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# A Mother's Story

by Judy Haught

Just outside the tiny southwestern Oklahoma town of Gould lies a small windswept cemetery. It is the kind of cemetery typical of rural western Oklahoma prairie, well tended but lacking a truly manicured look. There are no trees to speak of, only a few scrubby cedar bushes. The grass covering the graves, though usually neatly mowed, is not the lush bermuda of more urban cemeteries. Rather it is a mixture of bermuda, native grasses and a few goatheads. Purple irises and pinkish blue larkspurs, lovingly planted by family members many years ago, bloom in the spring. Graves range in age from the turn of the century to the present day.

Somewhere in the northwestern quadrant near the front of the cemetery lies the Atchley family plot. Eight graves with modest identical markers form two neat rows. A father, a mother, and six children were laid to rest here. This in itself is not unusual except for the fact that upon examination of the grave markers, it becomes evident that all six children preceded their parents in death at an early age.

What about the mother of these children? Who was this woman who was so bereaved? Did she live a life of unending grief? Rassie Shelby Atchley, born September 4, 1895, did bear an extra burden of grief, but hers is a story of an unfailing spirit and of an acceptance of life on any terms.

Rassie grew up near Sheridan, Arkansas, where tragedy found her at an early age. In 1907 when Rassie was about six years old, her younger brother died. At

that time laundry was done outdoors. A large pot of water would be placed over a fire to boil for washing clothes. On one particular wash day Foster, who was a toddler at the time, fell into the boiling wash pot. Tragically, he did not die immediately but lingered in agony for 27 days. No hospital being available, he was cared for at home. Rassie, his small surrogate mother, suffered with him. A child was lost, and a young girl's heart was broken.

The pain of this loss stayed with Rassie to the end of her life. She related this story to her grandson when she was in her eighties and living in a nursing home. She said, "I just thought I would never stop hurting."

In 1909 at age 14, Rassie moved with her family to Bluff Land, a community no longer in existence in what was once Greer County, Texas. Her father filed a claim on 160 acres of land. It was mostly prairie, and Rassie attended school in a half dugout.

On December 7, 1913, when she was 18, Rassie married Littleton Harrison "Pete" Atchley, the son of friends of the family who had also migrated from Arkansas. They lived on a succession of rented farms and were basically sharecroppers until they managed to buy a farm in the 1920's.

In August 1914 their son Laverne, the first of their 12 children, was born. Over the next several years, they would bring eight more sons and three daughters into the world. And they would become intimately acquainted with grief.

The first of their children to die was a tiny premature son in 1915. There was no funeral, and the grave marker simply reads, "Infant Son, August 27, 1915."

Another son followed in death in 1921. Lester Abraham was a lively toddler playing with his

older brother one day and died the next from something known as summer complaint, a severe form of diarrhea. Again there was no funeral. A casket was constructed out of new lumber by a neighbor. The small body of Lester Abraham Atchley was carried in a wagon to the nearby town of Gould for gravesite rites.

Tragedy struck again in 1925 when Lloyd Lynn, a small sickly baby, died. Again there was no funeral, only graveside rites.

The loss of the babies was difficult, but in those days the infant mortality rate was high, and people almost expected some babies to die. It was the unexpected deaths of the older children that shook people's faith and made them condemn their lot in life.

In 1933 Rassie lost her oldest child, Laverne, at age 18 to spinal meningitis. He took sick during the night and was taken 15 miles to the hospital at Hollis the next morning with a high fever. A spinal tap was done, and the doctor said there was a new drug in the form of an injection that could be given. The drug was not available in Hollis but could be gotten at Vernon, Texas, approximately 75 miles away. A group of men, some family members and some friends of the family, went to Vernon for the medicine.

When the medicine arrived, Laverne had begun to feel better. He could talk and joke, and he requested a pillow from home and a jar of cistern water to drink because the hospital water did not taste good to him. The doctor gave the shot anyway. Laverne died 30 minutes later screaming in pain. The doctor's only explanation was that he gave the shot in the wrong place.

Rassie, who was within two weeks of delivering her eleventh child, did not go to the

hospital. In this day and age, it is hard for people to understand this, but the Atchleys were very poor. Rassie was so large with child that she had no clothes to wear. Maternity clothes simply were not available or affordable. And, of course, she did not expect Laverne to die.

The baby was born two weeks later, and Rassie withdrew into a shell. Her mother cared for the family for about two weeks. For the first time in her life Rassie wanted to die herself. As she put it, she wanted to go to heaven and take care of Laverne and the babies. Finally she was brought back to reality by the comment of her oldest daughter. She asked her mother, "Do you think Laverne and the babies need you more than we do?" From that point on, Rassie bore her burden with dignity.

In 1939 Rassie was again to know sorrow. A twenty-two year-old son by the name of Carl drowned in the river that now forms Lake Altus. He was working in a CCC camp and was in a hurry to get home to his new bride. The river was up, and he should have gone around to the bridge, but he elected to swim. It took three days to find the body. Rassie walked the river bank searching for him those three days. When the body was found, Rassie was not allowed to see it because of the deteriorated condition. As an old woman, she was heard to lament, "If only I had seen him."

The final loss of a child came in 1943. Another son, Leon, died at age of 13 of appendicitis. The frustration and sorrow was compounded by the fact that this death could have been prevented if Leon had seen the doctor in time. But times were always hard for the Atchleys, and they never owned a



car that would start readily. The delay in getting Leon to the hospital was caused by a car that wouldn't start.

One would expect a broken, bitter spirit as a result of so much tragedy. But that was not the case. What all who knew her remember of Rassie was a sweet, loving nature. She had a ready smile and a gift for gab. She loved to talk, and trips to town were a delight for her. With a headscarf tightly knotted under her chin and a purse as big as a suitcase on her arm, she would shop and visit to her heart's content.

Her home was open to family and friends. Hospitality was second nature to her. There were always enough beans to go around. Her grandchildren adored her, and if the word grandmother is mentioned, her image pops into their minds.

Rassie outlived her husband by thirteen years and spent her remaining nine years in a nursing home where she was a delight to everyone. She busied herself visiting the other residents,

seeing to their needs and cheering them up. If a visitor came to see her, Rassie would not be in her room. She could be found making her rounds among the other residents. For someone who loved people as she did, the nursing home was a haven.

Probably the trait that is remembered by most people who knew her and what made Rassie unique was her acceptance of life and its sorrows and responsibilities. She did not shirk her responsibilities or complain about her lot. She was just an uneducated housewife bearing more than her share of sorrow. When asked why she did the things she did, her reply was, "You just do what you have to do."

A series of strokes left Rassie bedfast and seemingly mindless for the last three years of her life. Some say her body just outlived her mind, but one grandson disagreed. He felt there was always something there hanging on to life. She had endured so much that her condition was just another hardship to be gotten through.

And she did come through her final ordeal on September 14, 1986. At the age of 91, she passed on. She had not responded to anyone in three years, but when her daughter said, "You're going to heaven, Mama," she smiled. Perhaps she was thinking of Laverne and the others.

Standing before her grave, one realizes what a truly remarkable life she led. In a day and age when many people shirk responsibility and don't do what is expected, someone who just did what she had to do without complaint was a genuine hero. ■

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