

Memoir



Grace or Something Like It

John A. McDermott March 26, 2014

Again. It's 5:33 in the morning and in the dark you feel your wife lean up. "All right," she says, "I know you aren't *bad*. I think you're just checking on us, checking us out. But we need our sleep. Will you please, please quit waking us up?"

She's talking to the space at the end of the bed. This is August and you've lived in the apartment for a month. The 5:33 wake-up is a regular occurrence, but this is the first time your wife has spoken about it.

"We're okay, here," she says. "Okay?"

She lays back. You breathe together in the silence, cars in the distance rumbling down University Avenue. This is you, back in your hometown after years away, back in Wisconsin with your wife of two years, a girl from California who you met in Indiana, and now she is talking to a ghost. You wonder if this was a good idea. Not her, you love her. The place, this place you're renting.

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"You've felt her, too?" she asks you over breakfast. Bagels and black coffee.

"Oh, yeah. Yes, definitely." And you think, *I don't believe in ghosts*. You don't believe in ghosts, but you believe in whatever the fuck is clouding up the karma at the end of your bed.

“She’s not bad,” your wife says. “She’s used to getting up early. She’s an old woman.”

This is news to you. You don’t know anything about spirits, excepting *A Christmas Carol* and Scrooge McDuck. This is not your thing. You don’t see any person in the dark.

“Okay,” you say. “Long as she lets us be.”

“She’s fine now. She’ll listen to me.”

You have to get to work. You’re a drop-out doctoral student writing copy for a clothing catalog. You abandoned Keats for khakis, descriptions of combed cotton and steadfast dyes over Truth and Beauty. Pants pay the bills, but you feel like vapor sitting in your beige cubicle all day. Only weeks into the job you know it was a mistake.

When you get home, your wife says she’s bought sage “just in case” and plans to burn it through the place, let the scent waft like the incense of your Catholic youth burning out of the censer. You always liked the smell, but didn’t care much for ghosts, Holy or otherwise. The next morning is quiet. You sleep until seven. It’s a Saturday. Your wife decides not to use the sage; she doesn’t want to drive the spirit away. She likes her now, now that you are sleeping.

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On April 15 the following spring, you’re hustling across the small city park adjacent to your building—a red brick two story four-flat built in the early sixties—and you look terrible: torn jeans, t-shirt, a baseball cap. You haven’t shaved. You want to get your 1040 postmarked on time and you’re moving swiftly across the cracked concrete basketball court when a young white woman steps out of a small car and walks toward you. She has something in her arms. It’s an infant, a pretty new one.

“Do you live there?” She nods at your screened-in porch on one corner of the first floor. She doesn’t look dangerous. Mid-twenties, floral skirt, blonde. She’s not a mugger; muggers don’t carry sleeping babies.

“Yeah,” you say, “I do.”

“Would you mind if I came in?”

You cock your head.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I’m not crazy. My grandmother used to live here. It’s the place I remember her best.” She pauses and looks at the kid. “I just wanted to look again. I want her to see it.”

The baby doesn’t look up to seeing anything, but you lead them back to your foyer. You still have time to get the postmark.

This goes against everything your criminal lawyer father ever taught you about trusting strangers. His message was simple: Don’t. This lady could be a scam artist. She could claim you stole her baby. She could say you assaulted her. Why are you letting her in your apartment? And why do you care that the place is a disaster?

Doing taxes is like writing a term paper. There are dirty plates on the couch and in the sink, the bed is unmade, there are papers everywhere. Your wife is off teaching and in a few short hours you’ve made the place look like a bachelor pad. It’s just after eleven on a Thursday morning, the spring sun shining in the windows, so many windows, all of them streaked. You look like the criminal, a badly drawn sketch of a suspect. But the woman stands next to you, smiling, cooing at the baby.

She walks the path, from room to room, your wife would have strolled with the incense. You imagine your wife swinging a thurible, smoke rising, clouding the black and white photos you have on the white walls: your elderly parents, your dead grandparents, your brother and sisters. The baby makes happy gurgles, like babies are supposed to do.

The mother tells you, as she walks, about her grandmother—Grace—who lived here for thirty years after the death of her husband. Kind and gentle, the picture-book grandmother, tidy and charitable. You look at the mess again. Magazines on the floor, tennies in the doorway.

You let her linger, maybe ten minutes, and then she turns to the front door.

“Thank you, “ she says. “I just wanted to see it one more time. We don’t live in Madison. I’m never back here. I wanted Grace to see.”

You must have flinched.

She smiles. “It’s silly, I know. She doesn’t know where we are, but—“ She tilts the baby to the open room. “See, Grace, this is where your grandmother lived. Your grandmother was a lovely woman. She would have loved you.”

You feel like you’re eavesdropping.

“That’s why you have her name. I want you to grow up as kind, as smart, as her.”

The woman doesn’t cry, but you think she wants to. She thanks you again and then walks back across the court, the new green grass, to her sensible car. You watch her from the porch.

The spirit has a name.

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Three years later, your family has what your oldest sister derides as the “Summer of Fun, 2001.” She suggests t-shirts with tour dates: hospitals, rehabilitation centers. Your father takes all summer to die, through June, July, and August. Your mother’s old house is prone to bats and you’ve had late night calls to catch them, shoo them out with towels and tennis rackets, things your father did, reluctantly, but efficiently. In late summer, your teenage nephew goes to the hospital with a freak eye infection that almost kills him. In September, a week after the entire country has frozen in fear and grief, your father dies quietly, early one morning back in the hospital again. He lived a long life, a successful one, but his death was so protracted, new pains and humiliations day after day, that it’s both a shock and a relief.

A few weeks later, your wife is pregnant with your first child. You’ve been married five years and it is so, so right, to bring a life into this world which seems turned toward death. A month after that, you go to your first professional conference together, in upstate New York. You’re a grad student again, studying writing. This trip is exciting but no one wants to fly. So you drive, you at the wheel, your wife by your side, all the way from Madison to Cortland. She keeps a diary for the baby, recording your anticipation. This is the best way to mourn: loving a child of the future. Your wife had lived upstate, briefly, as her peripatetic father criss-crossed the country, dragging his family from one academic job to the next. Together you vow never to do that. You are both happy to travel, but happier to be home when it is done.

A football Saturday, game day traffic in your mother’s campus neighborhood. You’re raking her yard and the sky is that Popsicle blue only the north gets in autumn. Your wife comes out to stand by you, you think to observe the fans walking by in their red and white jackets, their red hats, the slow cars looking for parking. She tells you she’s having some pain. Her green eyes flicker. She touches her side.

You tell her to rest, put her feet up. Your mother, a woman who had five easy births, but one miscarriage before any of you arrived, tells her to do the same. Rest. This seems like calming advice. Your wife goes in and reads magazines on the living room couch. (Much later, you and your mother will curse yourselves as blind optimists, deaf to your wife's real needs.)

An hour later she tells you she needs to go to the hospital.

The ER is crowded, the nurses casual and preoccupied until they scan your wife's bloated belly and find so much blood. It looks like a shadow to you, a black cloud. They hustle her off for surgery. It was supposed to last an hour. Two go by. Three. You shuffle pages in *People* and *Sports Illustrated*. Your best friend, a man you've known since high school and who is now as much your wife's friend as yours, who you were supposed to have dinner with, stops by the otherwise empty waiting room. How many hours? Four. Five. He leaves. You call your sisters, your mother. Six. You're alone in the dark. A nurse comes in. She's alive, the nurse tells you, but it was ugly. A burst fallopian tube. Of course, she isn't pregnant anymore. If you hadn't come when you had, your wife would have died tonight, no doubt. You can still have a child, she assures you. You will.

You stay in the room with your wife until after midnight when they ask you to leave. You go home to the quiet apartment.

In five years, maybe you've been apart a handful of nights. She visited her father once for a few days a year ago. That was it. You wonder if she'll live. You can't fathom life without her. You try to pray. You speak to the dark. All you want is grace. Grace. You settle down, your insides no longer racing on terror and coffee. You fall asleep.

Your wife recuperates on the cramped rocking loveseat in the living room. (You don't own a couch, but you buy one as soon as she's mobile.) Your wife falls asleep, exhausted and drugged, her legs tucked up, a blanket under her chin. She tells you, years later, someone distinctly put a hand on her face as she drifted off to sleep, a caress, a comfort. It wasn't you, she knows, you weren't in the room. Maybe it was the drugs, she says. Maybe, but you know she thinks it wasn't. You don't either. (And you hear the Cowardly Lion mumbling, *I do believe in ghosts, I do believe in ghosts*. Invisible hands on troubled brows: should be funny, should be scary. But's it's neither.)

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You live there another three years during graduate school, busy with adjunct teaching jobs. You want to stay in Madison, but there's no permanent work, not for two PhDs in English in the zip code with more doctorates than any other in the nation. The joke has always been that even the cab drivers in Madison have PhDs and suddenly it isn't cute. But you're lucky—you land a tenure-track gig, a thousand miles too far way, in Texas, and you leave the four-flat behind. You leave the cemetery behind, the one where your father is buried, the headstone already carved with your mother's name though she still lives in the same house, and you go, like some sort of modern pilgrims to a state you never put on your to-do list. When you tell people where you're going, they don't say congratulations, they say, "I'm sorry." George Bush is running for re-election and the war is bloody and Texas is a curse word in Madison. You feel like you're walking into a trap, but you want the security. You want a family, solid insurance. You need insurance. You leave for that, that baby of the could-be future.

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The nurses told you that your wife could still get pregnant with one tube, one highway they called it, and you both had faith. You try and you try and the years go by and month after bloody month you both weep. This is not the way it's supposed to be, you think. Your wife keeps no diary for growing wombs. Every actress on TV, every celebrity has a "bump" and it's dragging at you both. Your mother says, "'Oh, shit,' is not the appropriate response to hearing other people's good news," but that's what she thinks, she tells you, with every cousin and neighbor's announcement. *Oh, shit.* You travel north for a family vacation with her and stop for lunch at a Perkins in Eau Claire. Your mother hates aging, every new frailty, and old women with walkers are her special fear. As you wait for a table, the restaurant seems devoted to either the pregnant or dying. Geriatric widows shuffle by, hunched over handles, tennis balls neon green on the metal legs. Young women lurch with bursting bellies, babies pushing at every seam. You try to study the pies behind the glass display case. Your wife gazes at the wallpaper, green and white stripes. Your mother sighs. Then, you and your wife and your mother get the giggles. "Oh, shit," you whisper. You count them each, each your terrors, and get to a dozen.

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A blur of specialists. The big-game hunter urologist whose lobby is filled with the taxidermied heads of antelope and moose, who tells you your visit should have come years earlier and sends you to another guy, whose assistant is a young resident just back from Moscow where he studied medicine and literature. You talk Dostoevsky and Tolstoy, then he hands you a stack of Russian *Playboy* and tells you to have fun. "Push the button and a light will come on to tell us when you're done." He leaves. The nurses chatter beyond the closed door. You look at the women on the glossy pages. Thirteen-year-old you would have dug this stack of magazines. This is not fun. This will never be your definition of fun.

Your wife is going through the equivalent tests and nothing's wrong with either of you, well, except for a missing fallopian tube and every day that passes you are each getting older.

You should buy stock in pregnancy tests. Every month a pair of white sticks in the bathroom trash. You go to Madison one Thanksgiving and your mother can't find her turkey baster. You march with your wife to buy one at the massive supermarket and your wife says, "Just to make sure," and grabs an EPT off the shelf. Standing in line, you holding the baster, your wife the little box, you realize how this looks. You go in separate check-outs and smile at each other over shelves of candy. The holiday is fun, but the test another bust. You don't want to fly back and leave everyone behind again, and again, and again.

The specialists in Houston finally tell you one day in December, beyond another Thanksgiving, three and a half years after you've moved to Nacogdoches, that it will never happen, *it* being a baby. The last doctor is an elegant woman with a national reputation. "You could look for an egg donor, maybe. But even then, I'd say your wasting your money." You drive home, dazed, past suburbs and then thick pine forests. You watch a stupid animated movie, *Over the Hedge*, and it makes you both weep. "We are a family," she tells you, kneeling together on the living room floor because you'd watched the film sprawled on the carpet, and you are, the two of you, family, and you hold each other, but that doesn't stop you both from thinking, *Oh, shit, oh, shit, oh, shit*. The credits roll. You turn the television off. The screen is black.

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Christmas comes and goes in Madison. A trip to Chicago. The New Year. Back to your mother's house. And then this is grace or something like it: what the doctors don't know is your wife was already pregnant, even as she was sitting in that famous doctor's expensive lobby chair. No drugs anymore, no operations. It's happened, just happened, the roulette of sperm and egg, despite age and that Saturday so long ago. A baby has taken hold in your wife: the most stunning surprise of your life. Another pregnancy test run to the same grocery store. *Yes*. And a few hours later to make sure. *Yes*. You are so lucky, so amazed. That word, *amaze*, as someone recently told you, is about coming out from blindness, out of a trap, out of a maze. You are truly amazed.

That night, lying in your childhood bedroom, your wife sleeping beside you, you don't close your eyes. You hear everything, see everything in the dark. How can you help her, protect her, protect what's inside her? You think of your father. You wish he could come back and tell you. You've never been so awake, so alert. You'll sleep later. Later, when you're sure everyone is fine. When will that be? Ten weeks? Nine months? Eighteen years? Forty years? Your mind races ahead of itself, laps itself, runs a lifetime in seven hours of dark, some B side to the A side of that Saturday night-turned-Sunday-morning seven years earlier, but this time there is joy beneath the exhaustion.

You tell your mother the news the night before your return flight. She should have been sitting. Her eyes flicker, her balance wavers, and your wife leads her to a chair. You think she might collapse. She cries. "You're sure?" she asks. Yes, you say. *Yes*.

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She arrives one morning in August, a planned Caesarian birth because labor would kill your wife. She is beautiful, she being your wife, she being your daughter. You give her the most graceful name you both love: Audrey.

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You're still a thousand miles too far from Madison. During the last visit, you drove your five-year-old past the apartment on Lynn Terrace. "Mommy and Daddy used to live there," your wife tells her, sitting in the back next to her carseat. "Before you were born."

Your daughter laughs at the idea there was a you before her. You wonder if there was a you before her and laugh with her. This is the way you'd imagined it: the girl and the woman beside her, you with them. You are family. This is the feeling your parents gave you as a child. This is the feeling the woman with the baby wanted Grace to see, to feel, one April more than a decade ago. This is the feeling Grace gave to her granddaughter. Grace is probably buried in the same cemetery as your father, but you don't know her last name. Grace the baby is almost a teenager, you suppose.

The world, of course, is turning, you explain to your daughter at breakfast back in Texas. We turn in circles every day, this way, this way, your finger moving in a tight arc, your arm moving out in a broad one. We don't feel it, but we are in motion. There are things happening around us we can't sense.

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Well, some of us can. You think of your wife, talking to Grace, calming her in the dark. You wonder who Grace stands above now, silently in the dawn. Do they know about her? Do they feel her? You wonder about your life there if you'd stayed. But then you wouldn't have this one, and this one is good. You remember the you before Audrey and you are so damned grateful. You are happy. You are a family. You hear your wife's voice. You lived with Grace for six years, a year longer than you've had your daughter. You can't believe how she's grown. The world turns and spirits float among us. Grace and incense alike. Keats said his tomb should read, *here lies one whose name is writ in water*. What about air? Vapor. Clouds. The space at the end of the bed. Memories. Your father. A grandmother you never knew. Other people's grandmothers and other people's babies.

Grace, you want to say, are you okay? We miss you but we're doing okay. We just want to tell you, we're okay. Then you tell her, go back to sleep. Rest. You're okay.

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