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# CONTENTS



<i>Acknowledgments</i>	7
1. The Last Best Word	11
PART I: HOW SWEET THE SOUND	
2. Babette's Feast: A Story	19
3. A World Without Grace	29
4. Lovesick Father	45
5. The New Math of Grace	59
PART II: BREAKING THE CYCLE OF UNGRACE	
6. Unbroken Chain: A Story	75
7. An Unnatural Act	83
8. Why Forgive?	95
9. Getting Even	109
10. The Arsenal of Grace	123
PART III: SCENT OF SCANDAL	
11. A Home for Bastards: A Story	141
12. No Oddballs Allowed	147
13. Grace-Healed Eyes	161
14. Loopholes	177
15. Grace Avoidance	193
PART IV: GRACE NOTES FOR A DEAF WORLD	
16. Big Harold: A Story	213
17. Mixed Aroma	225
18. Serpent Wisdom	239
19. Patches of Green	253
20. Gravity and Grace	271
<i>Sources</i>	283
<i>About the Author</i>	294

*I know nothing, except what everyone knows—  
if there when Grace dances, I should dance.*

W. H. AUDEN



## ONE

# THE LAST BEST WORD



I told a story in my book *The Jesus I Never Knew*, a true story that long afterward continued to haunt me. I heard it from a friend who works with the down-and-out in Chicago:

A prostitute came to me in wretched straits, homeless, sick, unable to buy food for her two-year-old daughter. Through sobs and tears, she told me she had been renting out her daughter—two years old!—to men interested in kinky sex. She made more renting out her daughter for an hour than she could earn on her own in a night. She had to do it, she said, to support her own drug habit. I could hardly bear hearing her sordid story. For one thing, it made me legally liable—I'm required to report cases of child abuse. I had no idea what to say to this woman.

At last I asked if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure, naive shock that crossed her face. "Church!" she cried. "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

What struck me about my friend's story is that women much like this prostitute fled toward Jesus, not away from him. The worse a person felt about herself, the more likely she saw Jesus as a refuge. Has the church lost that gift? Evidently the down-and-out, who flocked to Jesus when he lived on earth, no longer feel welcome among his followers. What has happened?

The more I pondered this question, the more I felt drawn to one word as the key. All that follows uncoils from that one word.

As a writer, I play with words all day long. I toy with them, listen for their overtones, crack them open, and try to stuff my thoughts inside. I've found that words tend to spoil over the years, like old meat. Their meaning rots away. Consider the word "charity," for instance. When King James translators contemplated the highest form of love they settled on the word "charity" to convey it. Nowadays we hear the scornful protest, "I don't want your charity!"

Perhaps I keep circling back to *grace* because it is one grand theological word that has not spoiled. I call it "the last best word" because every English usage I can find retains some of the glory of the original. Like a vast aquifer, the word underlies our proud civilization, reminding us that good things come not from our own efforts, rather by the grace of God. Even now, despite our secular drift, taproots still stretch toward grace. Listen to how we use the word.

Many people "say grace" before meals, acknowledging daily bread as a gift from God. We are *grateful* for someone's kindness, *gratified* by good news, *congratulated* when successful, *gracious* in hosting friends. When a person's service pleases us, we leave a *gratuity*. In each of these uses I hear a pang of childlike delight in the undeserved.

A composer of music may add *grace notes* to the score. Though not essential to the melody—they are *gratuitous*—these notes add a flourish whose presence would be missed. When I first attempt a piano sonata by Beethoven or Schubert I play it through a few times without the grace notes. The sonata carries along, but oh what a difference it makes when I am able to add in the grace notes, which season the piece like savory spices.

In England, some uses hint loudly at the word's theological source. British subjects address royalty as "Your grace." Students at Oxford and Cambridge may "receive a grace" exempting them from certain academic requirements. Parliament declares an "act of grace" to pardon a criminal.

New York publishers also suggest the theological meaning with their policy of *gracing*. If I sign up for twelve issues of a magazine, I may receive a few extra copies even after my subscription has expired. These are “grace issues,” sent free of charge (or, *gratis*) to tempt me to resubscribe. Credit cards, rental car agencies, and mortgage companies likewise extend to customers an undeserved “grace period.”

I also learn about a word from its opposite. Newspapers speak of communism’s “fall from grace,” a phrase similarly applied to Jimmy Swaggart, Richard Nixon, and O. J. Simpson. We insult a person by pointing out the dearth of grace: “You *ingrate!*” we say, or worse, “You’re a *disgrace!*” A truly despicable person has no “saving grace” about him. My favorite use of the root word *grace* occurs in the mellifluous phrase *persona non grata*: a person who offends the U.S. government by some act of treachery is officially proclaimed a “person without grace.”

The many uses of the word in English convince me that *grace* is indeed amazing—truly our last best word. It contains the essence of the gospel as a drop of water can contain the image of the sun. The world thirsts for grace in ways it does not even recognize; little wonder the hymn “Amazing Grace” edged its way onto the Top Ten charts two hundred years after composition. For a society that seems adrift, without moorings, I know of no better place to drop an anchor of faith.

Like grace notes in music, though, the state of grace proves fleeting. The Berlin Wall falls in a night of euphoria; South African blacks queue up in long, exuberant lines to cast their first votes ever; Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shake hands in the Rose Garden—for a moment, grace descends. And then Eastern Europe sullenly settles into the long task of rebuilding, South Africa tries to figure out how to run a country, Arafat dodges bullets and Rabin is felled by one. Like a dying star, grace dissipates in a final burst of pale light, and is then engulfed by the black hole of “ungrace.”

“The great Christian revolutions,” said H. Richard Niebuhr, “come not by the discovery of something that was not known before. They