

Russell Rowland



Ode to Springtime in the Fall

Ode to Springtime in Fall

"Did you hear any quit in that voice?" My Uncle Lee just hung up the phone, which was on speaker, after talking to the man who leases his ranch.

"No," I say. "I sure didn't. Did you?"

"Not at all," he says.

It is a poignant question, and a meaningful analysis coming from someone like Lee Arbuckle, who is two weeks into treatment for lung cancer. On top of the cancer, Lee has been living with MS since 1976, so he knows a little about having no quit. He still walks, a little unsteadily, and he still talks with a clear and steady voice. Other than his limp, there are no signs that this is a man who has had a muscular degenerative disease for 40 years.

Since I moved back to Montana in 2007, I have driven down to the Arbuckle Ranch with my Uncle Lee many times. And the more often I make this 250-mile drive, and spend these days alone with Lee, the more important it has become to find a way to evaluate what these trips mean. But it's hard. I have seldom experienced anything more intense than a few days alone with this man, who is my mother's youngest brother, as well as my godfather.

For starters, Lee is probably the smartest man I know. When my mother was two, her father died of a heart attack while loading grain. He was 42. Five years later, my grandmother, Mary Lee Richardson, met a man who married her and took on her four children as his own. Frank and Mary Lee Arbuckle had one child of their own, and that was Lee. So although he had four older stepsiblings, he was essentially raised as an only child, as most of the others were off at school. Lee was also the only kid in his grade at the one-room schoolhouse in Albion, Montana, two miles from the ranch.

According to legend, because he was the only kid in his class, the teacher gave him the whole year's schoolwork at the beginning of his fourth grade year, and he finished it by November. So he spent the rest of the year reading the school's collection of *Encyclopedia Britannica*. And that's pretty much what you encounter when you talk to Lee: a man with an encyclopedic knowledge of the world.

When Lee finished high school, he attended Dartmouth, but left after a couple of years to join the Peace Corps, where he was stationed in Colombia. He spent two years working with local businesses there, creating several co-ops, before he returned to Dartmouth and finished a degree in economics, then was offered a job as Peace Corps Regional Director in Bolivia, where he met his wife Maggie.

After several discussions about how little sense it made to get married, Lee and Maggie did it anyway, and moved to the Arbuckle Ranch in 1971. Lee was torn about whether to pursue a career in his field or to follow his passion, which was the ranch. Probably like many young men, his time away from Montana made him appreciate where he grew up much more than he did as a child, and he knew he needed to spend time in Montana to determine whether he could someday take over the ranch.

But the decision was made for him. After seven years on the ranch, Lee began to notice that his vision was a little off. He was only 33 years old, so he knew this wasn't good. He got it checked, and they informed him that he had MS. He knew he would not be able to continue doing the physical labor, so he made the difficult decision to leave the ranch with Maggie and his two young sons. He and his father agreed to lease the ranch to a local because no one in the family was prepared or interested in taking over.

Lee went on to complete an MBA at Tuck, the graduate school at Dartmouth, and a few years later he completed an MS in Economic Administration from Montana State University. He spent the next several years working as an agricultural banking consultant for the Agency for International Development, mostly in Honduras.

By this time, I had not seen much of my uncle, and he had become something of a myth—the family member who traveled the world and accomplished epic things. Every time I saw him he had incredible stories, delivered with gusto and a hearty laugh.

Lee moved back to Montana in 1996, and when I moved back in 2007, I finally had a chance to get to know him as an adult. And I soon realized that he is like most people—complicated and sometimes difficult. It was a good lesson, learning that even the most accomplished and incredible among us have our challenges; I eventually realized that I had spent much of my life comparing myself to Lee, believing that I was somehow a weaker man by not being more like him—more perfect somehow.

If you ask Lee a question, particularly one involving economics, politics, business, or international relations, you can expect to be led through a maze of tangents, into corners of knowledge you never even considered. A question about his favorite brand of coffee can lead to an entire history of the economic development of Colombia, as well as the effect of politics on the farmers who raised the beans. It's a fascinating mix of professorial instruction and homespun colloquialism. For instance, when talking about a bad drought, he jokes about the farmer who has a four-year-old frog who doesn't know how to swim yet. On one of our drives back from the ranch, I asked him a

question somewhere around the Little Big Horn Battlefield, and he was still unspooling the answer when we pulled into Billings, 65 miles later. I couldn't remember the question.

But this assessment of my uncle is incomplete. Because he is also highly versed in music, poetry, films, and literature. Although his life is dictated by facts and figures, he is well acquainted with the rest of the world.

But this trip was different. This trip was, if anything, even more intense. There was a sense of urgency, and it's not hard to imagine why. Two years ago, Lee was diagnosed with throat cancer, and after undergoing radiation, he was able to overcome that scare, but just a few months ago, doctors discovered that the cancer had come back, metastasizing in his lungs. Lee greeted the news in his usual manner, researching like mad, and keeping up a furious optimism despite a prognosis that told him quite the opposite.

Maggie's brother Tito Carrasco had worked as a radiologist at MD Anderson in Houston before he was killed in a climbing accident about twenty years ago. Lee and Maggie kept in touch with many of Tito's co-workers, and through these connections, they learned about a clinical trial at MD Anderson. It involved a procedure similar to the one Jimmy Carter underwent for brain cancer, a treatment that cured him. Lee was accepted into this trial, one of only three people. Unfortunately, the treatment didn't work.

His trial had begun just two weeks before we left for the ranch. He was visibly compromised, coughing a great deal, and moving slower than usual. But he continued to refuse offers of help, and insisted on doing his share, even trying to help me change a flat tire, a one-man job even with two completely healthy people involved.

Lee has always had a very focused agenda when we visit the ranch. He knows what he wants to accomplish, and little else matters. I have learned to accept the fact that any ideas I have about how I'm going to spend my time there need to be abandoned. It's good for me. As someone who has lived alone for many years, working for myself, accustomed to doing pretty much what I want, there's something humbling about being at someone's beck and call. More often than not, this means hopping in the pickup and driving around part of the ranch to study something, something that will be explained to me in great detail, detail that I don't understand at all.

Adding to the tension of this trip, Carter County has just experienced one of its driest years in history. In a county where the average rainfall is generally a third of the national average, a year like this can be devastating. On top of that, the couple who leases the ranch is going through a

divorce. Lee has been pleased with these lessees, so he's worried about the impact. The future of the ranch is very much on his mind. Lee is not the kind of man who likes to leave things to chance, and he's not the kind of man who would want to leave problems for his family.

The Arbuckle Ranch has been in the family for almost 120 years, since Lee's grandfather moved up to Montana to escape from the Johnson County Wars in Wyoming. And one of the reasons they have managed to stay afloat, in a county with so little water, is because they have developed innovative ways of utilizing that water. One of my grandfather's brothers was among the earliest dirt movers in the region, building a series of dikes surrounding the ranch's pastures in order to retain water. John Arbuckle also built several small reservoirs, and the brothers incorporated a scalloping technique in one pasture, where they dug trenches every five yards to create furrows where the water gathers.

These reservoirs on the ranch are significant for another reason, due to an event that happened early in Lee's life. When Lee was 10 years old, he and his cousin George, who was two years older, were out riding on the ranch, and they decided to defy instructions from my grandfather and go swimming in one of the reservoirs. They dismounted, stripped, and slipped into the water. But this particular reservoir had a steep bank; the water was over their heads in an instant, and George, who was not as strong a swimmer as Lee, began to panic.

Lee swam out to help him, and George got hold of one of Lee's legs. Lee started to swim toward the bank. Even with George hanging onto his leg, he was making progress, but at one point, he felt George let go. He swam underwater, trying to find him, but couldn't, and he knew he needed to get help quickly, so he rode back to the house. They found George's body later that afternoon, and back at the house, Lee was disconsolate.

"I was sitting on the stairs, bawling my eyes out, when my cousin Rieta, George's older sister, sat down next to me. She put her arm around me, and she very calmly explained that I was not helping George at all by crying, and that I was just making her mother feel worse."

Lee has shared this story with me several times over the years, and I'm always struck by one fact. Sixty-five years later, he still seems to believe that Rieta's advice was sound, that tamping his emotions away was the right thing to do.

I can only imagine how an incident like this must have impacted my uncle as a 10-year-old boy, but the guilt must have been enormous. Not only were they doing something they weren't supposed to do, but his efforts to save George failed, and he just made matters worse by

showing his emotions. I also don't think it's a stretch to assume that no event in my uncle's life shaped him more than this one. And I don't think it's a coincidence that the next school year, his fourth grade year, would have been the year he immersed himself in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Knowledge became the place he went to escape, and it worked well for Lee.

The most recent innovation for water on the ranch, initiated by Lee just this past year, was to install three solar pumps in conjunction with three deep pools of fresh water. A pipeline from each of these pools leads to water troughs fashioned from the tires from the dirt movers used in coal mines. The pumps are positioned to pump the water about four feet from the bottom of the pool, to avoid the silt that gathers. So these troughs are filled with fresh, clean water, much better than the reservoirs, where the quality of the water is often compromised by the livestock, not to mention other natural pollutants.

With the drought, it would appear that the timing of this project is perfect, but in fact only one of the three systems is completed. And considering the state of the ranch, this is the kind of thing that tests my uncle's patience. I know from experience that working for Lee can be a challenge. He pushes himself hard, and expects the most from himself, and like most people that live with this attitude (raising my hand), he tends to pass this along to others. He has always been incredibly diplomatic about applying this kind of pressure, but it's a constant. I feel it whenever I'm with him. He has a strong sense of how things ought to be done, and it often translates to feeling as if you have a security camera trained on you. Where even the smallest of decisions is being watched.

We start every trip to the ranch the same way, driving around to check on the stock, and in this case, the progress on these solar units. Because the ranch is about 12,000 acres, this task takes up a whole day. To the average American, Eastern Montana would probably appear to be an unlikely place to plant roots—a wide expanse that is mostly treeless, and often devoid of anything except sagebrush. But there is more to this land than meets the eye, and of course no one knows this better than Lee. The Arbuckles were fortunate to prove up on land that borders the Little Missouri River, so they had an advantage over many of their neighbors.

But today it's clear from the beginning that Lee is not pleased. His lessee has moved his cattle to a pasture that borders the river, and the alfalfa in this pasture is already gnawed down to the nub. "We're going to have to replant next spring," Lee mutters.

He's also annoyed that his lessee has leased out another of the pastures to a third party, who has brought in their own cattle. Not that this is an unusual practice, but because of these cattle, there

is less grass available to the lessee's cattle. Third, the pastures with the best grass are the ones where the solar pumps are being installed, so there is no water at all in those pastures. The reservoirs are completely dry. The pumps aren't running yet. So the pastures that are filled with thick, tasty grass cannot be used. It is the convergence of all the worst possible scenarios for a rancher.

But Lee is, as always, philosophical. He would never bawl out his lessee, or even criticize him. What he does instead is ask questions that make his feelings clear. It's a delicate balance, because the person who owns a ranch is bound to have strong ideas about how things ought to be done, especially when they've worked that ranch themselves. But there also has to be an element of trust with the people you have chosen to inhabit your land. If you constantly tell them how things should be done, they won't last long.

So everything about the conversation I overhear on the phone is strategic. Even the fact that he chooses to have this conversation over the phone is significant, even though the house where the leasee lives is just 50 yards from the ranch house. Less intimidating by phone. But the goal is to determine whether or not the man who is leasing this land is going to make the choices Lee would like him to make. Lee may offer two different choices, but you know that one of them is the right one. And the questions are also specifically designed to determine whether or not the lessee is feeling any inclination to give up on their arrangement. Whether the combination of the divorce, the drought, and the half-installed solar pumps have killed his spirit.

The lease is up in a year, so Lee has some time to decide. But of course, that's the problem. He may not have time to decide.

Back at the house, I point to a picture on the wall of the dining room. It's one of my favorite pictures of Lee and Maggie and their two boys, taken when they were living on the ranch. Lee's hair is much longer than he normally wore it, and he and Maggie stand on opposite sides of a small horse, which holds four-year-old Anthony and two-year-old Andrew. Both parents sport huge smiles. They form a very handsome family.

"What did you think your life would look like by now back when that picture was taken?" I ask.

Lee answers without hesitation, as if he has given a great deal of thought to this very question. "That picture was taken in 1976, and I'm wearing my hair that long not as a fashion statement, but because I didn't have time to stop at the damn barber," he says. "My Peace Corps friend Bob

Archer took that picture, and it wasn't too long after this that I told him I was worried about my vision. He suggested I get it checked out, and of course that's when I found out about the MS."

"Maggie and I had agreed to take on an exchange student from Uruguay, and after the diagnosis, we discussed whether we should tell them we couldn't do it, but we agreed there was no reason he shouldn't still come. It turned out this kid, Horacio Platero, was from a ranching family, and because I had to go for so many appointments, he ended up doing a great deal of the work around here that summer." Lee pauses for a moment. "I don't know how we could have gotten through it otherwise."

I found out later that when my grandfather drove Horacio to the airport at the end of his stay, Grandpa Arbuckle plucked the hat from his own head and put it on Horacio's head. The ultimate sign of respect from a rancher. I also learned that Horacio was killed in an automobile accident with his wife at a young age, and I found it odd that Lee would not have mentioned this...odd but consistent with his personality.

We were in a museum earlier this year, and I heard some people talking. Uruguayans have a very unique accent—similar to other South American countries, but it's very distinct. So I went up to these people and asked whether they were from Uruguay, and they were stunned that I would know this, so I started to tell them about this fellow, this exchange student, and I suddenly found myself in tears. And I was telling them about Horacio and what he did for me, and then a poem came to me, a poem I'd learned a long time ago, by Ruben Dario, and I was blubbing away, reciting this poem:

*Juventud, divino tesoro ;
ya te vas para , novolver!
Cuando quiero llorar, no lloro...
y a veces lloro sin querer..*

And then Lee repeats the stanza in English.

*Youth, divine treasure,
I'll bet you're leaving never to return!
When I want to mourn, I do not cry ...
and sometimes I cry without wanting to ...*

Lee tears up, and I can't remember the last time I saw him do that. "Ode to Springtime in Fall," he says with a wistful smile. "That's the name of the poem."

Eight months after we talked in his kitchen, Lee passed away. About a week before he died, he asked me to write his obituary. I was the natural choice, not just because I'm a published author, but because for the past six months, I've been helping Lee on his memoirs. The day before he asked me to write his obituary, Lee told me that he's glad we are related. It was the closest he ever came to telling me he loves me, even though I know it's true.

Life on the Great Plains gives you a different perspective. Both Lee and I have lived in other places enough to notice that there's a difference. But there is also a gap between us that I have never been able to bridge. Somewhere beneath that thick layer of infinite knowledge about the world lies a heart that is touched by such things as poetry and song. But the idea of finding my way into that part of my uncle never felt possible. When my own father died four years ago, he told me he loved me and was proud of me, and it wasn't one of those dramatic death-bed scenes where it was the first time he'd ever said such a thing. He had told me these things often over the years.

But when someone asked me a few days before he died whether Lee was afraid, I tried to imagine asking him that question, and I could see it play out with absolute clarity. He would have presented a long detailed explanation about how we should live every day to the fullest, and make the most of our time here. He wouldn't have admitted being scared. And I think I know why.

I think it goes back to that day when Lee was 10, when he watched his cousin drown, and knew he was at least partially responsible, but was told that he must not burden others with the pain of that experience. I think my uncle learned early on that showing that kind of emotion would not be productive to those around him.

When he died, he had just completed his third clinical trial, and just a week before, he had happily reported "the tumors have been reduced by 16 percent." We had a family reunion scheduled for June 30th, and he planned to be there. He and Maggie also had plane tickets for Scotland in July. He died on June 22nd. But there was no quit. His body simply couldn't keep up with his mind.

Montana Journey. He has an MA in Creative Writing from Boston University and lives in Billings, Montana, where he teaches online writing workshops and consults with other writers.



