

The Buzzard Tree

Johnny Townsend

Patty Lou looked out the door. She was waiting for her grandson, Robert, to come. She hadn't seen him since her ninetieth birthday party three months earlier, when the whole family had come out to Brookhaven, Mississippi, to celebrate with her. Robert came up from New Orleans to see her only three or four times a year, and she was looking forward to seeing him.

She looked out at the sky. There were four buzzards circling slowly and gently over the farm. She remembered the rhyme she'd learned some eighty years earlier. "One for sorrow. Two for joy. Three for a letter. Four for a boy." Well, she'd be getting a boy today. Robert. She'd actually be getting two boys. Robert would be coming with his friend, Joseph.

Patty Lou had long since stopped worrying about Robert being gay. At first, being Mormon, she'd worried that he'd go to hell, but he still seemed like a decent man. Then she'd worried about him catching AIDS. But he'd told her six years ago he had the AIDS virus, and he still seemed okay. He'd been taking medication right from the start and assured her he'd be fine for many years to come. Now she just worried she wouldn't see him enough.

Patty Lou went and sat back down on her sofa. She had a window unit air conditioner, which the family had forced her into buying five years ago, threatening not to visit her again during the long summer months unless she got one; but even though it was 90 degrees outside, she decided to wait until closer to the time Robert and Joseph were coming before turning it on. She still believed natural air was healthier. She'd lived eighty-five years before getting an air conditioner, hadn't she? And now, facing leukemia, she needed all the natural air she could get.

It wasn't the same kind of leukemia her daughter, Marsha, had died of twenty-one years earlier. Patty Lou still remembered seeing her daughter in her temple clothes in her casket. She herself hadn't converted till af-

ter Marsha's death, doing so largely so she could be with her daughter again. Marsha had had acute leukemia, while Patty Lou had chronic. There was more to the name than that, but she couldn't remember it. Patty Lou remembered when she'd been diagnosed ten years earlier. The doctor had said, "With this disease, I'm afraid you've probably only got ten years to live." Patty Lou had replied, "Well, I'm eighty. I'll take it." But now that the ten years had passed and the Leukeran pills no longer worked, ten years didn't seem like enough. She knew heaven would be nice, and it would be great to be with Marsha again. Patty Lou had had Marsha sealed to her in the temple by proxy after joining the Church, and she felt that the afterlife with her would be pleasant enough. She just wasn't ready to go yet. Was it being selfish to still want to live when you were ninety years old? It might be, but she couldn't help it. She liked being alive.

As it neared noon, Patty Lou turned on the air conditioner in the living room, and she heated some field peas and green beans on the stove. She also heated some mashed potatoes and a pot roast she had cooked earlier. The family had always loved her cooking, though it was simple enough. It was one thing she could still do, so she did it. She ate well, even though she was just cooking for one most days. She wanted to stay healthy, and she was in pretty good shape, except perhaps for a bruise or two lately.

Around 12:30, Patty Lou heard the dogs barking outside. She went to the door and saw Robert and Joseph walking up. Robert had dark hair and a graying beard, and Joseph was short and Italian-looking. Robert was forty-three, the same age his mother had been when she died, and Joseph was fifty-five. How could her grandson be so old?

"Hi!" said Robert as she opened the screen door. "How're you doing?"

"Okay." They hugged, and both boys gave her a kiss.

"Here. We brought you some treats." Robert handed her a bag, and she saw inside it a pack of chocolate-covered peanuts, some peanut butter cups, and a pack of maple-covered peanuts. She loved peanuts.

"Thank you," she said. "Come on in the kitchen. Dinner's ready."

The boys went in the bathroom to freshen up after their two-and-a-half-hour trip while Patty Lou poured some Coke. She knew the Church frowned on caffeine, but she also knew Robert liked Coke, so she always served it when he came to visit. The boys soon joined her at the kitchen table, which was already set. Robert's father, Henry, had made the

table some forty-five years earlier. He'd left New Orleans to come back to the country after Marsha had died and had married a local woman, Joann, a Baptist, a few years later. He no longer came to the Mormon meetings, but he still came by Patty Lou's house every few months to bush-hog her weeds.

"Would you like to say the blessing?" Patty Lou asked Robert.

He nodded and bowed his head. "Dear Heavenly Father. We thank thee for this food, and we ask thee to bless it that it will be good for us. And we ask thee to please bless Grandma that her medicine will work and she'll be okay. And we ask this in Jesus's name. Amen."

Patty Lou liked to hear him use Jesus's name. Robert had started going to the Jewish church in New Orleans when he'd been with his last friend, a Jew. She wasn't sure God would take him to heaven as a gay person, but there was no sense making it worse by being a Jew. Of course, her doctor was Jewish, and he seemed nice enough. Maybe being a Jew didn't matter, either.

"Your sister Joyce was up here last night for your dad's tractor pull. She came by for about fifteen minutes with Veronica before going to your dad's place," she informed them. Joyce was a year older than Robert and also lived in New Orleans. She came up to see her even less frequently than Robert, usually just for Christmas and maybe one other time a year. While Veronica was seventeen and still lived at home, Joyce's oldest child, Mark, was twenty-seven now. He also lived in New Orleans and came up to visit his grandfather Henry several times a year. Patty Lou knew this and couldn't help but feel hurt that he usually never bothered to stop by to see her as well.

"They're doing okay?" asked Robert.

"Yeah, I think so."

"Did Mark come up, too?"

"I don't know."

Mark usually rode in each of Henry's tractor pulls, but Patty Lou hadn't asked Joyce if he was coming up yesterday. If he didn't show up to visit, it was better not to know he was in town. They were all still active in the Church, at least, and that was some comfort. If they couldn't be together now, they might still be together later. Maybe she'd be more fun to be with in heaven.

"Veronica still in the ROTC?"

"I think so. They were only here fifteen minutes." She took a sip of

her Coke. She had to admit, she liked it once in a while, too. "Y'all didn't want to come up for the tractor pull?"

"It's not really our thing."

After the meal, Patty Lou went out on the back porch and brought in a yellow cake with chocolate icing. She brushed a few ants off the plate and set it down on the table. "I've got some Robbie-cake for you." As a child, this was the only one of the several kinds of cake Patty Lou made that Robert would eat, so it became known in the family as Robbie-cake. She still made it every time he came to visit.

"Thanks, Grandma."

When they'd finished eating, Robert washed the dishes in the sink. The other grandkids never helped clean up. Patty Lou felt awkward about it, not liking to impose when they were visiting, but appreciating the thought. If they helped, it made her feel as if they thought she was weak, but their not helping made her feel unappreciated. It was bad either way. When Robert was through, they all went back in the living room to sit down on the two sofas.

"How's work?" asked Patty Lou, hoping she'd be able to hear over the sound of the air conditioner.

"It's okay," said Robert. "A new girl just started at the library. She's obsessive-compulsive, so she drives me crazy."

Patty Lou didn't exactly know what that meant and didn't really care to ask. She was sorry Robert didn't do something more important with his life, but no one in the family really had. Being a good person was more important than being successful, but why couldn't you be both? "And how's work for you, Joseph?"

"I just finished teaching summer school this week. I had some good students. The fall semester starts in three weeks."

"Y'all going anywhere?"

"We're going to San Francisco for several days next week," said Robert.

Patty Lou nodded. The boys had spent two weeks in Europe in the spring and now were going to California for a week, but they were coming to see her only for the afternoon. They weren't even staying the night. Of course, she knew she never had anything interesting to talk about. She never did anything different. Robert used to ask her to tell stories about when she was growing up, and he'd written her early history up in a forty-page booklet and given copies to everyone in the family, but there

were no new stories to tell. At first, seeing the printed booklet had made her feel important. But after a while, she felt dismayed that her whole life, her whole being, had been reduced to a mere forty pages. It seemed somehow disappointing.

“How’s your blood count?” asked Robert.

“It’s at 100,000. It was at 160,000, but it’s supposed to be 4,000, so they want me to start chemotherapy tomorrow.”

“You have to go to the hospital?”

“No, I just go to the doctor’s office for a half hour. They’ll give me an IV for thirty minutes a day every day this week. Then I’ll be off it for three weeks, and then we repeat it again the next month the same way, for four months.”

“What’s the name of the drug?”

Patty Lou got up and went to her dresser, returning a moment later with a piece of paper. “It’s called Fludara.” She handed him the paper and let him read about the drug.

“Possible kidney problems,” said Robert. “I guess you better drink lots of water. Unless your feet swell up. I guess the doctor will tell you what to do.”

“I just hope it doesn’t make me sick. Remember your mother? I think the chemotherapy killed her before the leukemia would have.”

“Well, diarrhea isn’t supposed to be a problem,” said Robert, still reading the paper, “but nausea might. You could be okay, though. The paper doesn’t say what percentage of people experience these side effects.”

“I’m just glad I don’t have to go to the hospital. People die in hospitals. You never knew my sister Margaret Missouri. She went in the hospital to have a tumor removed, and she got lockjaw and died. She was only thirty-eight.”

“Tetanus,” said Robert. “How awful. Your whole body is just one big charley horse for two days and then you die.”

“And my sister Nelda Sue. She was forty-four when she went in to have her tonsils out. And she bled to death on the operating table.”

Patty Lou thought about the rest of her family. She was the ninth of ten children, and now she was the only one left. James had died of diphtheria when he was three, and Aubrey had died in his twenties when the glass in the back of the truck he was driving caved in and the dirt he was carrying suffocated him. Virginia, the youngest, was the last to go five years ago, of cancer. Patty Lou’s parents were gone, her brothers and sis-

ters were gone, her husband was gone, her daughter was gone. She should be ready to go, too, but she still wanted to stay a bit longer.

It wasn't that the grandkids were so good to her, but she still liked being around to see that they were okay. Her son, Shane, lived a couple of miles away and either he or his wife, Lisa, stopped by to see her every day for at least five minutes, but their two teenage sons didn't come by any oftener than Robert or Joyce.

No one called her, but she knew that was her fault. She could never think of anything to say over the phone, and the conversation never lasted more than two minutes. But Robert did write her every few months. Her eyesight was still good, so she enjoyed that. He often wrote her about his gay friends, but that was okay. They seemed to be nice to him, and that made her feel good. She didn't know if he was going to hell, but she still wanted him to have a good life. A good life was important.

"They'll probably stick you in a different vein every day this week," said Robert, "but I'm sure they have someone who will do it right and won't hurt you."

"You think they'll use a big needle?"

"I expect it'll be about medium."

"I hope I don't start going downhill," said Patty Lou. "I don't want a lingering death. I want to go in my sleep."

"I hope you go in your sleep, too."

Patty Lou smiled. The others wouldn't even talk about death, but Robert did. She liked that. She wasn't really afraid of death. She felt she was going to heaven, maybe not the highest degree in the celestial kingdom, but heaven nevertheless. She'd always tried to be a good Christian back when she was Methodist, and she tried to be a good Mormon now. So she believed the afterlife would be good. She simply wasn't ready to go just yet. When she was a girl, they didn't have running water. They had a horse and buggy to get to town. They had kerosene lanterns for light in the evening. The world had changed so drastically since then. It certainly wasn't all good, but it was definitely interesting. She didn't want to miss it.

They managed to talk till 3:00. So often when the grandkids visited, they would all just sit on the sofa in silence, struggling for something to say. But today it had gone pretty well. Then at 3:00, Robert said he and Joseph had to go over and see Henry for an hour but would be back.

Patty Lou just sat on the sofa waiting for them. She didn't really like to read, and there was never anything good on TV on Sunday afternoon.

She could listen to music or watch one of the videos the kids had given her, but she preferred just sitting and thinking. She always had lots of thoughts. She just never had anything to say. She thought again now of the possibility of death. She had her will made out already. She'd had it done twenty years ago. Everyone got an equal portion. Of course, they'd have to sell the two hundred acres and divide the money. She couldn't divide the land seven or eight different ways.

Robert and Joseph came back around 4:30. The dogs barked again but let them pass. "We went by the old buzzard tree down near the creek," said Robert. "There must have been seventy-five buzzards in it. It was incredible."

"Yeah, they're always out circling, waiting for something to die."

Patty Lou opened the pack of chocolate-covered peanuts, and everyone ate a couple. She used a twist tie to close the package, and though the conversation had flowed pretty well before, now it seemed to flounder. "So you like San Francisco?" she asked.

"It's great," said Robert. "The weather's always nice, in the 60s in the day and 50s at night. The hills are pretty. And the city is clean and lively, not at all like New Orleans."

Patty Lou had never been out of Mississippi, but of course she had seen a lot on television. "Y'all planning any other trips?"

"We'll probably go see my mom in New York for Thanksgiving," said Joseph. "She's eighty-five and is having trouble walking."

"Oh, that's too bad."

They found a couple more things to talk about, and at 5:30, Patty Lou heated up the supper. They ate mostly in silence.

"I want you to be one of my pallbearers," said Patty Lou. It sounded too abrupt.

Robert stopped eating and nodded. "Okay. If I'm not too old by then."

"You won't be."

They had cake, drinking milk with the evening meal instead of Coke. Then they went back to the living room.

"Joann said she could take you to your doctor's appointment a couple of times this week if it was too hard for Lisa to take you every day," said Robert. "She's a retired nurse, so she could probably answer some of your questions, too."

"I'll think about it." It was nice of Joann to offer, but Patty Lou

thought she'd feel too awkward with her, the woman who had replaced her daughter.

They sat in silence a while, looking at the wooden floor. Robert had varnished it a few years ago on one of his trips up, but it was starting to get worn in places. Maybe if she was still alive next spring, he could do the floor again.

Around 6:30, Robert stood up. "Well, I guess we better go before it gets too dark. We'll be praying for you tomorrow."

Patty Lou hugged Robert and Joseph and opened the door for them. "Will I see you before Christmas?"

"We'll have to see what our schedule is like."

"All right."

Patty Lou gave Robert a jar of homemade pickles, and she stood on the porch with the dogs as he and Joseph got in their car. They all waved, and soon the car had gone off down the curving gravel drive. Patty Lou stood on the porch a moment longer after they left. There were still three buzzards circling in the sky overhead. Three for a letter. Maybe someone would write to her soon.

Patty Lou went back inside and turned off the air conditioner. Then she sat back down on the sofa and stared at the floor. An hour later when the sun went down, she was still sitting there, thinking.

Chemotherapy started tomorrow at 9:00, and she wanted to live. She went to the kitchen, took out the pack of chocolate-covered peanuts, and brushed off the ants. She didn't usually have two desserts, but if she was going to be nauseated this week, putting on a few extra ounces now wouldn't hurt. She poured some milk and sat down to eat.