, living in the hope of the things she had been taught, hoping to endure all things—unaware that the last fruits of motherhood were loss and the annihilation of meaning.

Cheryl listened to her daughter and tried to wrap her mind around it all again. It wasn't enough that she had lost one son to the world. Now He had taken her favored and most beloved one. And He had taken him in his sins, too—foreordained him to damnation—how could anyone with so much love have done this to their son? She didn't care about herself; how could He have done this to Jeff? What "wise purpose" was there (Sister Holtshaw lacking the most essential requirements to know) in damning someone to hell who was supposed to do some good in this world (his patriarchal blessing was clear about this) when his MISSION WASN'T EVEN COMPLETED (ditto); what Mercy what Justice is there in a God (2 Ne. 9:19; Alma 12:33; etc.); Jeff had never hardened his heart; and weakness and human frailty are not the same things as hardness; TO HAVE BEEN GIVEN A SON and why let her raise him when He Knew he would fall? (weakness, Ether 12:27, is not hardness); like the son she once knew and THAT was hardness! (Alma 12:11; Alma 24:30).

* * *

*Oh sweet, the joy this sentence gives,
I know that my Redeemer lives!*

"I guess I had to ask my brothers to sing that song because it was my favorite and they're my favorite singers."

Jeff had paused before continuing.

"I wasn't always sure that I was going to make it here today."

He turned around and looked at his mother—and at his father, who sat where he always sat on that stand, week after week. Lee tried to subdue his emotions, though he knew he was sitting somewhere entirely holy at that moment.

"I know it hasn't been easy for my parents, trying to teach all of us

kids the right way to live our lives. It's also not always easy to have a bishop for a dad, or a mother who knows the scriptures like the back of her hand."

Cheryl smiled and wondered why everyone always thought that about her.

"I guess I could say I'm going on a mission for them. Or for myself."

His eyes were red now, his voice tremulous.

"But the truth is, I'm going on this mission for my Brother."

* * *

It took six of them to carry the casket out to the hearse, Lee holding up the back left and setting the perfect example. He glanced around at the crowd of assembled losers, weeping and wailing, and couldn't believe these people had been given the benefit of the doubt. Repentance on the extended plan. Even the good ones weren't so good—Brother Reid over there secretly wallowing in his digital fantasies; Sister Collins with her lust for hot caffeine; the Gredlins, large butts on green cushions, riding this wake in a terrestrial haze and their extra 10 percent. With what extra grain of mortal pity had these Most Noble Spirits touched the Almighty and bartered their prisons for life with probation? And to what had their son owed such divine disregard?

* * *

The procession of cars worked its way up State College to Lambert and from Lambert toward Central, passing intersections and houses, strip malls and corners—some more difficult than others. There was the restaurant where Jeff had earned money for his mission. There was the side street where Jeff had been pulled over and had given the policeman a Pass-Along Card.

In their limo, she cried and begged him to go to Peru and he held her and said nothing and wished she wouldn't be so ridiculous. He didn't want to go down there. He didn't want to dig deeper. Did she really think it would change anything?

In long lines they passed and slowed and took forever. In slow lines they gathered around the hole and contemplated the Astro-turf. Cheryl got to sit up front with Lee—it was their day—the others had to find their own places and excuses.

* * *

*Then sings my soul,
My Savior God, to thee—
How great thou art!
How great thou art!*

Lee looked around at his son's fans and marveled that they were so easily fooled. It had been a simple, brutal act, nothing uncommon for the area. He couldn't remember anything being so simple.

"And please bless those that mourn, that they may be comforted . . ."

As Patrick rambled on with the dedicatory prayer, filling out his hopes with familiar references, Cheryl glanced up at the bowed faces, eyes closed to be closed, and for the first time saw her prodigal child—Steven of the mocking smile and endless condemnations.

They never loved him, he said. They never cared. They never let him do what he wanted; why did he even bother to come?

Church sucks and so do you. Screw you all.

I can do whatever I want. It's called free agency. Screw you all.

There was a quiet fear in his eyes, a hollow disorientation that startled her in its sharp and frightening unfamiliarity.

She had raised and taught and loved this son (and gave him so much of herself he couldn't help but believe), and after all these years he had come back to show her the damned.

Hardness and weakness. Two sons dead, one among the living. Two sons left, only time before they all slipped away.

* * *

"We just want you to know that we love you."

Cars were pulling out and people were now starting to leave, but it was far from over. It would never be over until they had gotten to the bottom of things, until they were given answers both verifiable and satisfactory. Journals lie; his letters were never this insane. What of this girl who had wanted him so badly? Maybe their son had gone to say good-bye that last night. Maybe he had gone to repent. Would that girl have been so kind in her love to have let him choose the right without the contract of her wrath being carried out upon him? Or had it been the mistaken retribution of jealous friends or another who felt replaced by their son?

There were too many holes, too many unanswered questions. They would talk to the girl (that ring was theirs), talk to her family, find his com-

panion. They would leave as soon as possible, use their ready passports and countless air miles.

* * *

At the luncheon afterward, they announced to their dwindling posterity that they were going to Peru. An investigation was probably underway; and if not, they would open one. They would stay till it was finished—a week, maybe less—it wouldn't cost much to get things done down there. And when they came back, they would have the answers to this mystery and put all their minds at rest.

Stacy and Jesse protested, but they weren't listening. Patrick just cried and Lynn tried to dissuade them with reunions and appeals and tiresome peace treaties—Steven would be in town for a few more days; they were all going to Disneyland on Monday; things had all happened so fast—so could they please wait and spend some time with them before they went off to Peru?

In silence, they drove home, their mouths working out the details, their thoughts devising alternate endings.

They would take only what they needed; what they couldn't bring or needed they would buy. They would get a translator maybe at the airport; they would rent or buy a car there, too. They would travel light and bring plenty of money; people in these countries weren't too up to speed. They would pay for the truth and if someone else had to pay, so be it.

Peru. They hated the thought and sound of it. They hated the soft contours of a language that belied the Gadianton desperation of a people and culture that meant death. Didn't their pleading children know they would go the same lengths for them? It didn't matter what they would suffer when the comforting truth would release them all. They would lose themselves to find their peace, and they would retrieve their son from hell.

As they walked into the darkened house, she grabbed the mail and began to sort. Condolences, condolences, trash and utter waste. As she rifled through the endless stacks of bills and cards, her eyes caught a glimpse of air mail stripes and for a split second she found herself in the world of a week ago. Lee took the letter from her shaking hands and then stopped and shook himself. It would be Jeff's last message and then no more. Of all the things they could have hoped for—if it gave them their

truth (and how it would! they couldn't deny the peace and warmth they were now feeling)—then things could be made manageable again.

It had been written on P-Day, the morning before he died. It covered less than half a page, two short paragraphs (truth is brief) and there was a small three-by-five photo tucked inside. A man of about twenty or younger stood smiling between their son and his companion. He was supposed to have been baptized that Sunday, Jeff wrote, but he had disappeared and had gone back to old ways. He and his companion were distraught; they didn't know where he was. But they loved him, for they knew the worth of his soul. And they trusted that the Lord, who loves and knows the souls of all men (D&C 18:10) would judge him in mercy despite his hardness and his weakness—and be there to help him when he was ready to come back so please, please could they pray for this lost, hurting child that he loved?

They read it over and over and over. They held the letter tight and read it again. And with a piercing devastation that slowly gave way to a quiet exhaustion, they sobbed and pleaded and refused to be comforted.