

## Tower Duty

When cancer took Murray, I was such an ingrate. Weren't my forty years of marriage to him enough? Weren't the two daughters God gave me enough? He lived almost a year after Doctor Diver diagnosed his brain tumor—wasn't that enough? Why must we set our hearts on things that must be limited? The Lord gives, the Lord takes—we should let it go at that.

How I wish I could follow my own advice. When that dark shadow fell across Murray's bed, I bawled like a calf. "Not yet, Bunny," I said. "Not yet." But he slipped away from me without saying so much as a word. My god, I'd have given my very soul for another day with him. But souls like mine are a penny a dozen. Why on earth would God make an exemption for a dumpy little housewife from Newcastle? A bailiff's daughter who's lived her whole life in a podunk Indiana town.

Yet the lord wanted *Murray's* soul—why I can't imagine. A TV hound, a sloppy drunk, and an absentee father, he was in *no way* remarkable. The Lord might have just as well left him with me for all the good he was. Goodness, was he really worth all my tears? I think some women are criers and that's all that needs to be said about it.

Still, I was such a wreck at the funeral that Billie and Sarah Jean, our daughters, had to hold me up. Afterwards, I went to see Father Mulligan at The Holy Family Cathedral. Father Mulligan is such a well meaning man—I wish I had treated him better. “We cannot understand God's ways,” he told me in a voice that could butter pancakes. “But know that he loves you, Loretta.” I wanted to scratch his eyes out, I wanted to slap his face. “If you *ever* want me back in your parish,” I snapped, “You will have to say more than ‘God loves you.’”

After Murray was laid to rest, I volunteered to work in the Newcastle Food Pantry. I had to keep myself busy so as not to lose my mind. So every day, for three hours a day, I handed out Spam and boxes of cornflakes to people down on their luck. It helped to not be so selfish, it helped to think about others for awhile. Sometimes, I even held hands with them and we said a little prayer.

But each afternoon after working in the pantry, I visited Murray's grave. The small things were what I remembered most: how he hogged the covers at night, how he always drove five miles under the speed limit, how he liked his morning coffee black with four teaspoons of sugar. One afternoon as I stood by his grave, his voice popped into my head. It gave me such a fright that I dropped my memorial roses. *Stop wasting your time, Loretta*, he said. *Go back to the church, I'm not here.* How

sanctimonious he sounded—is that what death does to a soul? If he wants to nag me like a bill collector, I'd rather he just moved on. He was a whole lot nicer before God took him—I guess because he was soused half the time.

One afternoon, as I stood by Murray's grave, I noticed two trees on a hill. One of the trees was lush and flowering, the other was leafless and gnarled. And I realized my life was just like those two trees. My youthful bloom was gone—I was pretty when I was young. But now I was like the second tree—twisted, old, and droopy but still of some use to the birds. Thank god, I was learning to look up.

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Murray never earned much money. As a salesman for Universal Windows, he was mostly paid commissions. And he wasn't that good a salesman. But although I know how to make do with little, I still needed to find a job. That isn't so easy for a woman of sixty who hobbles like a goose. Thirty years ago, I broke my knee when I fell off a step ladder in my kitchen. Doctor Diver said I needed surgery, but who has time for that? With two daughters to raise and a husband to feed, I had to stay on my feet. "Don't tell me how to run my life," I said to Doctor Diver. That was the last time he ever spoke to me about surgery.

A month after Murray passed, I went to Wal-Mart and asked for a job. The manager said they weren't hiring. I also applied at Target, but they didn't want me either. I even went to the local college and asked for a job in the cafeteria. "I make a real mean pot roast," I told the personnel director. He was a pleasant man with a comb over and a little pot belly like Murray's. Well, he put me on a waiting list, but he never did call me back.

I finally got a job as a guard at the Indiana Penal Farm—a factory farm correctional facility five miles out of town. Imagine me wearing a blue uniform and telling grown men what to do. But they're always hiring at the Penal Farm, I should have gone there first. They have to staff three shifts so they hire almost anyone.

Major Bundy, who interviewed me, asked so many questions. "Can you say no to inmates?" "Could you shoot a man from a tower?" "Do rapists and thieves disgust you?" I guess he was trying to frighten me, but he didn't scare me one wit. We're all God's children under the skin. We all need the love of the Lord. And since the job was mostly sitting, it wouldn't be hard on my knee.

They sent me to a two-week training academy at the Westville Correctional Facility—this enormous fenced-in complex beside Lake Michigan. I learned how to search a bunk; I learned how to fire a Mini-14, which is a lot like a squirrel gun. I also learned how to keep my mouth shut when the instructors were trying to talk. Lieutenant Brady, who ran most of our classes, took me aside on my first day of training. Such a serious little man he was, and he scowled like Old Man Winter. "Loretta," he said, his voice sharper than a tack. "You've told me, 'God bless you' six times today. *Nobody* needs that much blessing."

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When I showed up at the Farm for my first morning roll call, Major Bundy called me into his office. "Can you say no to inmates?" he repeated—my, what a tiresome question. I told him he needed to say no to doughnuts—that man must weigh four hundred pounds. He said, "Honey, we don't need wise apples here." I said, "Apples for *you* would be wise." Major Bundy laughed like a donkey—I guess the man

has a good heart. “Be careful here, Loretta,” he said as he rubbed his heavy jowls. “This work’s not for everyone.”

They paired me up with Officer Whitley who works in the intake and processing unit. It’s a long narrow building with unwaxed floors where newly arrived prisoners are housed. Our job was to assign the new inmates to cells when they got off the prison bus. We also had to march them to the dining hall for meals.

Officer Whitley, a silver-haired gentleman in his seventies, gave me a word of advice. “Let ’em know when you’re walking the range,” he said. “Rattle your keys, shuffle your feet, whistle a tune real loud. You catch ’em doing drugs or something, you’ll have to write ’em up. If you write up too many of these scumbags, you may end up getting jumped.”

But the inmates didn’t seem mean to me—not as mean as Officer Whitley. They nodded politely and called me ma’am and asked me for something to read. The fish—that’s what they call new inmates—are not allowed to have books. They just sit in cramped cells day after day while they wait to be assigned jobs. My god, even robbers and thieves don’t deserve to be that bored.

On Sundays, we marched the fish to the prison chapel where they listened to Chaplain Clayton. The man is half saint and half banty rooster—he’s always quarreling with someone then apologizing for his temper. But that man can belt out a sermon much better than Father Mulligan. I guess it takes a congregation of felons to bring out the fire in a preacher. He’s a handsome man too—his shock of white hair makes him look like Martin Sheen.

Each day, Chaplain Clayton left the chapel and came to the intake unit. And he handed out Bibles and pamphlets to the fish. He said the prison can't stop the men from receiving religious material. Even a fish is allowed to have literature that might bring him closer to God. So I went to the Christian bookstore in Newcastle and got the seller to donate a bunch of books. Books about criminals and heretics who turned their lives over to Jesus. And I gave these books to the men on the fish range, and they all said, "Thank you, Missus Yoakum." The book they liked best was the one about the Manson Family.

Well, Major Bundy stopped me in the parking lot and scolded me like a parrot. "You can't run a lending library, Loretta," he said in his big gruff voice. I said, "I'm not lending those books—I'm giving them away." He said, "You're bending the rules, Loretta." I said, "Jesus bent 'em too." Major Bundy shook his head and said, "You gotta learn to tell inmates no. If you try to be friends with these bojacks, you're going to end up in their trick bag."

The next day at roll call, the Major announced that I was being reassigned. I was going to go to the school dorm, and I'd be on the afternoon shift. "Be careful of the cons in that dormitory," Major Bundy advised me. "All that education is making them smarter crooks."

This time they paired me up with a female officer. Her name was Officer Collins and her shoulders were as broad as a man's. She also wore her hair so short that she looked like Ellen DeGeneres. I can't say I approve of that kind of lifestyle, but she was nice enough to the inmates and liked to crack a joke. I suppose the love of the Lord can even be spread by sinners.

Officer Collins was very patient with me as she coached me through the job. Not that I needed a whole lot of coaching—there wasn't that much to do. Three times a shift, we counted the inmates while they sat upon their bunks. We then compared our totals to make sure the numbers matched. We also searched footlockers at random to check for weapons and drugs. If an inmate had any contraband, we put him on report. And once every hour we phoned the key room and gave a status report. I think they made us do this so we wouldn't fall asleep.

Most of the inmates in the school dorm were boys around twenty years old. And a few of them liked to hang around the officers' desk and chat with me. Like all boys, they were a little bit mischievous, and they started to pull my leg. "Ain't choo scared to work here, Missus Yoakum?" one of them said to me. "Why, are you going to murder me?" I asked; they got a big laugh out of that. One of the boys, whose name was Bubba, started calling me Mother Yoakum. "Hippity hop!" he'd call out to the dorm whenever I announced count. "If yer butt ain't on yer bed, Mother Yoakum gonna cut a switch."

Bubba and I had some lively chats, which helped to pass the time. He was a skinny boy with crooked teeth and tattoos of women on his forearms. He always had a foolish smirk on his face and he seemed a little bit simple. And my goodness, the things he told me would have made a sailor blush. "Didja know," he said, "that I dropped out of high school 'cause it interfered with my jacking off?" I said, "Too much of that, Bubba, will *keep* you simple-minded." He said, "Yer right 'cause I did a dumb thing, Missus Yoakum. I robbed a Seven Eleven to get money to buy myself porn." I said, "Bubba, that's so silly. Why didn't you go to church?" He said he now

goes to church every Sunday and listens to Chaplain Clayton. He said he's going to get baptized and spread the word of the Lord. He also told me that in a couple of months he will have his GED. When I told him I was proud of him, he snorted like a colt. "I gotta serve four more years, Missus Yoakum. What can I do with that kind of time once I got my GED?" I told him I would pray for him and I hoped the time passed quickly.

After I'd been in the school dorm three weeks, Major Bundy gave me a lecture. He told me I was being much too friendly with inmates and I needed to cut that out. "You can't be buddies with them, Loretta. I told you that once already." I said, "Those poor boys need to talk." He said, "Let 'em talk to the chaplain. If a con spends too much time with an officer, it makes him look like a snitch."

Major Bundy said I was being reassigned—he was pulling me out of the school dorm. He said I'd be going to the northeast tower to work the midnight shift.

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The following evening at midnight, I started my new assignment. They put me in the guard tower at the remotest corner of the prison. The tower shack was a concrete room atop a fifty foot pillar. It was empty except for a desk, a chair, and a toilet that needed cleaning. The room was surrounded by windows, which gave me a bird's-eye view of the grounds and the dormitories behind the double wire fence. A rack by the desk held a Mini-14 to shoot escaping inmates with.

The shift supervisor, Captain Hodgkins, was a lean little man with the face of a weasel and a temperament to match. He told me to keep my eyes open and to report anything suspicious. He said I could take a snack with me if I put it in a paper bag. He



said, "Don't be taking no lunch box up there. I searched an officer's lunch box last week and I found a television in it." "I'll bet he got good reception," I said; Captain Hodgkins didn't laugh.

"If I catch you sleepin' on duty," he said, "I'll fire you on the spot. If you let an inmate climb over the fence, I'll fire you on the spot. If you show up one minute late for roll call..." "You'll fire me on the spot," I said. Goodness, what a tiresome man; I wanted to box his ears.

It was quiet as a morgue in the tower, but I didn't feel lonely at all. Sitting fifty feet above the prison made me feel so much closer to God. Each hour on the hour, I punched dialed the intercom phone to check in with the key room officer. "All's well here, hon," was all I ever said. Since the inmates were all sound asleep in their bunks, I had nothing else to report.

Of course, Captain Hodgkins did what he could to catch me nodding off. I never knew when that silly man would sneak up the spiral staircase. I think it was a bit of a game to him so I decided to play along. Every time he appeared at the doorway, I offered him cookies and coffee.

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On my third night in the tower, I saw movement inside the fence. Two shadowy figures were dawdling behind it like lovers out for a stroll. At first, I thought they were guards; a perimeter light wasn't working too well and I could barely make them out. But when they started to climb the inner fence, I knew an escape was happening. I punch dialed the key room officer. This time, I got no response.

I slid open a window and gave them a shout; they had already scaled the inner fence and dropped to the ground below. They looked brighter now because they had taken their shirts off to cover the razor wire. Their shirts hung down from the wire like flags.

I racked the slide of the Mini-14. "I can see you both real plain," I called out.

"How ya doin', Missus Yoakum?" one of them answered. I recognized Bubba's voice.

"I was doing just fine 'til you got here," I said. "Bubba, you need to stay put."

"Why? You gonna murder me?" Their laughter fluttered like moths.

Well, duty is duty but oh my god, my hands were shaking like Jell-O. "Bubba, you're going to miss breakfast," I said. What a silly thing to say.

"Can't talk with you no more," Bubba said. "What church do you go to, Missus Yoakum? I'll meet you there on Sunday and buy you a *pancake* breakfast."

As they started to climb the outer fence, I could feel Murray lurking beside me. *Loretta, stop your chatter*, he said. How annoying that man had become.

Bubba was the first to reach the top of the fence so I pointed the rifle at him. When I released the safety, I felt more alone than I had ever felt in my life. It must have been just like Jesus felt the day he was nailed to the cross. The day they marched him to Calvary and hung him between two thieves. *Why, Lord?* I prayed. *Why this test? Why did you give me this test?*

As my finger found the trigger, a shadow fell over Bubba. It was the same dark shadow that fell over Murray before he left me behind. I squeezed the trigger gently,

as though I was milking a cow. The report sounded hollow, the gun had no kick—so it startled me when Bubba froze before climbing over the top of the fence.

*“Damn, Missus Yoakum, I’m sorry,”* he said then he didn’t say anything more. He just swayed like a bough struck by lightning then fell to the ground with a thump. Even when his friend started shaking him, Bubba lay as still as a log.

*“Don’t shoot no more, please!”* his friend shouted, and he kept on shaking Bubba. *“Bubba,”* he cried. *“You sack of shit! Just look what you made her do!”*

As a puddle grew around Bubba, I said a little prayer. I can only hope that the good Lord heard it. The prison alarm was now wailing so loud it must have awakened the dead. It sounded just like a tornado warning.

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Things are topsy-turvy—they don’t add up any more. Do you know they gave me an assembly for shooting that wretched boy? I received a color guard salute, and a bagpiper played a march. And the superintendant made this speech about how well I’d done my duty. Goodness, from all the fuss they made, you’d have thought I had won the lottery.

After the ceremony, Major Bundy called me into his office. *“Those boys profiled you, Loretta,”* he said. *“They knew you were in that tower. The only reason they climbed that fence was because they didn’t think you would shoot.”*

A month later, I went on medical leave—Major Bundy signed off on it. A plum-size lump had shown up in my lung, and I couldn’t catch my breath. Doctor Diver ordered a bunch of tests and he looked like he was concerned. But I can’t really say that I dwelled on it much. Winter comes to all.

**I don't want to go to heaven though—not if it's full of Father Mulligans. My god, I would be bored to death there. I don't want to see too much of Murray either—he's turned into such an ass. I guess forty years of marriage to him really were enough. No, I want to be where that poor boy is—wherever the Lord chose to put him. I want to spend more time with him. I want to box his ears.**

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