



State of Grace

By Ann Wendell

Surely all art is the result of one's having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, where no one can go any further.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Chapter

1

Grace knew that blowing off the cancer support group would have repercussions but she hadn't thought they would entail being harassed by ghosts. It's just that ever since those undergraduate psychology classes where the study sessions turned into encounter groups she'd hated the whole idea of baring her soul to a bunch of strangers. What about when someone started to cry? There's always that woman on the other side of the circle tripping over her caftan, knocking everyone else out of the way in her desperate attempt to be first on scene with the box of Kleenex. And what if...God forbid...someone wanted to hug? It all just seemed way too Fight Club to her and without even the chance of Swedish meatballs at Ikea. And she just didn't think she had the energy right now to appear empathic about anybody else's problems. She had to do enough of that at work. But never the less, here she was, her back up against the wall of the elevator at the Cancer Care Center with tiny, old, dead Mrs. Moscovitz jumping up and down in front of her like a Jack Russell terrier possessed by Beelzebub.

“Go away”, she hissed out of the corner of her mouth although there wasn't actually anyone else in the elevator at the moment....at least anyone still breathing. “What do you want from me??”

“I just don't have time for this right now”, she thought.

She was already 15 minutes late for her appointment with Dr. Connors, her oncologist who looked and sounded remarkably like Julia Child but had the bedside manner of General Patton. Not to mention the fact that her boss Bitsy was on the warpath about her missing work over little things like chemotherapy. No matter that she worked for the mental health division of a big HMO. Apparently the whole sick leave concept was just there for show...it's not like they actually allowed you to use it. The thing is...it wasn't even the fact that she was seeing ghosts that had her worried...that had been going on since the third grade. All the women in her family had

had some kind of otherworldly connection. In retrospect she wondered if her mother really had been kidding when she used to fill in the blank for religion with Druid on all official forms. And her sister would still be with the Psychic Friends Network if Dionne Warwick hadn't ended up in a prison cell with Tammy Faye Bakker or whatever. But until recently her experience had been more along the lines of the occasional doe-eyed child wanting mommy to know she was in a better place or Uncle Wilfred wanting to give Aunt Ethel permission to move on. Now that she'd started chemo it seemed as if the whole situation had ratcheted up to a new level, and not necessarily a higher one. Roving packs of the dearly departed were now camping out on her lawn and lounging around in her linen closet. Yesterday there was an entire family of Amish in the back seat of her car and this morning she'd given her order for a standing rib roast to the butcher before she realized that the blood on his apron actually came from a bullet hole in his forehead. The weirdest thing was that instead of communicating with her with the transcendent, serene understanding she was used to they seemed to be in a desperate state of trying to get her attention like some sort of zombie Hare Krishna stalker mimes.

Grace tried snapping her fingers at Mrs. Moscovitz...after all, that used to work with the horrible little terrier that had been responsible for the downfall of her first marriage. And Mrs. Moscovitz' performance was causing her to have some sort of déjà vu experience of that whole nightmare. Nothing. Then she tried begging.

“Look Bubbe...I promise I'll talk with you after my appointment. You know how Dr. Connors is...there's going to be hell to pay already. Why don't you go down to the cafeteria and see if anyone you know is hanging around? Then I'll meet you in the Meditation Room where at least I can fall back on the explanation of communing with the divine if someone hears me. OK?”

With a ping the elevator doors opened onto her floor and Grace scooted out before she could hear any objections. She careened down the hall and skidded to a stop in the waiting room by the check in counter. Calvin the receptionist barely looked up from his copy of Cosmo, saw it was her, and waved her on through. LaShondella the nurse was waiting outside the exam room.

“Well Miss Thing, you better get your sweet self into that room and out of those clothes – Dr. C is on a tear already this morning”

“Well Jesus, Mary and Joseph on a porch swing”, thought Grace. “That's all I need today.”

Grace Porterson was 42 years old. She had piercing blue eyes and wore her hair in a shoulder length, auburn bob, or rather she did when she had any. These days it was more like chicken fuzz but luckily before the whole cancer thing Grace had already amassed a rather extensive collection of hats and at least she no longer had to make up any excuses to wear these on an every day basis. Grace had always felt she had style and it was true. Even bald and one boobed she carried herself with a certain *je nais se quoi*. She had been diagnosed with Stage II breast cancer last December and after surgery was now in the midst of what seemed like a never ending round of chemo. The whole experience pissed her off. She refused to identify herself with her disease and so when the perky Sisters for Survival lady had called her last week about the Circle of Healing Support Group she told her that amateur assemblage was against her religion.

Grace had lived in Seattle all her life in the same house she grew up in and she was proud of her native status. When chatting up strangers in social settings she was hyper-vigilant over others' claims to the same and always asked the litmus test question of in which hospital they had been born. Poseurs who tried to claim life-long residency when born in California were treated to a withering stare. Of course this was a bit harder to pull off now that she had had to import her second husband, a sweet, absent minded comparative religions professor, from Los Angeles. But at least Harry was up front about his lack of local roots and frankly she felt she deserved him. She had pretty much given up on the idea of true love after the soul sucking experience of being married to her first husband, The Jerk. The only good things to come out of that experience were her lovely 9 year old twin daughters, Sophie and Zelda. While the girls were often a handful, and a second marriage sometimes a challenge, she felt she was truly blessed with her family.

Now her job on the other hand was another story. Grace worked for the mental health department of Wellness Therapy Foundation, an enormous HMO known universally by its acronym, that gave new meaning to the term managed care. She wasn't exactly sure just what that meaning was but she knew it wasn't anything good. Trying to do good was how Grace ended up there in the first place. She had been a Product Support Specialist for ScreamingHamster, a dotcom that fancied itself an Internet Business Strategies company back in what the analysts these days

referred to as the “irrational exuberance days of bubble version one” but which turned out to be just a contingent staffing company with delusions of e-grandeur. When the onsite masseuse got fired and the guy in the next cubicle over offered her his stock options to pick up the pizza she knew it was only a matter of time before all that was left were the logo emblazoned t-shirts and mugs. She decided to fall back on her undergraduate psychology degree and now spent her days helping the terminally depressed navigate the morass of their health care benefits. On her best days she felt like a psychiatric air traffic controller – she got people and their baggage to their destinations without crashing. The ghosts really had been helpful with this job – often when she was on the phone with someone she would find that what she thought of as “their people” would drift out of the ether and hang out on the corner of her desk, yakking away in her other ear and giving her the low down on what was really going on. She ended up getting quite a good clinical reputation especially for talking down software developers who would call in sobbing from the floor of their cubicles at the end of a release cycle hopped up on all that free Pepsi.

It just didn't seem to be doing her a hell of a lot of good in her own situation. Thank god Dr. Connors had been caught up with some other patient today and moved through her exam like a bat out of hell. She didn't actually know someone could do a breast exam that fast but she supposed it helped having only one to deal with. Now upstairs for chemo and then maybe she could sneak home without Mrs. Markowitz buttonholing her in the elevator again.

Grace picked up her chart from LaShondella and headed to the 5th floor for chemotherapy. The chemo unit was a strange combination of pale pink walls, soothing music, and the overpowering smell of disinfectant. Crash carts rested next to mini frigs full of chicken broth, apple juice, and rice pudding. The walls had both crayoned kid's portraits and expensively framed bland corporate art. The floors had a pattern of yellow stars swirling into purple pentagrams and always made Grace think that the architect must have been going through a Harry Potter phase during construction. There were corridors of curtained off cubicles with hospital beds, ancient magazines, and TVs bolted to the ceiling. She headed to what she always thought of as the temporary holding area, a long row of recliners each with its own IV pole standing guard. Laz-E-Boys in Limbo. She settled in and popped her nausea pill that she had picked up at the nurse's station. She hoped she would have Sandy as her nurse today. She liked all of the nurses on the chemo floor, a no nonsense

bunch that could handle whatever came their way and were always willing to listen to a never ending litany of symptoms and side effects, but Sandy was her favorite. She was kind of goofy and Grace always thought that should be encouraged. And Sandy's son was the same age as her girls which meant that they could have normal mom conversation. Grace had found that when you had to spend two hours every week getting poison pumped into your system every little bit of normal helped.

Grace heard noises coming from the next chair station and looked at the bottom of the partition curtain to see if she could tell who was there. What she saw was a pair of glittery silver platform boots that wouldn't have been out of place on Ziggy Stardust. These were followed by a pair of modest spectator pumps straight out of Neiman Marcus.

“I don't know how you can wear that outfit here. What are people going to think?”

“I don't know mom...probably that I have better places to be than here. Why? Do you think that outfit you're wearing is more appropriate? You know I'm not dead yet – why don't you save it for the funeral?”

“I know you don't mean that...it's just the drugs talking.”

“Drugs? What drugs? I get drugs? Maybe this won't be so bad after all.”

“All right Trevor...that's enough. I'm going to go run a few errands and I'll be back to pick you up in a couple hours. Can I get you anything?”

“Yeah...drugs. When do I get those drugs?”

Grace heard the universal sound of motherly frustration and watched the pumps click down the hallway. She couldn't believe what she heard next.

“Geez Mrs. Moscowitz can't you leave me alone? I'll talk to you at home later, OK?”

Chapter 2

Grace leapt up out of her Laz-E-Boy and yanked aside the curtain. Yep...there she was...no longer jumping up and down but now wagging her finger at Ziggy and ripping him a new one (in that way only a Jewish grandmother can) about the amount of eye liner he was wearing. Ziggy was ignoring her with practiced teenage insolence and looked up at Grace.

“Uh...yeah...can I help you lady?”

“What are you doing talking to Mrs. Markowitz?!” Grace blurted.

“Huh?...what? What do you mean?”

“I can see her too you know. She’s standing right there in her fuzzy pink cardigan and orthopedic shoes.”

Grace had a sudden thought that when she was the one haunting people she sure as hell was going to make sure she was wearing Jimmy Choo’s. Not that she actually owned any. But wasn’t the Nordstrom half-yearly sale coming up?

While Grace was experiencing this little chemo brain interlude the teen was staring at her in slack jawed wonder.

“You can see her?” he whispered.

“Oh yes indeedy...I can see her. How long has it been happening for you?”

“Uh...just since I started chemo. I have leukemia...ALL...I was just diagnosed in January. My name’s Trevor.”

“I’m Grace. Breast cancer...Stage II...status post surgery...started chemo last month. But I’ve been talking to ghosts since I was your age...younger actually. Things have just gotten a lot more intense since I started chemo.”

“I think Mrs. Moscovitz wants to say something.”

Grace glanced over at Mrs. Moscovitz who was banging her walker against the floor in frustration.

“She wants us to go see the Dark Man in the meditation room.”

“Darkman? From the comic book?? Awesome.”

“Somehow I doubt it but at this point who knows? Damn...here come the nurses. Do you have any time after treatment? Is your mother coming back to get you?”

“Oh, she won’t come back until I call her. She can’t stand being here ‘cause it’s not all about her you know? I could meet you down there in like half an hour I guess.”

Trevor whisked the curtain closed and got back in his chair. Grace did the same, thinking to herself well now... that I didn’t expect.

Trevor Gabriel was 16 years old and lived with his parents and little brother in Medina, “just down the street from Bill” as his mother Cindy liked to say. This wasn’t entirely accurate although they were in the same zip code, along with all the other millionaires for which the town was known. His mom has made their considerable wealth working as an Admin Asst at Microsoft back in the 80s and now spent her days doing the Eastside equivalent of the ladies that lunch. This consisted of equal parts shopping at Bel Square and volunteering for the Opera Guild. His dad was a corporate lawyer for some big firm in downtown Seattle and seemed to only come home long enough to pick up his dry cleaning, and of course his golf clubs for the weekends.

Both Trevor and his brother Paxton went to Lakeside, “Bill’s alma mater you know”. It was a good school and Trevor liked some of his teachers a lot. He figured

on the whole he was better off there than at one of the suburban public schools. His best friend Tristan went to Roosevelt and the shop teacher there kept calling him cupcake. Of course Tristan did keep wearing his tiara to class. Trevor told him repeatedly that this really was just asking for trouble at a school where the Roughriders football team gathered for their pre-game huddle under the framed portrait of Teddy Roosevelt and his big stick.

Trevor and Tristan met a year ago at a rave in Seattle and had been inseparable ever since. They were just friends although Trevor knew his mom was convinced they were going to run off and have a commitment ceremony any day now. The fact that Tristan was gay too and completely out was of course a factor in their friendship. But more than that Trevor and Tristan just clicked on so many different levels. They both loved the same music and the whole all inclusive peace/love/unity/respect rave scene. They'd have one of their parents drop them off down the street from one of the all ages clubs and dance until the wee small hours, taking the bus back to Tristan's to crash. Maybe it wasn't the same as the raves he'd only heard about where Ecstasy stoked dancers ended up zoned out in the corners sucking on their pacifiers but there was still music pulsing and teens dancing with dizzy abandon beneath the laser lights and the neon blue, pink, and green of hundreds of glow sticks darting through the crowd like psychedelic fireflies. They'd spend rainy Seattle afternoons combing through the thrift stores and vintage shops assembling incredible outfits or playing backgammon and drinking Americanos at The Ugly Mug where you could buy a bumper sticker that said Friends Don't Let Friends Go To Starbucks. They were both old movie aficionados and hung at Scarecrow Video putting together programs of obscure films for theme Movie Nights at which they were the only audience. Tristan didn't know about the ghosts – Trevor was going to tell him...especially after the double feature of Here Comes Mr. Jordan and Heaven Can Wait...but something kept holding him back. And now maybe it was for the best...while he might have been able to explain communing with the dead he didn't know what excuses he was going to make for why his he was suddenly hanging with a fortysomething soccer mom.

Trevor just couldn't believe he'd ended up with cancer...leukemia for god's sake. It was like his life had just one day turned into some overwrought Lifetime movie of the week. All of a sudden he just couldn't seem to stay awake and he was covered in bruises that wouldn't go away. He knew that his gym teacher Mr. Nelson was about ready to call CPS before he was finally diagnosed. Now that would've gotten his

mother's attention. Of course you'd think that having your teenage son, the baby of the family, diagnosed with leukemia might have gotten to her but it felt like taking him to chemo was just one more thing that she penciled into her Day Timer. He supposed that if Bill took up leukemia as the new cause celebre and started throwing some of that Foundation money at it things might be different but between puking gay suburban teenager and fly covered belly swollen little African babies there just wasn't much of a contest.

Coming here to the Cancer Center wasn't so bad. The nurses on the chemo floor never made him feel weird or out of place. Sometimes he'd catch one of them rolling her eyes heavenward after his mom would make her escape and often they'd hang with him and watch part of the old Buffy reruns that were on while he had treatment. And he liked his oncologist Dr. Von Sieking all right. He was this 6'7" South African that raced bicycles competitively when he wasn't climbing mountains. He had so little body fat that at times his face looked skeletal and he always wore one of those little surgeon's caps that had tropical birds printed all over it and ratty looking jeans under his white coat. At times he had more bruises than Trevor did and Trevor was sure that one day he'd come in to find him staggering up and down the halls in a partial body cast. But Trevor liked that he seemed to live dangerously – in a perverse sort of way it made him feel safe.

Today Trevor couldn't wait for chemo to be over. As soon as the nurse flushed out his port he was out the door and down the elevator. He opened the door of the sanctuary and slipped into the dimly lit room. This was actually his favorite place at the Cancer Center...if one could really have a favorite place at a cancer treatment center. He liked it because it had all of what he considered the best parts of church – stained glass and spacey music – without having to deal with any overtly religious hooah. And it was almost always deserted, at least on the Friday afternoons when he usually had chemo, so he often looked forward to just having a little alone time there. Today he heard voices coming from one of the alcoves and he went in to find Grace talking with some old guy. They looked up and motioned for Trevor to come join them.

“Trevor – this is Mr. Schwartzman. “

“Hello kid...Leo Schwartzman here....prostate cancer...6th week of chemo. That’s quite a farshlugginah outfit you’ve got on there boychik but then take a look at this – maybe, god forbid, we’re all supposed to go in costume”

Mr. Schwartzman took out the gilt edged invitation from the breast pocket of his jacket. “It was in this morning’s New York Times,” he said. “Lying right there on the stoop. I’m thinking it was the paperboy’s bar mitzvah announcement. But no... it’s a summons from Death. Who would have thought? If I had had any bejeezus in me it would have been scared right out of me.” He handed it to Grace who noticed all their names written with silver ink in beautiful cursive on the envelope, with “in care of Cancer Care Center” below them. She took the heavy cardstock out of the envelope and took a look at it, holding it out slightly so Trevor could read it too.

The necessity of your company
Is commanded
For an audience
With Death
Seattle underground
Midnight
Midsummer’s Eve

Bring chocolate

“Geez Louise,” thought Grace, “now this.”

“How are we supposed to pull that off?” squeaked Trevor. “I guess I could sneak out after my mom and dad are asleep and ride my bike back over but how are we supposed to get into the Underground?? I mean don’t you have to go on that tour like you’re one of the tourists from Topeka?”

“Actually,” said Mr. Swartzman, “that’s at least a worry we won’t have. I own The Tomes down in Pioneer Square.”

“Oh yeah! That’s where I’ve seen you! Like, that is such a way cool bookstore. My friend Tristan and I go there all the time. But how would that help us get to the Underground?”

“There’s a passageway, down in the basement...that leads to the Underground. That tour – only the smallest part of what’s really there do they show you – it’s all still there under most of the buildings in Pioneer Square. In some of the old buildings you can still get to it.”

“That is so amazingly awesome! That must be completely chill”

“Ah...yes...well, dirty is what it is...and dank...a big farshtunken mess. But I suppose if I was Death, or a teenager, I might think ...awesome.”

Grace realized she was going to have to play the den mother card with these two. Death. Chocolate. Midsummer’s Eve. What was this? Dead Like Me crossed with Shakespeare served with bon bons? She didn’t have time for this – she had to pick the girls up from soccer practice.

“OK you two. Let’s try to make a plan here. When is midsummer’s eve...next Friday? We’ve got a week to try and figure this thing out. (Even as she said this her mind was racing...just what kind of chocolate did one bring as an offering to Death...ephemeres from The Dilettante? Gold Bars from Fran’s? If only Frederick and Nelson were still around...Frangos had always been an appropriate present for any occasion.) I’ve got to scoot but shall we try and meet up tomorrow? Should we meet back here?”

“I spend enough time here already. Come to the bookstore – I’ll put one of the youngsters out on the counter and a cup of coffee we’ll have and chew this over. Maybe even take a look downstairs in the daytime...get a feel for the place. What time works for you two?”

“I could come after school...3:30?”

“Sure, I can duck out of work early. Does that work for you Mr. Swartzman?”

“Call me Leo, cookie. 3:30pm is fine by me.”

Leo watched Grace and Trevor go, looked around to make sure no one else was in the Sanctuary, then walked to the front where the candles were burning under the stained glass window.

“Psst! God! Leo here. Are you listening? The ghosts weren’t enough to send to me? Now this?”

He didn’t get an answer. Not that that was a surprise to him. How long a time had it been since he expected to get an answer from God? Almost a lifetime. It likely was the day he last saw his mother. She had climbed the stairs of the subway tunnel in Berlin to get a drink of water. He remembered her looking back at him from the top of the stairs and smiling. “Just blink your eyes bubbellah and I’ll be back,” she called...but in the blink of an eye she was gone. What happened to her? Still, he had no answers. Had she been shot by German soldiers? Taken away by the Russians to a fate...he still can’t bear to think. He was twelve. His father, a tailor, had been arrested by the Nazis in 1938 and sent to Auschwitz. The records, when he finally gained access to them all those many years later, said only “verschollen” — “unknown.” No answers. For months he survived after his mother disappeared, passing for one of Hitler’s Youth in clothing stolen from backyard clotheslines. But one day, somehow, he was found out, made to strip naked in the street, beaten, and thrown into the cattle car for Dachau. During the journey, in the terror and confusion, he escaped. And then...the allies were approaching. Again, he survived. Why him? Still, no answers. In later years Leo took comfort in re-reading Rilke – “Live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers.” Who knew? Maybe now was that distant day.

TO BE CONTINUED...