

The Election

Roy just couldn't give up campaigning. Gladys understood that. Forty-four years he'd worked for the party, organizing suppers down at the stone schoolhouse off Highway 19, passing out bumper stickers and lawn signs, giving rides on election day to voters who promised to vote a straight-party ticket. Roy had always gone at it with the zeal of a preacher, and with a good deal more zeal than some preachers.

He'd still been active in party activities as recently as the mid-term election, in spite of his increasing deafness, a growing onslaught of bodily aches, and fuzziness around the edges of his memory. But the heart attack that caught him just as he reached the top of the stairs in May had delivered the final, decisive blow to Roy's political contributions. The party had recognized him at its last meeting with speeches from several of the other old men and a plaque with the words *Roy J. Buchanan, for Distinguished Service* engraved on a shiny brass plate. Gladys could see it now from where she sat on the sofa, a heavy block of wood with beveled edges that hung between the dining room window and another plaque: *World's Best Grandma*, in swirly gilded letters with a gold foil rose underneath.

She looked over at Roy, sitting in his recliner with the empty TV tray pushed to one side. They nearly always ate their suppers off TV trays these days. With the election so close, he didn't like to miss any of the coverage, which had reached fever pitch over the past few weeks. Gladys would rather have been watching *Lifetime*, or even the *Weather Channel*, which she found relaxing, but Roy couldn't seem to get enough. He rarely changed the channel and sat parked in front of the television for hours at a time. It was a particularly exciting election cycle because of the candidates; one was a billionaire businessman famous for his reality TV program, and the other was a woman.

"Roy," Gladys called to him, pitching her voice above the racket of the television, where a blonde woman was accusing the female

candidate of corruption. “Let’s get in the bed, honey. We’ll be tired tomorrah.”

“Arright,” Roy said, but he continued to sit, unmoving, until Gladys stood up and crossed the room to check that the door was locked. Then slowly, he worked himself out of his chair, keeping one hand on his cane handle and the other on the arm of the recliner until at last he stood blinking at the television screen.

“That’s enough for one day, I reckon,” Gladys murmured, and Roy yawned deeply as if in agreement before trudging toward the bedroom, leaving her to turn off the television and the lamp.

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Later, once she’d given Roy his medication and lay listening to his measured breaths from the twin bed next to her own, Gladys thought again about the upcoming election. It was like a hangnail, like a rough patch on her palm that needed pumicing; she couldn’t seem to leave it alone. In other elections, local or national, Gladys had simply voted for Roy’s candidates, the ones whose names and slogans decorated the patch of grass out by the mailbox and whose causes Roy had so devotedly taken up and down Spencer Ridge Road to whichever of their neighbors would give him a hearing. It had never occurred to her to do otherwise, even as she’d found herself questioning more and more of what the party stood for.

Their hatred of homosexuals was one example. Her cousin Martha was a homosexual, or at least Gladys thought she must have been. She never married or had children, and she lived with the same friend—Nancy was her name—for more than forty years before bone cancer separated them. Back when they were still in their thirties, Martha and Nancy had taken in all three of Mona Walkingstick’s boys after the poor woman passed away. Their daddy stayed drunk all the time and didn’t half look after them, and the youngest one was still in diapers at four and a half when, one Sunday afternoon, Martha drove her pick-up out to the refurbished milkhouse on the Pryors’ property where they were living and told the boys to pack up their belongings and come on home with her. The women saw to it that all three of

the boys got an education and made something of themselves, and if that wasn't Christian charity, then Gladys didn't know what was. She resolutely refused to believe that Martha was in Hell.

Then there were her brother Franklin's farm workers, his "*amigos*," as he called them. Those people never missed a Sunday service at the Catholic church, kept their yards as neat as a pin, and didn't take one penny in aid of any kind. Gladys knew because Franklin had told her so; he couldn't praise them highly enough. Gladys had seen them, many times, as she and Roy drove past the trailer homes they rented along the ridge on the way to Franklin's house, the children joyfully running around outside, the women shy behind their aprons. Were these the rapists and drug addicts the billionaire candidate described? Lying in bed, Gladys clucked her tongue aloud before she could catch herself.

But it wasn't just the differences between the party line and what she knew to be true that bothered her. In this election, it was something else; it was that man himself. How anyone could look at him and not find him odious—frightening, even—was more than Gladys could comprehend. All his hateful talk, his cursing and name-calling and threatening. There didn't seem to be anything so vulgar or uncouth that he wouldn't say. Gladys had even asked Roy once, "Don't you think there's something . . . *unpleasant* about that man?" but Roy had only answered, "Well, *she's* a criminal, so . . ." and trailed off, as if the rest were self-explanatory. Gladys personally thought that, after all those years in politics and the investigations the female candidate had been through, she must not be too much of a criminal or she would have been found out a long time ago. It just stood to reason.

Gladys lay now, twisting her wedding ring around her bony finger. Her fingers had grown so thin that most of the time the diamond hung backward at the base of her finger; if it weren't for the swollen knot of knuckle it would have fallen off altogether. There seemed to be less and less of her. She looked at her hands on top of the quilt. In the bluish glow of the streetlight, they were as gnarled as the roots of an old tree. She still remembered her first age spot, a perfect little egg on her left forearm. The color of an egg too, the brown ones they sell

at the farmer's market. How it had worried her when she first noticed it! She was still in her forties, too young, she thought, to be speckling with age. The flesh she now inhabited was as dappled as a wren's egg and knotted through with rope-like veins. A thought suddenly occurred to her as she lay in the dark: as much as she worried about Roy, the truth was that this might just as easily be the last presidential election Gladys ever voted in herself.

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In the whole of her married life, Gladys had only kept one secret from Roy. It was the summer after Teresa's first year in college, and Gladys had asked Mikey to take her to see her daughter, who'd decided not to come home for the summer. The oleander was in spectacular white and red bloom along the highway as they wound toward the dismal little mill house Teresa had rented, listening to oldies on the radio and occasionally, both of them, singing along. While Mikey unloaded the cake from the backseat of Roy's Buick, Gladys marched up to the door and rang the bell, ready to shout, "Happy birthday!" when Teresa opened the door.

Only when the door opened it wasn't Teresa, but a tall man in bellbottoms and without a shirt, his scraggly beard mapping out patches of his face. Before Gladys could stammer out that they must have come to the wrong place, down the narrow hallway came Teresa, her hair tied back in a handkerchief like a gypsy woman.

"Mom!" she shouted. "What are you doing here?"

"Happy birthday, Sis!" Mikey called from the front walk. Then he came into view, the sheet cake held out before him like an offering.

They ate off mismatched tea saucers in a simmering silence before Gladys and Mikey hastily took their leave amid a series of awkward hugs and handshakes. After Teresa walked them back to the end of the gravel driveway, Gladys stood with her lips pursed tightly and looked from her daughter to the forlorn house behind her.

"Don't tell your daddy," she finally said. "It would break his heart."

Roy's heart, literal and figurative, was still her main preoccupation in life. It was his heart that Gladys had wanted to protect when

Teresa afterward divorced the scruffy man—Harlan—and ran off to South America to find herself. And it was his heart that she sought to shield when, a year later, their daughter showed up on the doorstep with a distinct bulge under her navel.

But there was more to it than that. In the matter of this election, as in so many things in their life together—and it *was* a lifetime, a marriage of nearly sixty years—Gladys wanted something preserved: she wanted her image of Roy as a wise, noble, kind man to remain untarnished. In the scrapbook of her mind, Gladys returned again and again to the scenes in which Roy’s magnanimity was confirmed. At a time when most men his age were enjoying retirement, Roy had thrown himself into raising little Bodhi—Teresa had disappeared again, this time to an ashram somewhere in the northwest—attending parent-teacher conferences and bandaging skinned knees and bringing home the trophy for the boxcar derby.

But there were other scenes Gladys didn’t like to revisit. She thought of the evening of the other party’s convention a few months ago, when the candidate’s husband, a former president himself, detailed her many achievements.

“I wouldn’ta known she did all that,” Gladys had remarked wonderingly.

But Roy had only sniffed and said, “If she was that great, you’d think he woulda been faithful,” so Gladys had said no more. It was an ungracious response, and she couldn’t bear to see Roy in that light.

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On the night of the election, they stayed up late watching the results trickle in state by state. As it became more and more clear that the billionaire would be declared the victor, Gladys turned her attention from the television, picking up first her crossword puzzle magazine then an old issue of *Southern Living*. Finally she scooted to the edge of the sofa and stood slowly up. Her body felt heavier than normal.

“I b’lieve I’m gonna go ahead and turn in.”

From his armchair, Roy looked up at her in surprise.

“Don’t you feel good?”

“No, honey, not much.”

Gladys stood at the window in the near-darkness biting her lower lip, suppressing an emotion that seeped out unbidden and made hot trails down her cheeks. She clenched and unclenched her hands. How close they'd been to a woman president, in her lifetime! How unlikely she'd live to see one now. It felt like grief, nearly, like losing someone you loved.

Later, when they both lay in their twin beds in the dim room, Roy gave a loud, satisfied sigh.

“He did it! No matter what they all said, he did it after all.”

“Yes, honey,” Gladys said softly, a catch in her voice. “He did.”

“Feels good to do your part, don't it?”

There, at least, she found some consolation.

“I s'pose it does, Roy. I s'pose it does.”