



WALTER WANGERIN, JR.

MIZ LIL

AND THE CHRONICLES OF GRACE

A New Illustrated and Expanded Edition

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The stories told in this book are true. They happened. And most of the characters you will encounter here are also accurate portrayals. But I've made an aesthetic and ethical decision sometimes to conflate events, sometimes to create a single fictional character from a composite of many people, and sometimes to invent the detail and the character which the deeper spirit of the story required. In this manner I've tightened the pace of a human life considerably, and I have absolutely rejected using details or identities which would disclose another human life besides my own.

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Preface

A WANDERING CLERIC was my father. Wherever he went I went there too, as rootless as he was in this world. But there came a time when I turned and traveled in ways he never chose, and then we were divided for a while.



I was born in Portland, Oregon, the first child of a youngish Lutheran pastor and a woman of eager intensities: dramatic, enthusiastic was my mother's hunger for the world. And she was handsome in those days. One mute snapshot shows an even, intelligent brow, a sparkling eye, and a widow's peak.

Within a month of my birth, my pastor-father baptized me. He prepared for the rite by warning the deacons not to worry if the baby should cry from the

shock of the water. “A lusty lung,” he said, half joking, “means my son is destined to preach.” But I remained serene throughout the ceremony. I uttered not a peep.

After the service—so my father told it—the deacons met him “with faces as long as hoe-handles.”

“We’re sorry, Reverend,” they said.

“Why?” said my father. “What’s the matter?”

“Well, your son will never make a pastor,” they said.

The baptism took place in Vanport City, Oregon, where I lived the first year of my life. I remember nothing of Vanport City—except that we returned there thirteen years later to view it from a hill, and found that it had been lost entirely to a flood. Nothing built remained, nothing but the flat grid of empty streets and grass.

We moved. I spent my second year in Shelton, Washington. My mother once said that we could see Mt. Olympus from the kitchen window, but I don’t remember Mt. Olympus. On the other hand, it is during this period that personal memory begins for me—sudden, sharp, and seemingly pointless—and I do recall a sighting of the Pacific Ocean.

This memory starts as we are driving a narrow highway through tall, continuous forests of pine. I have made a bridge of my body, my toes on the back seat of the car, my arms and chin on the ridge of the front seat, my face between my parents’ faces. They are gazing forward through the windshield. My father drives. My mother is talking—though memory

preserves neither the timbre of her voice nor the words; rather, I see the tip of her nose dipping down as her mouth keeps forming soundless sentences. Forever and ever that tiny trick of her nose consoles me when I watch it, proof of my mother's presence.

Then my father says, "There!" I hear the cordwood tone of that command. "Look to the left," he says. "You'll see the ocean."

Almost casually I glance left. The forest is thinning as we speed through it, and a distant water flashes between the trees. Suddenly the pine is altogether snatched away, and I am startled by the sight. There, indeed, lies the monstrous sea, a nearly impossible reach of water, massive, still, impersonal, and infinite.

"I rowed a boat out once," my father says, still looking forward, "and swam in the Pacific."

My mother shudders.

I imagine my father in that boundless water, a dishrag beside a bobbing rowboat, and I shudder too.

This is where my earliest memory ends.

We moved again—to Chicago, Illinois, where my father served the youth organization of the whole church body. His wandering increased in distance and frequency, but he traveled alone. The rest of us spent portions of the hot, hot summers with my mother's family in St. Louis, Missouri.

Dramatic was my mother's hunger for the world, enthusiastic; but the world would not hold still for her;

therefore her enthusiasms were forced to turn in upon themselves. And as the forms of my father's religion did not change, however much we wandered, the forms themselves became a sort of moveable stability and structure for our lives; and my mother—deep-hearted, brave, a warrior for the sake of the homeland, had there been a homeland—guarded the doors of religious form as though it were the fortress that kept her family safe. We were the Jews, whose Sabbath and whose circumcision were bound to no particular place, though their hearts might long intensely for a city.

We moved again. Before I enrolled in the third grade, my father had entered the pulpit of a parish in Grand Forks, North Dakota.

Now we lived in a windy old house above the banks of the Red River. Our backyard ran down a hill of weed to the wood that bordered the water. In spring this river burst its banks and rose to cover half our hill, then descended, leaving a blackened vegetable growth that disappointed my mother's sense of order and beauty. She waited till the ground grew dry again. She waited while weed entangled the whole of the hill. And then one day she took an ancient, clattering push-mower and attacked the ugliness. Back and forth, back and forth with a sort of fury she mowed and mulched the humid weed, leveling the growth, by will alone prevailing. I watched her and said in my soul, *This is a very strong woman.*

By midsummer the weed returned, and rabbits lived in it.

We moved again.

My father accepted the office of president for a small preparatory school, many of whose students went on to the seminary and then into ministries like those my father had served.

We lived in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. The winter shocked us with its cold, then held us in its everlasting cold. The North Saskatchewan River, whose valley the front of our house oversaw, froze solid. And for several years my mother suffered certain chill indignities which I could not understand. In that place, then, the fortress of our faith grew stronger, stonier, more embattled; and I would watch my mother's eyes, sometimes, and marvel at their icy perseverance: the hard blue guardianship which would, by God, maintain the protective structures of this family's safety. And I would want to cry for her.

We moved again. But with this move we separated.

My parents and family returned to Chicago, while I, the firstborn of my father, attended a boarding school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a high school like the one he had administered, a prep school for the Lutheran ministry.

I too, it seemed, would prove a wandering Aramaean like my father.



And I did go wandering—but not in the obvious, geographic way my father took. In fact, I had already departed from my family several years before I left them for Milwaukee. Nobody knew my leave-taking, least of all myself: the spirit of this nomad was invisible. But quietly—as my family struck camp again and again—secretly, unknowingly, I had decamped the faith.

I lived still within the forms of my father's religion. My mother's fortress still surrounded me. And so far as I knew, there were no reasons why I should not also march the walls of the stronghold of Christendom. It was without a conscious deception that I planned to become a pastor.

But form was form alone; the law alone was real; and I had stolen out-of-doors to wander another sort of waste.

Half of the stories that follow in this book recount that hidden journey of the spirit of a child. Into Egypt, one might say.



And then—despite my silence at the Baptism, despite my distance from the heart of the faith of my parents (but nothing is as simple as that statement sounds, and I was valiantly ignorant even of myself)—I was ordained into the ministry. I did, as a young man, start to preach.

But if my father had moved continually, I would stick in one place only. Early in adulthood I began, as the pastor of a small, black congregation called Grace, to preach; and I stayed there: in the center of Evansville, Indiana, on a northward loop of the Ohio River.

Yet if my father had never deviated from the still center of one consoling creed, his firstborn had. Ever in Evansville, the invisible spirit of this nomad had very far to go. Out of a deep unknowing. Out of his Egypt, learning to walk.

And a frozen river must break before it flows again. But a summer of constant hearts can accomplish this terrible wreckage.

Half of the stories in this book observe that other journey—of the spirit of a young man bound to a particular people, a spirit bound to Grace.



It will help the reader, perhaps, to know that these two series of stories are presented alternatively, first the adult, then the child, the adult again, the child again, and back and forth as once my mother went back and forth to level the tangled weed until her hill was beautiful.

Miz Lil

1.

DOUGLAS LANDER DROVE THE mule that pulled the plow that broke the earth to dig the hole on which was built Grace Lutheran Church. They dug that hole twice. The flood of 1937—when folks boated above such streets as Governor and Garvin—filled it in the first time. But Douglas was ever an even-tempered man and would do the same thing six times over uncomplainingly if five times first it failed.

“You can’t command a mule,” he chuckled even to the end of his days, “until you got its attention. An’ you know how you get a mule’s attention?” It was a tired joke; but Douglas was so sweet in its delivery, so pacific a man himself, so neat and small a ginger stick, that people grinned on the streets when he told it. He was a pouch of repeatable

phrases. Besides, it was understood that he meant more than mules: the younger generation, the government, some recalcitrance in human nature, cocky young preachers—whatever the topic of his present conversation. He could trim a joke to any circumstance. “Hit it with a two-by-four.”

He wore oversized glasses with silver stems. He never learned to drive a car. He walked wherever he went, and he paused to talk with whomever he met. And quietly, confidently, as though it were the deeper creed of her soul, Miz Lillian loved him. Miz Lil. She was his wife primevally. Her loving needed no public demonstration. She had been there before he drove the mule that pulled the plow that broke the earth—twice.

Both Miz Lillian and Douglas—and she was as short as he was, though neater, thriftier, quiet, maternal—were fixtures of the inner city neighborhood, as standard as pepper shakers on a table. They *made* the mean streets neighborly. They gave the crumbling streets a history. Douglas could point to a rubble three blocks west of Grace, where the city had demolished some substandard house, and remember: “I lived there. Right over there. And I recall when Line Street *was* a line, black to the west of it, white to the east, and you better not cross ’less you got business takes you across. Now we black on both sides.” He grinned. He lifted his sweet eyebrows. “One o’ them things,” he sang high tenor. “One o’ them things.”

Miz Lil spoke less of the past than did Douglas. Not because she did not remember, rather because she spoke less than Douglas in all things. She hadn't a compulsion to talk. She watched and kept her own counsel, and her words were weightier, therefore.

But Miz Lil remembered slippers in the Depression, how that Douglas once came home with a box of pairs of slippers, payment for an odd job when jobs were scarce. She remembered the distribution of slippers among their relatives and friends—and chickens, when they got them, and canned goods. And the slippers may not have been terribly warm in winter, but they were a sort of bank deposit, a sort of security, because some relative might earn an extra coat and a friend might find some precious article like long underwear—and then Douglas, who hated the cold as perhaps his only enemy, could dress the warmer in consequence of the slippers.

These were the flesh of the inner city, Douglas and Miz Lil, the living ligatures. For their sakes, do not call it a ghetto. Do not presume it a mindless, spiritless, dangerous squalor—a wilderness of brick and broken glass, brutality, hopelessness, the dead-end center, no! They made it community because they remained in confidence and honor. The *Lamed Vavnik*: the Righteous Ones. They gave it civility, familiarity, and purpose—they caused it to be a good ground on which to raise fat children—because they remembered the names.

“Her grandma’s name was Alice Jackson,” said Miz Lil. “Come up from Kentucky with her family when the coal mines couldn’t support them. Turn of the century. She went to school with me, Alice did,” said Miz Lil, remembering, the veil of time upon her eyes. “Bright. She was bright in those days. With stories and plans, all eager for the future. But then she got caught raising children, and then her children had children, and she raised them too. And she suffered to feed her grandbabies. She put on weight. I remember how Alice Jackson labored to breathe, surrounded by grandbabies. But she suffered to make them good too. Took them to church, yes. Prayed to Jesus for their souls. She did the best she could. A body can only do so much. When you talk about skinny Marie,” said Miz Lil, “you think on her grandma, fat Alice Jackson; then you can’t help but talk with pity, and you’ll be inclined to give Marie a drink of water for her grandma’s sake. No, you won’t be judging Marie then. She’s got good blood in her and the print of love in her poor face. The fat just closed on Alice Jackson’s throat, I think. I think it got to be more misery to breathe than not to. That’s how she died, I think.”

In the context of such remembering, how could the inner city be faceless, rootless, cruel? Concrete and desperation only?

Under the sunlight of such a mercy, how could anyone, smug in the suburbs, fear it as dark and dangerous?

This was no ghetto. Douglas and Miz Lil—invisible perhaps to the outside eye for that they blended in; who were black and short and old, who held no office but had lived there since the beginning of the world, when folks swept not only their porches in the morning, but their sidewalks and their gutters too—Mr. and Miz Lander, they were its citizens.

He wore long underwear, autumn and winter and spring, laughing at himself because his little body could not endure the cold: African indeed.

She trudged to the projects with pies and helped move Mrs. Collier's furniture out on the lawn so they could bomb her place for roaches. Mrs. Collier needed comforting for the incomprehensible disruption of her life. Mrs. Collier also needed a bath.

They wore, did Douglas and Miz Lil, the mantle in the neighborhood. They scarcely knew this; therefore they wore it in a perfect modesty; but perhaps any community with blood ties and past history and present complexities, problems that want a personal solving, contains one or two wise spirits, sages to whom the rest of the people will come when they are themselves at wit's end and helpless. Upon these the mantle has fallen. These Wise Ones are chosen unconsciously, by the mute agreement of the truest members of the neighborhood. They are invested with a silent respect. The community is stabilized—the community is both grounded and elevated also and comforted—

just knowing that the Wise Ones are there. Whether one ever takes advantage of their presence or not, one knows he has a place of appeal: *Somebody knows my name.*

But to eyes outside that small society, the mantle is invisible.

Who would ever talk about it?

To hearts within the small society, it is a consolation taken for granted. No one would ever talk about it.

Nevertheless, it is nothing other than prophecy. It is the presence—the *bath qôl*, the living voice—of God.



Douglas Lander died while watching “The Lawrence Welk Show” and eating a piece of pie. Miz Lil was dozing on the sofa at the time. She didn’t realize that he was gone until the house had filled with a perfect quietness and she saw him slumped all wearily on the floor. Perhaps he’d been coming to tell her something.

His glasses, those wide temples and the silver stems of them, had always seemed too big for his filbert face, too formal for a man so sweetly malleable to all the sudden circumstances of this existence. But when he lay thoughtfully in the casket, the glasses seemed absurdly superfluous. And the suit that they had dressed his

body in, it was too big at the neck, excessive at his thin wrists and little hands.

At his wake the people noticed the lack of long underwear and chuckled over homely jokes. "He be warm now, Miz Lil," they said. "He got God for sunlight now, and it ain' nothin' but summer where he gone to."

Miz Lillian barely acknowledged the joke.

She stood at the bier of her husband, rubbing and rubbing her abdomen, a little woman gazing at a little man now lost in thought.

She would have to do the talking now. One pepper shaker stood alone.



In the months that followed, Miz Lil did not interrupt the habits of an old, old life. In the evening she sat behind screens on the porch of her house, facing Bellemeade Avenue, watching the traffic. Watching nothing. Sometimes relatives sat with her. Sometimes not. She gave the impression of rocking, whether the chair could rock or not, because she maintained a slow, perpetual rhythm in her body, a secret drumbeat. In fact, she was rubbing her stomach with one hand or with both.

On Sundays she went to church. She sat in the second row from the back on the left-hand side, the

same pew that the Lander family had always occupied since the mule first plowed the ground and the little building had been built. She didn't sing the hymns. Neither did she, who had never been demonstrative of deeper feelings, demonstrate her feelings now: her face was internal, her eyes were like tiles of porcelain.

In this wise did she take her place among the people after worship, and file through the tiny narthex, and shake the pastor's hand.

The pastor leaned down to her and spoke as if no one else were there. He said, with earnest significance, "How are you, Miz Lillian?"

She responded as if no one at all were there, neither the pastor, whom her tile-eyes did not see, nor even herself. "Fair," she said. That was all she said. She proceeded through the double doors outside, holding her stomach with the hand the pastor had just released.

And so the year unraveled.

Douglas and Miz Lillian, complements of one another in character, behavior, and in wisdom, once had worn the mantle together. It was uncertain—though no one consciously asked the question—whether Miz Lil would lay it aside now altogether, or pull it over her head and hide in sorrow, or else wear it for the people's sake alone. If she did not wear it, it would be quietly cast upon another, whom slow time, the passage of a thousand days, would reveal. Or if none other received the mantle, that would be a sure and terrible sign of



the breakup of this small society. But if, in time, she lifted her face and smiled again and spoke to someone a consoling word, then God would not have left the inner city without its prophet, would not have left the people without *bath qôl*, the daughter of the voice of God.

The end of this story is this:

On a particular evening the pastor came to visit Miz Lil in her living room. While they sat together, he on the sofa, she in a rocking chair, rocking and rubbing her stomach at once, dark grew darker in the room and the faces of both of them dimmed to the other's sight.

The pastor prayed a prayer. That is what Miz Lil had said he could do for her. But he ran out of prayer before he ran out of yearning on the little woman's behalf; so he sat in silence.

And then she broke the silence. Miz Lil began to talk. The pastor listened without interruption and slowly began to realize, even before she was done, the holy benevolence of her words. In the darkness he allowed himself to cry.

In fact, Miz Lil was speaking of grief. Carefully, touching the subject with infinite reverence, she said that her grief was a stone in the womb. Not *like* a stone, no. It was there—a lump as mortal as an infant between the wings of her old hips, but heavier: a painful, physical presence. "And you pray it would go away," she said. "It doesn't go. You plead to Jesus you can't bear the suffering. You bear it anyway."

She rocked and rocked in the darkness. There was the sound of a whispering fabric: she was rubbing her stomach.

“Finally you understand,” said Miz Lil, “that this is the way it’s going to be forever till you die. The stone is never going to pass. You’re going to mourn forever. But you say, *This isn’t wrong*. Finally you say, *This is right and good*.”

The sorrow that started as the enemy, it ends a friend. This is what Miz Lil explained as the night developed. Sorrow had become a familiar thing for her now, and the perpetual pain in her stomach a needful thing. It was there when she woke at midnight, there in the morning. She took it to church with her, and she brought it home. This particular baby would never be born nor ever leave, but would companion her forever. This was the loneliness that kept a widow from being altogether lonely—because it was, inside of her, a memorial of her husband. It was pain and wanted rubbing. It was sorrow and caused her to sigh. But it was also the love of Douglas—and stroking it was the same as stroking the husband whom you love.

“Douglas is not far from me,” said Miz Lil, “nor me from Douglas—” In midsentence, she fell silent. There was only the sound of the whispering fabric. And the pastor in the darkness realized his tears.

More than that, he understood them. For he wept for the old woman whom he loved, whose sorrow

affected him, but whose resolution of the sorrow kept his tears from being merely hopeless. For he wept as well for the neighborhood at large, because this marvelous, holy talk of Miz Lillian's was a sign: she had taken the mantle up again; she had found a way to wear the mantle not altogether alone. The voice of God had not departed from the grim streets; the inner city had its Wise One still.

For he wept, most particularly, for himself, because the woman had chosen to speak such intimate wisdom to him, to reveal her inmost spirit to him. He was, therefore, no more a stranger. The invisible was visible before his eyes, and he could see the mantle, and he was made a citizen. *Bath qôl*, the daughter of the voice of God—it had spoken in his hearing, and he was moved to tears because he thought: *Somebody knows my name.*



This, as we said, is the end of the story.
The beginning and the middle follow.

2.

From the first days of my ministry at Grace—when I still wore massive, black-rimmed spectacles, unpolished shoes, unmatching clothes, and a halo—I

took a greedy pleasure in the ritual of greeting members after worship, shaking the hands of every soul who'd sat to hear me preach.

There was one main door from the tiny sanctuary, through which all the people had to pass. Down some steps from that was the narthex, where I took my pastoral stand—and then, to my left, the double doors of the church, which opened outside to sidewalks and lawns and the weather.

“Good sermon, Reverent,” parishioners complimented me. I grinned. I agreed.

“Glad to have a preacher not afraid of preaching!”

“Wonnerful, wonnerful.”

“Very spiritual, Reverent.”

“Well, I enjoyed myself today, that's a fact.”

“Fellow pumpin' gas at the Mobil station, he said to me, ‘Yeah, but can that white boy preach? I mean *preach*?’ Well, I was proud to tell him, ‘White or purple, my pastor gives as good as he gets, yessir.’ I shut his mouth. I told him, ‘He can raise the dust.’ Amen, Reverent—right?”

“Right,” I said.

“Right,” said the grinning face in front of mine, one in the file of parishioners greeting me: “Just keep on doin' what you doin'. Right.”

They were including me—on their own terms and in their own language embracing me. They were glad I was there, and I was glad to note their gladness. More

than glad, I was relieved. Happy days, those early days! I had position and a host of admirers.

Well: the fact that the church was black, and the concomitant fact that it sat in the inner city, caused a sort of contention in me which needed this affirmation. Actually, two separate problems needed this balm in my breast.

First, I was purely flattered that a people not of my heritage received me as one of them and praised me in the reception. That spoke well, it seemed, of my deeper humanity and my ministry; it laid to rest the uncertainty I'd had of whether I might prove prejudiced or meanly provincial. Success in the city must be prized. So the problem of doubt was eased in a private rush of triumph—to God be the glory.

As for the second problem, I was (I explained to myself) inexperienced. I was (in actual fact) a stranger on this turf, untutored. The inner city was altogether foreign to me—and I might have been a pastor inside the church, with all the rights the office granted me; but on the street I was alien, ignorant, an interloper notably white. I was (to put the issue more plainly than I ever did in those days) scared.

But the more that the members of Grace affirmed me here and on the streets, the safer might be my goings forth—and even the inner city might be persuaded to accept my pale, improvident presence.

Oh, love me, Grace. But love me out loud, okay?

I was hungry for handshakes in those days to calm my fear. So much depended on their approval and their praise.

“I’m the kind of person,” said Eleanor Rouse, “who brings her flowers to the living. I don’t wait till they’re dead. So I tell you to your face: Pastor, *my* Pastor,” she said, “you got my respect.”

And Eleanor Rouse had my immediate, complete devotion—most especially because she, who had called me her pastor, was not a member of Grace. She belonged to New Hope Baptist Church, only sometimes attending our worship with her parents. Besides, Eleanor was a most outspoken woman and might therefore bruit my goodness abroad, in the courts of the neighboring kingdoms, as it were.

She had a vigorous handshake. I returned it with equal energy.

“To God,” I said, “be the glory.”

“Thank you, Jesus.”

“Thank you, Eleanor—”

And then her mother, whom the people called Miz Lil, followed in her turn; and then her father followed next, both of them shorter than their daughter, shorter than all their children, it turned out: shorter than most of the population. But a couple most serene. A couple, whom to meet and know, was comforting indeed.

This Miz Lil distinguished herself from the common run of compliments for several reasons. She looked

me directly and kindly in the eye, no embarrassment on her behalf, no qualms regarding me. Her gazing caused a sort of solitude around the two of us which lent her words importance. Nor did those words come tripping from her tongue. A fox eye had Miz Lillian, a canny glance, and a habit of pausing before she spoke. Her thoughts were parceled one by one and personal.

Under the aegis of such a spirit, one remembers what was said, yes, word for word. And one is a bit discomfited if he cannot fully interpret the oracle.

On a certain Sunday Miz Lillian said, "Well, you taught us today."

And then on another Sunday she fixed me with her eyes: "Hooo, Pastor," she said, "you preached today."

Her husband was another matter. Douglas Lander, always equable whatever the time of day or year, wherever the little man turned up, downtown or mowing the lawn of the church or shoveling snow, could talk at an endless length, his sweet voice on and on, his glasses bobbing up and down, his single, final, philosophic observation for any topic he could not otherwise resolve or explain or morally excuse being: "One o' them things." So he sang the tougher problems of life to rest and lived in peace in spite of them: "Just one o' them things." With such a metaphysic, the man was fearless; he could talk on anything, no subject too perilous for him.

But Miz Lil was chary of her words. She knew how

she would end whatever she began. She gave infinite space to Douglas, undismayed however far his droning led him; but her own subjects she chose with a watchful care.

Therefore, I began to notice, Sunday after Sunday, that Miz Lil had but two words for my sermons. One was “teach,” and one was “preach,” and there surely was a difference between the two. But I could not, for all my pondering, guess what that difference was.

Everyone else in the congregation seemed at peace with Miz Lillian Lander, innocent of her effect; they seemed to take her much for granted—like children sporting on the shore of some almighty, rolling ocean.

Me she made nervous.



On a particular Sunday, then, when she reached to shake my hand, I held on and began to question her.

“Miz Lillian?” I said.

The fox eyes, sharp and kindly, gave me more than a moment, gave me the whole day if I wanted it. “Pastor?”

“Sometimes,” I said, “you say I teach.”

“Mmm?” she said.

“And sometimes you say I preach.”

“Mmm-hmm.” She said this high in her sinuses. She smiled. She waited.

“Well,” I said, “is there a difference?”

The old lady raised an ironic eyebrow, as though she thought an educated seminarian would know of differences. But she kept on smiling. I felt suddenly brutish and lumbering in front of her. And white.

“Of course there is,” she said.

“Well?” I said, making a smile myself, embarrassed. “What,” I said, “is the difference?”

Now Miz Lillian was holding my hand in hers, which was work-hardened, her little finger fixed forever straight, unable to bend.

“When you teach,” she said, instructing me, “I learn something for the day. I can take it home and, God willing, I can do it. But when you preach—” She lowered her voice and probed me the deeper with her eyes. “—God is here. And sometimes he’s smiling,” she said, “and sometimes he’s frowning surely.”

I grinned. Her language was elemental, but I chose immediately to take it all as a compliment, for the teaching and the preaching together—but for the preaching especially, which seemed to be the calling of the holy God into our little church. What a mystic power that gave my homiletics, like shining from shook foil! I grinned.

Miz Lillian Lander smiled and released my hand and went out the double doors.

But in the next instant Douglas Lander floated into view, shrugging as though in apology for his wife.

He shook his head while he shook my hand. “Just one o’ them things,” he sang, seeming to ease some little friction, seeming to salve some little thorn between us—as though we men could stand the female nature which we couldn’t understand. “Just one o’ them things,” he said, and I lost my grin.

In my hypersensitive state a prickle went up the back of my neck. Why would Douglas think he had to cover for his wife? What had I missed? How was Miz Lil’s compliment one of Douglas’s “Things”?

Or wasn’t it a compliment at all?

What had the woman said to me, *of me*, truly?

Oh, the more desperate I was to make sense of it, the more foreign seemed to me the language of the inner city. Black talk: teach and preach! Black talk: smilin’, frownin’. What exactly did I do to make it teaching, or how was I different to make it preaching? *Yeah, but can that white boy preach? I mean PREACH?* What did she mean by “God is here”?

Maybe (I mused alone in my tiny study) I am not, at the bottom of it all, a part of this people. How can I know, if I don’t know what I do to them? Maybe Miz Lil is the only honest one among them, though she speaks in riddles. Maybe I’m the dupe of a harmless, necessary deception: because they need some sort of pastor, they’ll gladly make this pastor think they like him—*ack!*



And then came a Sunday of revelations. And then came the sermon in which I told a story to illustrate some point. I don't remember the point. But I do, for two particular reasons, remember the story.

First, it was factual. I drew the story from personal experience in the church and in that inner city neighborhood, involving a woman who had been and gone before the telling of this tale. She was a transient. No one, I thought, would recognize her.

Second, when worship was over Miz Lil took my hand in the narthex, and held on, and gripped it until it hurt. She wouldn't let it go. She pierced me with her fox eye. "Pastor," she said softly, "you preached today. Pastor," she whispered in the solitude she caused around us, "God was in this place."

She said this with utter conviction. But the diminutive woman was not smiling. And she would not let me go. . . .

3.

(Herewith, an account of the experience, a portion of which was "preached" on the Sunday when Miz Lillian killed me with a word.)

Marie

All day long she sits in front of her shotgun house, in a cotton dress, on a tubular kitchen chair, gazing at nothing, rocking: the crazy lady, surrounded by a patch of weed she does not mow.

Neighborhood children call her the crazy lady because she mutters to herself. They sneak to the tree behind her; they watch her gesturing to the air; they hear her arguing with no one at all, and their eyes grow wide at the aberration. "Pastor! Look at the crazy lady!"

She does them no harm. She scarcely admits their existence.

Perhaps she would deny the existence of any in her world except a few men, and those only of necessity.

One day I said hello to her. Well, that house is right across the street from my office, and I am a pastor, after all.

"Hello!" I called with a friendly cheer. She froze midsentence. Her mouth snapped shut, her nostrils flared. She stared at me over her right shoulder. I came halfway across the street. "Hello," I said. "I'm the pastor here. We're neighbors, you see. What's your name?"

No answer.

Her body is a boiled bone, curved like a rib-bone, gaunt. Her eyes are huge, the dome of her head is huger. Her age is impossible to tell.

“What’s your name?” I said.

No answer. The skull-gaze only, undecipherable. Which left me in an uncomfortable predicament: how to close a conversation that never started?

But a kid no more than two or three years old came ripping down the sidewalk on a wretched trike. “Marie!” he shrieked at the top of his lungs. “Marie! Yaw-waw-waw! Yaw-waw-waw!” He rocketed over the curb, lowered his head like the bull, and made directly for my suit pants. He wasn’t pretending. At top speed this kid meant to run me down. “Yaw-waw-waw-waw!”

So I learned that her name is Marie, and this was her child—though she did nothing to stop him and merely watched me dodge his assault—and that was the last conversation we didn’t have together.

And I learned to leave her alone. I could only wish that she left me alone as well.

This kid of hers is an affliction to Christian piety. Nobody disciplines him. Up and down the street he rides like a wandering siren. His mother disappears into her muttering, and no one’s there. He shatters the air as though the city’s afire. And no one is there. He’s a disaster, an act of God, a tight tornado three feet high. But *I’m* there. My office is the tiny room to the right of the chancel, no windows, one outside door to the fire escape—to Gum Street. I am there. And I am forced to choose, when the kid is screaming, between two sacrifices: either I will shut the door and stifle in

the still, hot air. Or else I'll open the door and pay for the breeze by enduring the noise of that boy. Either way I pay. Neither way is it easy for me to work in my study.

But I pity the kid. I do not blame him. I've heard him lift his voice in a truly wounded anguish, the poor child wailing in abandonment. I've looked and seen that his mother has locked him out of the house, and then his screaming doesn't frustrate me. It hurts me.

This is what happens: at sundown men begin to come to Marie's front door, alone, in pairs. They knock or they do not knock. They enter. Almost immediately her child is put out like the cat, and he whirls around and he beats on the door and he howls. Finally he sits on the stoop and gives himself over to the tears alone. Time those tears: twenty minutes. Then do not blame the boy.

The crazy lady across the street from Grace Lutheran Church, who lives in a haze the whole day through, who regards me with a rabid eye, who regards her baby not at all, is a prostitute.

So then, this is a serious question of ministry, of Christian and civic responsibility—of charity to the child, if nothing else: what should I do about Marie?

Well, it's a ticklish circumstance, isn't it? Rights and freedoms; contrasting lifestyles; morals, to be sure—but by what authority could I approach a woman who wouldn't talk to me? I'm new in the neighborhood.

I did nothing.

But Marie did something. And this is what happened between us.



One night I sat reading by a small lamp in my study, all the doors being locked to the church (for fear of the lurking inner city?—for safety, for common sense and safety, since the members warned me, “Lock the doors when you’re alone”), all the lights being out in the church save mine. One night while I was reading at my desk, someone began to whistle inside the building.

I froze in my chair. A tingling tightened all my flesh. It has been my habit from childhood, when confronted with a fright, first to pretend that the fright’s not there. To freeze in whatever position I had when I sensed my danger. But my heart goes ramming against my ribs, and my face may seem indifferent, but my ears are roaring.

Deep in the darkened building, smack in the middle of the inner city, far from any assistance I could in the moment imagine, someone had commenced a weird, a coldly passionless, whistling.

I prayed to God that it would stop. Just go away and release me.

It didn’t.

I stole a glance into the sanctuary, to the back of the sanctuary, to the door that leads to the narthex and downstairs. No light. No one had switched on a friendly light. There was only the darkness made ghostly by shadow and shapes from the stained glass windows, effigies in glass.

Twice in the past year thieves had broken into the church. But no one else had been here at the time.

Why in God's name would a thief disclose himself by whistling?

Okay! Okay, I'm the pastor. I never figured that ministry meant law enforcement or fights or bloodshed or whatever was about to be required of me—martyrdom!—but I am in charge. The building is my responsibility. I'll see who you are (you idiot!) and what you're up to.

I crept from the warm light of my study into the sanctuary. I crept down the dark aisle toward the back. The floorboards creaked. I froze. And I found in the midst of my terror that I was angry. Furious, in fact, to be sucked into a confrontation I hadn't caused and didn't deserve. I hated this whistling thief.

But hatred wasn't enough to ease my fears. The whistling was below my feet. In the basement. The nearer I crept to the steps downstairs, the more I swallowed. In the narthex, now, I heard it loud in ecclesiastical pits. In the boiler room, which was dark, dark.

Inhuman whistling! I began to notice that it

never took a breath. One note, on and on and on—a mechanical sort of whistling.

I burst into the boiler room, crying, “Hey! Hey!” horrifying myself.

But there was not a soul in all the gloom.

And the whistling continued undisturbed. Above my head.

I reached up. I groped what I couldn’t see. And touched pipes. Water pipes! Oh, my heart nearly flew in its happy freedom: water! How could I mistake it as anything else? The whistling was running water; the noise was water rushing through the plumbing of the church, ho ho! I could handle water.

Behold: I was bold again, though panting still from a host of emotions. And the conclusion to my private drama seemed clear and evident: find the faucet leaking water and shut it off. Ah.

I went into the men’s bathroom right next to the boiler room. I checked the toilet, the sink, the urinal, and found all of them dry.

I had almost turned to leave, when a shadow in the window caught my eye. Something outside. This window was at ground level facing the parking lot. I put my face to it—

Someone outside!

Lord, there was a thief here, after all.

Under the dusk-to-dawn light, crouched so close to the window that we might have kissed, but busy at the

lawn faucet, unaware of me, filling plastic milk jugs with water from Grace Lutheran Church, was Marie.

I jumped backward. For two minutes I stood mute on the near side of the wall, listening to the water go, feeling her presence altogether too close, feeling (instantly) abused, a victim, a sucker. Apparently brick walls did not keep out the corruption of the inner city. Marie was taking our water as her due, no effort to ask us. Geez! the presumption griped me. She was busy stealing. She was reaching into the very heart of the building, even to frighten me in the privacy of my study. I felt very, very vulnerable.

The whistling fluted up and stopped. She'd shut the water off. When she passed the window, I saw her from the knees down, lugging in each hand two plastic jugs of water, and then I was alone again—and full of anguish.

I should do something about this, you know.

I went up into the sanctuary and switched on the lights and began to pace up and down the aisle.

I had no idea what to do about Marie's little theft—or the arrogance of it. Well, well, well: water isn't communion ware, after all. What do you pay for water? Pennies. So let it go. That's what I said to myself. Just let it go. And I thought: if the city has turned off her water, you can bet they've turned off her gas and electricity too. The woman's without utilities. And she's got a kid who needs to drink and wash and

use the bathroom. So calm down and call it charity and let it go.

Yeah, but that kid nagged at my mind. What was she teaching her child? That he could take whatever he needed—whatever he wanted, for heaven’s sake? Any child, I don’t care who or whose it is, deserves better than this poor kid was getting.

And then that’s the next thing that nagged: what is the ethic for supporting a prostitute, even by inaction and noninvolvement? This is a church, after all. We have a covenant with virtue, after all, a discipline, a duty, a holy purpose, a prophetic presence. Shouldn’t I talk to the woman?

Precisely at that point all my abstract inquiry skidded against reality. Talk with the woman? Why, the woman doesn’t talk! She stares you a moribund stare. She scorns you with murderous scorn. *Talk* with the woman? I might as well reason with the moon or argue with the whirlwind. Who knew, if I truly approached her, whether she would flee or fly at me with a gun—or simply stare as though I were some dream that she was dreaming.

“So let it go.” I said that out loud in the doorway of my study.

It didn’t ease the itch of responsibility in me, fiscal responsibility (Grace pays for its water too, you know, and we have members no better off than this particular profligate), social responsibility (that kid stuck in my



mind), moral responsibility, and even an evangelical responsibility. But nothing at seminary had prepared me for such a dilemma as this. I had no wise solution. I simply had no other solution at all.

“Forget it,” I said and, as proof of putting the issue behind me, I went into my office, sat down in my chair, picked up the book I had been reading, and bit my lower lip. “It really doesn’t matter. It isn’t worth the worry. Let it go.”

And so it was that I sat glowering at a page of print, in a church ablaze with electrical light, in an inner city that had bested me, at nearly midnight of the clock—when the whistling began all over again.



Sometimes when your neighbor does something to annoy you, you feel compelled to go and watch her do it. You know that you’ll learn nothing new by looking. That’s not why you need to look. You’re angry, that’s why. And anger wants to see its cause. Anger wants to get angrier. It is sweet to feel a just and righteous wrath—that’s why.

So when the whistling began again I was out of my chair and down the aisle like a shot. I verily flew down the steps and into the basement, into the men’s room, flew! I thrust my face to the window and looked into midnight and squinted to make my eyes adjust. I

saw the figure beneath the street light. I saw the body bending at our faucet. Two feet from mine I saw a concentrating face—and I let out an astonished yip, and I leaped from the window.

That wasn't Marie. Four more milk jugs at his feet, thankless pomposity in his manner, a skullcap clutching his head—who was this drawing water from the bowels of Christendom? One of the prostitute's *johns*!

I tell you truly, doubt was gone in a flash. I knew straightway what I would do. I had a sudden vision of Grace Lutheran Church, the building itself, rolled over on her side like a helpless sow, while *all* the people of this neighborhood like wriggling piglets were pushing their snouts into her belly and sucking and sucking the poor church dry. "Nip it," I hissed with inspired clarity. "Nip it in the bud!"

I slipped into the boiler room, where the water was whistling one note over my head. I reached up to find the coldest pipe. I fingered along that pipe, feeling for a knob. Found that knob. Turned it to the left, and heard the whistling choke and stop, then covered my mouth and swallowed giggles of glee. For I saw in my mind's eye the john hunched over a faucet that suddenly died in front of him: drip, drip, and nothing.

I had shut the water off.

Even so in the end did a cleric and the church prevail, by cunning, not by confrontation, and no

one was hurt, and no one's feelings or reputation was wounded, neither the church's nor the prostitute's. We could coexist on opposite sides of Gum Street. All in a rush of inspiration, a problem had been solved; and I drove homeward feeling equal to the task at hand, as sly as any rogue in the ghetto—a native. I slept very well that night.

To God be the glory. Amen.

4.

Down the steps and through the narthex, making agreeable racket with each other and greeting me one by one, the members of Grace filed out of the church and into the daylight. Worship was over. I was shaking many hands.

I loved the ruckus. I loved the genial disorder. I was at home.

“Pastor. Did that really happen?”

“It happened, Herman.”

“Well, you just don't know 'bout some folks, do you?”

“No, no. You never know.”

“Takes all kinds.”

“All kinds. Say hello to Janey for me, will you? Tell her I missed her.”

The next man said, “Just one o' them things.”

I almost laughed aloud. "One of them things, Douglas," I said. His observation struck me as perfectly accurate. He slipped from view like trout in a stream, flashing silver at the stem of his glasses.

"Pastor?" All at once, Miz Lillian Lander. She took my hand and we exchanged a handshake, and I let go, but she did not.

"Pastor?"

Her voice was both soft and civil. It was the sweetness of it that pierced me. I think its tones reached me alone, so that it produced a casement of silence around us, and the rest of the people receded from my senses: there was Miz Lil, gazing up at me. There was her shrewd eye, soft and sorry.

"You preached today," she said, and I thought of our past conversation. "God was in this place," she said, keeping my hand in hers. I almost smiled for pride at the compliment. But Miz Lil said, "He was not smiling." Neither was she. Nor would she let me go.

She paused a while, searching my face. I couldn't think of anything to say. I dropped my eyes. *God was in this place*. Evidently she meant more than a spiritual feeling, a patting of feet and gladness. The old woman spoke in velvet and severity, and I began to be afraid.

"Her grandma's name was Alice Jackson," Miz Lil said staring steadily at me. "Come up from Kentucky and went to school with me, poor Alice did. She raised her babies, and then she had to raise grandbabies too.

She did the best she could by them. But a body can only do so much. Pastor,” said Miz Lil, “when you talk about skinny Marie, you think of her grandma. You think of Alice Jackson by name. You think to yourself, she died of tiredness—and then you won’t be able to talk, except in pity.”

I stood gaping at the floor, a large man with monstrous glasses on his face. My shoes were skinned at the toes. Look. Look around. Not another member wore such wretched shoes to worship. This was embarrassing. My whole face stung with the humiliation.

Miz Lil continued to press my hand with her large, work-hardened fingers, the little finger forever straight. She would not let me go.

“God was in your preaching,” she whispered. “Did you hear him, Pastor? It was powerful. Powerful. You preach a mightier stroke than you know. Oh, God was bending his black brow down upon our little church today, and yesterday, and many a day before. Watching. ’Cause brother Jesus—he was in that child Marie, begging a drink of water from my pastor.”

Miz Lillian Lander fell silent then. But she did not smile. And she would not let me go. For a lifetime, for a Sunday and a season the woman remained immovable. She held my hand in a steadfast grip, and she did not let it go.

MIZ LIL
&
THE CHRONICLES OF GRACE



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