

Bud Russell's Birthday

By Charity Singleton

April 1, 2002. Bud Russell was officially as old as the hills – at least that's how he felt the morning of his 70th birthday. Without the aid of an alarm clock, he awoke right on schedule at 5 a.m. – his body knew no other time to awake after 52 years of waking up at the same time every day. "Sleep in? Are you kidding?" he would tease with his grandchildren. "The birds don't sleep in. I'll bet ya never saw a beaver down at the crick sleeping in. And one thing's for sure – the purebreds ain't sleeping in."

Bud had been an Angus cattleman for years – since his father bought him his first steer when he was 16. Since the day he received the registration documentation in the mail certifying that his calf was a purebred Angus, he always referred to them as purebreds.

For most of his life, he'd wake up at 5 a.m., lean over and kiss his wife, Helen, and then roll out of bed to begin his day. Since Helen had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's three years ago and then eventually was placed in a long-term care facility, his morning routine now consisted of a prayer, instead of a kiss. "Lord, you've given me another day. Now I'm a'given back to you."

As Bud rolled onto his side and lifted the weight of his body up with his left arm, his feet swung around him and his right arm instinctively grabbed his lower back. The pain he usually felt during this getting out of bed exercise was not nearly as sharp this morning, and though he grunted out of habit, he actually felt like his 70-year-old body was more rested today than in years.

"Lord, you've not just given me another day. You've given me another GOOD day. And hey, happy birthday to me!" Bud laughed out loud as he prayed. If he could crack jokes with the Lord, he knew he must be feeling alright.

Bud grabbed his trademark "Russell overalls" from the back of the chair near the bed. Except for Sundays and an occasional holiday, Bud could always be found in his faded denim overalls, usually with a long sleeve plaid shirt underneath – even in the summer. This morning he had only his white Hanes t-shirt that he had slept in underneath the overalls as he headed to the bathroom. The overalls hung a little more loosely these days than before. No matter how much Bud ate, he could feel the weight slipping off of him. But Bud usually didn't feel like eating. It was the loss of appetite more than the loss of weight that

had Bud worried. For decades, he would gain a little weight in the winter and lose it all when the heavy work time came around in the Spring, Summer and Fall. But whether he was gaining or losing weight, he'd always had his appetite.

Running his hand over his scratchy face, Bud determined that he would need a shave today, especially since this was his big day. He knew all the folks down at Jim's Diner would have plenty to say about an unshaven man on his birthday, especially such a landmark birthday as the big 7 – 0. And they would know it was his birthday alright – there had always been just as much celebrating at Jim's as there had been at home, even during Helen's good years. Bud had always suspected that the goings-on at Jim's had been Helen's idea to start with. But it stuck with Jim, and year after year there was some sort of celebration. Probably had something to do with his birthday being on April 1, Bud always thought. His only consolation with having this particular day as his birthday was the assurance that his parents had nothing to do with choosing the day he would be born. Otherwise, he might have had some bitter growing up years. There's little relief for a man who's been referred to his entire life as the Biggest Fool of All.

A quick once around the bottom half of his face and upper half of his neck with his new electric razor his son had gotten for him on his birthday two years ago left him with a smooth, but still sagging face. Bud paused for a moment in front of the mirror. *Where did all this extra skin come from?* He always joked. Today he really wanted to know. Bud's face was pale from having not seen the sun in a few months, and his chapped lips seemed thin stretched over his elongated teeth. And with his cheeks now resting at each side of his chin, his nose jutted out more than it ever had in his youth. After breaking it 15 years ago, the crook was even more pronounced.

But Bud's eyes had retained all their color, all their youthfulness. Helen always told him they were as green as a John Deere tractor – but since Bud only drove the red and black Case farm machines, he preferred that they be compared to the color money. "But money's not that green," Helen would protest. "It's green enough for me!" Bud would snap back. They had had the same exchange of words over Bud's eye color at least a thousand times. Now when Helen looked into Bud's eyes, she usually said only one thing. "Go get Billy. It's time for supper." Billy, Helen's little brother, had died when she was 17.

Bud usually had dry wheat toast and two fried eggs over easy before going out to feed the few head of cattle he still had on his farm. He always ate before going to Jim's, but then would drink a few

cups of coffee, sitting around talking about falling grain prices and rising property taxes. Today, he bypassed the kitchen, put on his hooded sweatshirt and old army green mud boots, and headed straight for the barn. If he hurried, he could get the feeding done and be down at Jim's by 6 a.m. For his birthday, Jim always insisted on a big breakfast for him and a cup of coffee for everyone else, on the house. By the time they would finish with their traditional eating, coffee drinking and harassing, Bud could leave and be at Helen's by 8:30 a.m. He prepared himself that she probably wouldn't even recognize him, much less remember it was his birthday – it had been weeks since she had called him by name and last year on his birthday she had been in the hospital

After finishing in the barn, Bud went back in the house to wash his hands, comb his hair and put on a clean shirt. Since it was his birthday, he decided on the solid green denim shirt his daughter had brought over the night before. Janey had told him that she had to come over the day before his birthday because she was working second shift at the hospital on his birthday. But knowing Janey, Bud was pretty sure the real reason was that she wanted him to have a new shirt to wear for his celebration at Jim's and his visit with Helen. *Nope, I don't get out much*, Jim thought to himself, realizing that his plans for the day weren't exactly exciting. *What else is a man going to do on his 70th birthday?*

Grabbing his worn wallet and stuffing it in the back pocket of his overalls and putting on a different hooded sweatshirt –his “nice sweater” – over his new green shirt, he walked slowly out to the blue Ford pickup truck. Lifting several 5-gallon buckets of feed and water for the cattle had caused the pain in his back to flare up a little. Nothing like it usually did though. He was still grateful for a relatively pain-free day.

Bud drove down the long winding driveway away from the white two-story home he had lived in for 50 years. He and Helen bought the land and built part of the house when they got married in 1952. His poor eyesight and flat feet had kept him out of the Korean War – though it had always been his dream to serve in the Navy. With a loan from each of their parents, Bud at 20 and Helen at 18 had their first experience with the American dream. As their family expanded, so did their home. When they discovered that they were expecting their fourth child, Bud convinced his brothers and brothers-in-law to help him add a second story. That was 1962, the same year John Glenn traveled around the earth in Mercury Friendship7. Bud had been sketching out some plans and figuring out how much a project like this,

adding a whole new level to his house, was going to cost, thinking that he was crazy to even try it. Just then, his eight-year-old son Joey ran out to the barn where Bud had been working, screaming at the top of his lungs. "They're doing it, pop! They're sending a man to space. He's going to orbit the earth. Quick! You've gotta hear it!"

Bud went in and sat in front of the radio, listening with Joey and Ben, their five-year-old, while Helen held Janey in her lap. She was only two. As he was listening to the announcer documenting the historical event, he realized that if John Glenn could risk his life to orbit the earth in a metal container filled with jet fuel, he could surely take out a loan from the bank to add on a second story to his home. After that, Bud always supported the space program. It was inspirational to him. In fact, Bud decided to run for a local government office the year Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. And when the first shuttle was launched, he and Helen went on their first Caribbean cruise.

When Bud got to Jim's place, it was dark inside and there were no cars in the lot. He glanced at his watch again – 6 a.m. Jim usually opened at 5:30 – he should definitely be here by now. Bud turned on the radio in his pick-up, hoping to hear the official time announced. He considered whether he had missed the transition to Daylight Savings Time. Mumbling the old rhyme to himself, he realized that it would be "Spring ahead," anyway, and in that case, it would be 7 a.m. now. Even more reason that Jim should already be there.

Bud got out of his truck, feeling like something must really be wrong. He recalled one day last week when he had been at Jim's for lunch and ordered extra gravy on the tenderloin special. Jim had commented about wishing he could have extra gravy on his meat. "Can't do it, though. Doc says my cholesterol is too high. I can't even have real butter any more," Jim had said.

As Bud recalled the conversation, he began walking a little faster toward the diner door. As he sped up, he felt the muscles in his back tense, and his right arm again automatically reached back to massage the weak spot. When he got to the door, he peered in, putting his left hand over his eye and next to the glass door to block the glare of the security light in the parking lot behind him. He didn't see anything unusual, except there was a light on in the back of the diner, where the kitchen was. He pulled on the door handle, and surprisingly, it opened.

An involuntary gasp came out of Bud as his mind raced with a hundred different possibilities. He knew most of them were unreasonable ideas planted in his head by the evening drama programs he watched on television. *Now Bud, don't go gettin' yourself all worked up.* Bud said to himself under his breath.

He shut the door again and thought of a plan. Maybe, just in case, he should go over and get one of the police officers. He knew the local sheriff's deputy usually parked over at the 7 Eleven this time of morning for coffee and long johns. Bud got back in his truck and began to back out when another car pulled up beside him. He looked over at the mid-size Pontiac and recognized his old friend Frank who also used to farm until his sons convinced him to sell off his land to a developer and invest in their new hardware franchise.

When he saw Frank getting out of the car, Bud rolled down his window and greeted him.

"Am I too late?" Frank asked, looking into the dark building and then looking at Bud.

"Too late? I'd say you're too early," Bud replied. "The door's open but it doesn't look like anyone's here. I was just about to go get the deputy to see if he'd check things out with me."

"Aww, we don't need no deputy. C'mon, I'll go in with you," Frank said, as he turned on his heel and headed toward the door.

"Alright," Bud said hesitantly. "Just not like Jim to not be here."

Frank opened the door and yelled in.

"Anybody here?"

Bud just got to the door when he saw Frank heading back toward the kitchen.

"I'm going to check things out," he said over his shoulder.

Bud's hand went to his back again, and just lowered his head for a minute trying to figure out what it could all mean. Just as he was lifting his head to see if Frank had found anything, all of the lights came on and there was a huge shout.

"April Fools!" Most of the voices yelled. Some said, "Happy Birthday," forgetting their only line. Bud fell back into a chair that was just behind him. Trying to catch his breath and steady himself at the same time, his face softened from horror into a knowing smile. He had been set up.

Everyone was laughing and slapping him on the back.

“What’s wrong, old man. Can’t take a joke?” Jim said, as he came over and gave his old friend a big bear hug.

Frank came into the now crowded room, feigning oblivion.

“Everything’s alright, Bud. I found them,” he said, laughing with the others.

“Ain’t there a law against surprising a man on his 70th birthday?” Bud asked, finally able to speak. “Another surprise like that, and I might not have another birthday.”

The crowd roared. About 25 of the regular patrons and a few off-duty waitresses had gathered early for the surprise. They all had known Bud for years.

Marcia, the regular early morning cashier, came out of the kitchen carrying a stack of pancakes covered in maple syrup with two flaming candles on top in the shape of a “7” and a zero.

“Hey Bud,” Marcia said, her bright red lips looking as sticky as the syrup. “You gotta blow out yer candles ‘fore the fire chief gets here. You know we can’t have open fires here in town.”

“Don’t tell him ‘bout Jim’s grill there in the kitchen then – I’ve seen all kinds of flame coming out of there,” Bud said, just before drawing in a big breath and extinguishing the flames in one try. As the applause broke out, Marcia set the plate down on the table where Bud was sitting.

“On the house, Birthday Boy,” the 52-year-old waitress said. “You want yer coffee now, or juice?”

“Oh, let’s just go for the coffee. You’re only 70 once, you know,” Bud said, looking around at all the well wishers who were still laughing and watching Bud get the special treatment. “And don’t bring me none of that decaf stuff. I want it leaded today!”

“Coffee for everyone,” Jim said. “It’s on the house.”

“So, how’d you know what time I was comin’ in,” Bud asked. “I usually don’t get here ‘til 6:30.”

“Bud, how many years have you and I known each other?” Jim asked, not really answering the question.

“Well, I guess 35 or 40. How am I supposed to remember that, I’m 70, you know!” Bud cracked.

“Well, after 35 or 40 years, you’d think a guy could guess what his friend’s going to do on his birthday,” Jim said. “And besides that, why do you think Janey came over to your place last night instead of today?”

Bud just shook his head. He knew Janey had been up to something, but he never suspected she was in on a local conspiracy.

“Yeah, I’m surprised she’s not here yet,” Jim said.

“Here? She’s coming here?” Bud asked, surprised. Janey had never been a part of his morning ritual. She and her husband Rick usually slept until 7:30 or 8 a.m. Janey worked evenings or overnights at the hospital and Rick was an insurance salesman, so he had most mornings off.

“Yeah, and she’s bringing Hel . . .”

Marcia slapped Jim on the back of the head.

“You, go get the rest of the pancakes going,” she said to Jim. “She’s bringing her, well, she’s bringing helmets for the party.”

“Helmets?” Bud asked.

“Helmets?” Jim also asked. He hadn’t gone to the kitchen yet.

“Yeah, we asked her to bring the birthday helmets for the party, and I guess she’s just running a little late,” Marcia struggled.

Both of the men stared at her for a few seconds in silence. Bud, because he couldn’t imagine what she was talking about. Jim, because he couldn’t think of any better cover-up for the slip he almost made.

“Well, I better go see about those pancakes,” Jim said, relieved to be excused from Marcia’s terrible attempt to cover up the rest of the surprise.

“Yeah, I’ll go get another pot of coffee,” Marcia said. “And if Janey gets here, just tell her to bring the helmets back to the kitchen.”

“Yeah, ok. Thanks,” Bud said, still not sure what to make of his daughter getting up early to bring some kind of helmets to his 70th birthday.

The regulars began finding seats instead of milling around, and the diner began to resume a little of its normalcy. A group of guys that worked at the local grain elevator walked in and looked around for a table. When they saw Bud, they began heading for his table, yelling birthday greetings across the restaurant.

With Bud's attention on them and their carousing, he didn't see Janey's car pull up just outside the diner and into the handicapped parking spot. But as the men began walking away from Bud toward an empty table in the corner, Bud saw the door open and Janey holding it open for someone who must have been walking very slowly behind her. He stood up to go over and help her with whatever it was she was supposed to be bringing. He was smiling as he approached, and she returned his smile briefly, and then she looked again toward the person for whom she was holding the door.

Bud also looked out the door and saw that it was Helen she was holding the door open for. Helen who was walking slowly behind her. Helen, whom Janey was bringing, not birthday helmets.

"Oh my God," Bud said, quietly. His smile had faded into a look of disbelief. Helen hadn't been out of the center for months, much less into town.

"What on earth?" Bud asked, looking at his wife, and then at his daughter.

"Happy Birthday, daddy!" Janey said. "Mom and I didn't want to miss your 70th birthday."

"I guess you didn't," Bud said, wrapping his arm around his wife to help her find a seat.

"Mom, it's dad's birthday, you know," Janey said to her mother.

"I know what day it is, Janey. Happy Birthday, Bud," Helen said, looking up at her husband, as he lowered her into the chair he had been sitting in. "I haven't seen you for a while."

"It's been too long," Bud said. Helen and Bud smiled at each other. Janey pulled up another chair for Bud so that he could sit next to his wife without having to ask someone else to move.

"Well, what shall we eat?" Helen asked, breaking the silence of everyone at the table who were staring at the couple, paralyzed in the moment.

"How about pancakes for everyone, on the house!" Jim said, walking toward the table from the counter.

"Here, here!" several of the coffee drinkers said, lifting their mugs in a toast.

"And happy birthday to me!" Bud said.

"Here, here!"