

Redeeming Grace

A novel

by

Smoky Zeidel



Copyright 2016 by Smoky Zeidel

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without written permission from the publisher, with the exception of brief quotations in a review.

This book is a work of fiction. While some of the place names may be real, characters and incidents are the product of the author's imagination and are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to events or persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Dedication

In memory of my mother, Mary Z. Houff, whose tales of growing up on Maryland's Eastern Shore greatly influenced me when writing this book.

Chapter 1

June, 1928

At one time, he had loved them.

During the Pennsylvania years his love had been steady as the beacon from the Cape Henlopen Lighthouse, on the Delaware shore where he'd taken them on vacation when she was seven. He'd bought them salt water taffy, and she'd eaten too much and gotten sick. He held her head while she vomited, speaking soothing words and wiping her mouth and forehead with his handkerchief when she was finished.

Their house had echoed with the chattering laughter of little girls playing Annie Oakley, shooting make-believe pistols in the air while riding on his back as he pranced around on all fours, snorting and pawing the floor in so poor an imitation of a real live horse that she had tumbled to the floor in fits of hysterical laughter, nearly getting trampled in the process. He'd feigned wild fury, rearing up, pawing madly at the air, pretend hooves thrashing. Emily had saved her, roping the marauder with a yellow satin sash lasso.

Then Emily died, and Papa didn't want to play anymore. He'd packed up the family and moved them away from the only home she'd ever known to Maryland and the sandy shores of the Choptank River. Some memories were too painful to live with.

Emily's memory refused to stay put in its Pennsylvania grave, following them to the ramshackle farm he bought on credit, drifting in and out of their collective unconsciousness like the shifting sands of the Choptank River itself, insinuating itself into every corner of their house and their minds. Grace found comfort in her sister's memory. Mama cried. Papa alternated between cursing God for taking his child from him and burying his nose in his Bible, searching for a divine reason for the tragedy.

God's answer—Matthew, a golden-haired son; and Miriam, raven-haired and solemn—arrived, red and screaming, at a time when most women Mama's age were welcoming grandchildren, not babies of their own. Papa celebrated the miracle of their birth with zealous participation in a month-long revival meeting, where he accepted ordination into the ministry with a single dunking in the river. He left the revival the newly appointed pastor of their tiny rural church. Hope springs eternal, Grace once read. Although his religious epiphany turned the playful father into a serious and strict man, at least Papa's grief had been replaced with hope.

Then came the sickness, riding in on a heat wave, swallowing up young and old alike with the greed of a stray cur. For three days Matthew lay writhing on his cot, dehydrated and delirious, tangling his sturdy legs in the sweat-soaked sheets until, at last, he writhed no more. He died on his fifth birthday. Grace fancied she saw his small spirit dance out the window, hand in hand with Emily. She never felt her sister's presence in the house again.

Grief is a poison that works its devilry in insidious ways. For Mama, grief meant taking to her bed the day after Matthew's death, and not leaving it again until, a year later, she was carried out in a pine box. Heart attack, her death certificate read. A broken heart, Grace thought more likely.

Papa's heart bled with each blow of the hammer as it sealed Mama's coffin shut; bled as she was lowered into the ground in the cemetery next to Matthew; it bled as he turned to face his two surviving daughters, his face twisted with a bitter confusion of emotions Grace could not read. Grief tore at him like a riptide, drowning the last vestiges of the kind and loving father, leaving in his stead a stranger, cold as the ice floes of winter.

Grace thought of these things as she knelt on the floor, trying to turn up a hem on the dress she was making for her younger sister, taking care to avoid bumping the red welts across the back of Miriam's knees and calves. She may as well have been fitting the dress on a newborn puppy, Miriam squirmed and wriggled so.

"Hold still, Miriam! I don't want to stick you with a pin!" Miriam stopped squirming.

Grace pulled out the last two pins, lowered the hem a fraction of an inch, then put the pins back in place. "Honey, why didn't you tell me last night that Papa hit you? I could have put a poultice on your legs so they wouldn't bruise so badly."

Miriam pinked, her eyes pooling. "I was a bad girl. I know I'm not allowed to climb the apple tree but I didn't think Papa seed me. Papa said God gets angry when I'm a bad girl and that he had to hit me to drive the devil out." A tear made its escape from the corner of her eye, coursing its way down her cheeks before dropping to the floor.

Grace pulled a handkerchief from her pocket. "You are most definitely not a bad girl, Miriam," she said as she gently dabbed the little girl's tear-stained face. "Papa was wrong to hit you, do you hear me? Just plain wrong." She gathered up her pins and tape measure and placed them back in her sewing basket. "Do me a favor though, honey, okay? Stay out of the tree unless you ask me first. Just to be sure Papa isn't around to catch you."

"Okay. Can I see how my dress looks now?" Miriam hopped down off the stool.

"Sure can. Go look in the mirror."

Miriam ran over to the large full-length mirror that stood in the corner of the room. "It's so pretty, Grace!" Miriam jumped up and down, her dark curls bouncing like springs.

"It is, isn't it?" Grace gave Miriam's dress a critical look. The dress was the same drab brown worsted fabric as the one Grace was wearing. It had the same high neckline, long sleeves, and formless shape their father demanded they wear to hide their female form. But Miriam's dress had tiny white and yellow daisies expertly embroidered around the cuffs and neckline.

"It's the work of the devil." Luther Harmon's hulking frame filled the doorway, casting a shadow over his daughters. "No good comes to a woman who dresses as a harlot."

"For pity's sake, Papa, I'm not the devil, and she's not a woman, she's seven years old, and she's hardly dressed as a harlot."

Miriam turned to face her father, beaming. "Papa, I promise I am not a harlot." Miriam's smile could melt ice, but it seldom had the same effect on her father. "Grace, what's a harlot?"

"A wicked woman. I think we're finished with this hem." Grace turned Miriam around one last time, giving the hem a final inspection. "Go change your dress now, Miriam. And be careful not to stick yourself on the pins!"

But Miriam had already skipped off down the hall, singing merrily to herself.

"She will not wear that dress, Grace, until those immodest flowers are removed." Luther towered over his daughter, the disapproval in his eyes magnified by thick spectacles precariously balanced on his bulbous nose. "It is forbidden by our Lord. Women must 'adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety; not with braided hair, or gold, or pearls, or costly array.' It is so written in Paul's first letter to Timothy. Look for yourself if you have forgotten your scripture lessons."

"Sounds to me like it is Paul that forbids it, not our Lord." Grace picked up a stray pin from the floor. It took every ounce of strength to remain calm when he shouted scripture at her. "It's only a few flowers. The dress is plain enough."

Luther shook his fist with rage. "Do not mock the words of the sainted apostles in my presence,

young lady!”

Grace eyed him coolly. “‘Be not hasty in thy spirit to be angry: for anger resteth in the bosom of fools.’ Perhaps while you are quoting scripture, you should keep that one in mind. It is so written in the book of Ecclesiastes, if you have forgotten your scripture lessons.”

Luther raised his hand as if to strike his daughter, but Grace held her ground, unafraid. “What are you going to do, hit me, Papa? The way you hit Miriam?” She dodged to the right, avoiding the hand that cut through the air toward her face. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice the bruising on her arms and legs? Did you think she wouldn’t tell me you’d beaten her again?”

“It’s of little consequence to me if she told you or not. She disobeyed me, and had to be punished. ‘He that spareth his rod hateth his—’”

“Stop it, Papa. You will not convince me that God sanctions you beating a little girl just because she was sitting in an apple tree.”

Luther lowered his fist. “I hardly think you are in a position to act the authority on the word of God. You are, my dear, nothing but a woman, and as such have no right to any opinion whatsoever.”

Grace was in no mood to get into a theological debate with her father. She changed the subject. “Don’t deny Miriam flowers on her dress, Papa.” She reached out and gently squeezed Luther’s arm. “She’s a little girl. She needs some beauty in her life.”

Luther opened his mouth as if to reply, then, changing his mind, turned abruptly and headed for the door. “I’m going to milk the cows, then pay a visit over to Bessie and Ernie Simms’ place. Their boy Todd’s taken sick with the scarlet fever.” Luther put on his hat. “I’ll be home in two hours. Have my supper ready.” He opened the door, then paused a moment before turning back to face his daughter. “Miriam may wear the dress for play, but not for church.”

He was gone before Grace could respond.

“What was Papa yelling about, Grace?” Miriam crept fearfully back into the living room, clutching her new dress.

“Come here and sit with me, sweet pea.” Grace put down the book she was attempting to read and patted the tatter-worn sofa. Miriam ran over and snuggled close to her sister.

“Was Papa angry?” Miriam persisted.

“Papa was angry, but not at you, sweetheart.” Grace stroked the little girl’s curls. “Papa misses Mama, and sometimes that makes him confused. He yells at me when what he really is upset about is Mama going away.”

“She didn’t go away on purpose. She died.” Miriam’s lip quivered as her brown eyes flooded with tears.

Grace held Miriam close, her own tears a reflection of her sister’s. The bruises on Miriam’s arms were in the perfect shape of a hand, where Luther had squeezed her roughly while yanking her from the apple tree. The welts on her legs looked like stripes on a candy cane, an ugly reminder that Luther favored a riding crop to mete out his interpretation of divine justice.

Miriam’s sobs faded into soft hiccups, but Grace continued to hold her, humming a quiet tune as the little girl nodded off.

She wished she could find a way to protect Miriam from their father’s verbal and physical assaults. Luther was becoming more unpredictable by the day. Yesterday it was the apple tree. The week before, he’d slapped Miriam across the face when she accidentally knocked over a glass of milk at the breakfast table. Grace had not lied to Miriam when she said Papa’s temper was misdirected anger over Mama’s death. But she suspected more was bothering him, something more insidious. She’d tried to talk to him about it during one of his cheerier moments, but he’d turned on her like a rabid fox. She had

not broached the subject again.

She had to get Miriam out of the house.

Once Miriam had cried herself to sleep, Grace gently tucked a blanket around her and tiptoed into the kitchen to prepare dinner. Goldie, the family's ancient German shepherd, thumped her tail in greeting without bothering to get up from where she rested.

Grace patted the dog on the head before turning her attention to preparing dinner.

She flipped on the radio. President Coolidge had declined re-nomination by the Republican Party, the radio announcer droned. Famine was rampant in the Soviet Union.

Opening the icebox, she took out a quart of milk, eggs, and a crock of butter, making a mental note to tell Luther to pick up a fresh ice block in town the next morning. "Chicken and dumplings tonight, Goldie girl," she said, measuring flour into a large earthenware bowl. "You be good and I'll see to it you get some."

Chicken was a rare treat. They could ill afford to slaughter one of the birds from their small flock of laying hens, because selling their eggs and the milk produced by their three Jersey cows provided the family's only reliable, if paltry, income. Luther had been the pastor of the Sandy Ridge Brothers of the Holy Word Church for nearly seven years, but the church had been unable to pay his meager salary for the past four of those years. Churches were only as wealthy as their congregants, and like most small churches on Maryland's Eastern Shore, Luther's congregation was made up of poor farmers and day laborers. But Luther had married a young couple from Ridgely on Saturday, and the bridegroom paid him with a fine roasting hen. They had feasted on the bird at Sunday dinner and still had enough left over for Grace to make dinner tonight.

Grace stepped out the back door to see what offerings the kitchen garden might contribute to the evening meal. The sun was making its daily departure in the west, casting a soft peach glow over the land. A soft breeze drifted over the sandy fields, blowing a wisp of her fine blonde hair into her eyes. She brushed it aside as her senses were bombarded with the sweet scent of the mint, rosemary, and chives in her garden, mingled with the strong but not unpleasant smell of cow manure from the pasture. A red-winged blackbird perched on the pasture fence, serenading her with an elaborate aria while gulls fussed in the distance.

Grace gathered rosemary and thyme to season the dumplings. Vines snaking around the fence posts resisted only slightly as she pulled a quart of plump green beans from their hiding places beneath the leaves. The yellow pear tomatoes Miriam loved were just beginning to ripen, and Grace added a handful of the tiny treats to her basket. A firm, emerald green cucumber and a sweet green pepper completed her selections.

Luther returned home just as Grace finished the dinner preparations. He was whistling as he entered the kitchen, his eyes considerably brighter than when he had left the house a few hours earlier.

"You're in a fine mood, Papa." She scooped the steaming chicken and dumplings into a serving bowl. "How are the Simms?"

"Better, much better." Luther surprised his daughter by taking the heavy bowl from her hands and carrying it to the table for her. "Todd's fever broke last evening."

"I'm glad."

Luther nodded, whistling under his breath once again. "Bessie's brother Otto was visiting."

Grace felt the color rise in her face. She grabbed a rag and turned back to the stove, rubbing hard at some imaginary spill and hoping her father had not seen her blush.

"He asked permission to call on you. I have my reservations, Grace. He's nearly twenty years

your senior.”

Grace froze, then slowly turned to face her father. “I’m a woman now, Papa. I’m nineteen years old.”

“Nineteen, yes, not much more than a child yourself.” Luther lowered himself heavily into his chair, and drummed his fingers absentmindedly on the table.

“How can you think that? When Mama was sick, I’m the one who nursed her, and I managed quite well at taking care of you and Miriam at the same time. I still take care of you and Miriam. I’m more like a mother than a sister to her anymore.”

Luther showed no signs of hearing her. Grace busied herself with arranging and rearranging tomatoes in the salad bowl, her heart thumping so wildly she was certain Luther would hear it.

Moments past before Luther spoke again. To Grace, it seemed like hours. “What is your opinion of Otto Singer, Grace?” he asked. “Do you hold him in high regard?”

“Mister Singer is a fine man,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “If he wished to call on me, I would not tell him no.”

Luther stroked his long beard, then let out a sigh. “I have invited him to dine with us tomorrow evening. He may escort you to choir practice after dinner, if that is your wish.”

“Thank you, Papa. I should like that.” Grace wanted to shout out loud for joy, but quickly regained her composure. She didn’t want to behave in an uncomely and childish fashion in front of her father, given his propensity to change his mind at the slightest provocation.

It wasn’t until later that evening, lying alone in her bed, that Grace allowed herself to wonder why Luther was going to allow Otto Singer to call on her. The papa of old would have embraced the idea of a man like Otto courting his daughter. But the papa sleeping down the hall, the papa who beat his youngest daughter in the name of God, never did anything without first calculating the risks and benefits to himself.

The thought filled her with dread.