

# *Grace*

By Leslie Larson

When I met Grace Hills, she didn't know the alphabet. She could write her name, but she couldn't read the newspaper, take down the address of her doctor's office, or pass the written test to get her driver's license. She was seventy-four years old, the third of eleven children born in Empire, Georgia. She had started chopping cotton when she was seven; when she was thirteen she took a job as a housekeeper in a white woman's house. She married at seventeen and spent the rest of her working life as a seamstress. She had raised five children, three girls and two boys. Now that she had retired, she wanted to learn to read. Not only did she want to read, she wanted to learn to write. And not just write. She wanted to write *poetry*.

She didn't tell me all of this right away. The first time we met was on a winter day in the main branch of the San Francisco public library. She was waiting for me in the reading room, which had tall ceilings and enormous windows that filled one wall. You could see the gray sky outside. The tables were filled with homeless men who had come in to get out of the cold. Some thumbed through magazines, many slept with their heads on the tables. There was a close smell of musty books, old coffee, and human bodies.

Grace was sitting at the corner of the table nearest the reference desk. As soon as I saw her I cursed myself for suggesting we meet in this place where Grace was clearly uncomfortable. She sat with her purse in her lap, her knees together, and—though she didn't move her head—her eyes shifted from side to side, keeping an eye on the men. She looked at me with distress and reproach. *What in the world were you thinking?* her eyes said.

I introduced myself and suggested we find our own table. When she stood, I was surprised at how tall she was. She was dressed as if for church in a dress that reminded me of Blue Willow china, navy on white. Her skin was very dark and her hair very white, pulled straight

back into a bun at the nape of her neck. She had a long face and prominent teeth. I had never met anyone whose name suited her so perfectly.

I was in a hurry to get her away from the smell and the snores of the men, but she walked stiffly, taking small, careful steps. I would soon learn that everything Grace did was unhurried and precise. We finally found a table in the stacks, hidden in a thicket of bookshelves. I told her a little about myself: that I had moved to San Francisco when I finished college, that I was trying to make a living as a freelance writer. I explained how reading had always been important to me and how, since reading had enriched my life in more ways than I could express, I wanted to pass that gift along to someone else.

I was in my twenties, earnest and enthusiastic. I expected Grace to react with appreciation and eagerness. But though she listened politely, I could tell she didn't much care what brought me there. Instead she eyed the stack of paperback books and the folder of paper I'd brought. She made it clear, without saying a word, that we should get down to business. She was there to learn.

I opened one of the books I'd chosen from the rack on the main floor of the library. It was for beginning adult readers; there were stories about fixing cars, finding lost dogs, and applying for jobs. I placed the book on the table between us and pointed to the first line. I wanted to get an idea of how much she knew. Grace leaned forward. She looked at the print for a minute, then she ran the palm of her hand down the face of the page as though to absorb the meaning through her skin. When she was finished she leaned back and smiled at me, nodding for me to go on, to teach her.

During the course of that first hour I saw that we'd have to start pretty much at the beginning. That first lesson we took on A, B, and C, practicing recognition, sounds, and writing. Grace worked hard. At the end of the lesson I was exhausted.

That week I drew up a game plan. I made flash cards, selected readings, and created worksheets. Teaching someone at Grace's stage of life to read seemed like an enormous endeavor, but I was determined—at least at first. We worked our way slowly through the alphabet. I

taught Grace the way I'd learned myself in elementary school. B was for BLUE, BOOK, and BOY. H was for HARD. Some letters were tricky, you never knew what sound they were going to make. Grace kept her head down, the pencil clenched in her hand. She was serious and a little shy, not very talkative. She never laughed at the jokes I made, she just looked at me to see if I was finished so we could get back to work. I quit fooling around. She learned short words: THE, IT, DOG, RUN. The flashcards got soft and tattered. We met for an hour and a half once a week. At the end of six months, we'd worked our way through the alphabet. The rain stopped and the fog came in, giving an underwater glow to the reading room when the weak sun shone through the big windows. The homeless guys moved from the tables to the steps outside. Grace recognized all the letters; she knew the sound each made. She could read about thirty or forty words and was well on her way to sounding out a lot more. I prompted her as she stumbled through simple sentences, sticking and bumping, but eventually making her way to the end of the paragraph. The last few minutes of every lesson, I always read a passage from the Bible she carried in her purse, usually one of the Psalms. We were both tired by then and it was a relief to hear my voice moving, unimpeded, over the words. All I had to do was read and all she had to do was listen.

To break up the tedium I brought in maps and showed Grace where the continents were. I pointed out the oceans, the mountains, the different countries. We read news clippings and magazine articles, seed catalogs, instruction booklets, and recipes. Grace's attention lagged. She nodded politely as I explained, and struggled dutifully through the readings, but I got the feeling that she was doing this for my benefit, not hers. She was always glad to get back to the words: to sounding them out, learning the meanings, memorizing the spelling. Then you could *feel* the force of her attention as she translated the word from the markings on the page to the sound in her mouth, or as she sketched the letters onto the paper.

I asked Grace if she wanted a writing project.

Yes.

What did she want to write? A letter to her daughter, who worked as a nurse in Seattle?

She shook her head.

A birthday card to her grandson?

Nope.

Did she want to write a news story about some pivotal event in her life? Grace pressed her lips together and looked at me like she'd just wait for this particular bout of madness to pass.

Well, then. What *did* she want to write? A smile split her face open like I'd finally, *finally* asked something she wanted to hear.

"Poems," she said.

That's when I finally began to get it. The strange way Grace had always used the paper, breaking the sentences in half and starting on the next line, leaving white space, sometimes just a word or two to a line. Wasting paper! The way she'd perk up when I explained consonant blends and the ways vowels changed their sounds when they paired with other letters. Her delight when she learned certain words: RIVER, TWILIGHT, MOON, WIND. All this time she'd been listening with a poet's ear, looking for a language that matched the music in her heart. After all, she had *listened* to language all her life. To her language was sound, not sight. Once she started, she couldn't stop. The poetry was already in her head, but it was a nuisance to get it out. She struggled impatiently with the words, working her mouth as she wrestled with the pencil, held back by fingers that couldn't keep pace with the rhythms in her head. But she stuck with it and the poems grew, line by line. They had the same pared-down power as the Bible verses we read. She didn't waste any time on frills, cheap emotion, or pretty phrases. She'd waited her whole life to write poetry and there was no time to waste. She wrote about two things: the countryside where she'd grown up, and her relationship with God. There was no clear line where one ended and the other began.

Then one morning I had a phone call from Grace's daughter. Grace wouldn't be at her lesson the next day. She had suffered a stroke.

Despite Grace's age, the news took me completely by surprise. I realized I had no way of reaching her. Though we'd spent almost a year together, I'd never met anyone in her family, visited her house, or invited her to mine. Our meetings had been friendly but businesslike,

focused only on our work. So I waited. I was struggling with my own fiction writing at the time, and barely making a living writing advertising copy for cookie jars, baby strollers, office supplies, and luxury vacation packages. Months went by. Then out of the blue, the same daughter called again to say that Grace was better, that she was ready to carry on with her lessons.

I was nervous waiting for her at the library. I didn't know what to expect, whether she'd look or act different. But Grace looked the same. Her perfectly ironed dress and her hair pulled back, her same slow and steady way of walking. She let me lay my hand over hers when she sat down beside me. She thanked me when I told her how glad I was to see her.

I thought she might need a little brush-up, that we might have to go over a few things to refresh her mind. I asked her to read a little from one of the books we'd already mastered. Grace stared at the page a long time before she raised her head and looked at me, a puzzled expression on her face. I prompted her with the first few words, reminded her of which story it was. When she continued to stare at the page I pointed to the letters, asked her to sound them out. A queasy feeling rocked my stomach. I asked her to spell the word, to point to the first letter, to name it. Grace just looked at me and raised her eyebrows. She even gave me a little smile.

She had forgotten everything. *Everything*. The letter A and all the letters that came after it. What's a vowel and what's a consonant. When two vowels go walking, the first does the talking. She had forgotten every word she learned, even favorites like ROCK, WIND, RAIN, and SKY. The only thing she remembered was that she wanted to write poetry.

We started over.

Learning was harder for Grace the second time round, but her need to write was more urgent. Her mind had become porous, incapable of holding onto anything for more than a few minutes. We drilled for weeks on the first few letters of the alphabet, but sometimes it was like the lesson hadn't even happened. We did exactly the same thing the next week. I began to dread our Tuesday mornings. It was too painful and, frankly, too tedious to go through the alphabet all over again. Since the stroke, Grace's hand was uncoordinated and weak. Her writing was barely legible. I wrote words in a yellow highlighter so that she could trace them in pencil. Over and

over. We went through stacks of paper I salvaged from my freelance jobs: one side filled with her labored struggles to form the letters, the other with my ads for shopping malls, banks, and leather jackets. Grace was dogged. Once in awhile she sighed with exasperation or clenched the pencil like she wanted to squeeze it into submission. But usually she just worked. One letter, one sound at a time. At the end of the lesson we still read a passage from her Bible and when we were finished she gave me the same mild smile and told me she'd see me next week. I began to wonder what she had to say that was so important. What was worth that much effort? Her progress was painfully slow and my patience was wearing thin. Maybe there was something wrong with her because who in her right mind would persevere so stubbornly with so little payoff? I schemed about ways to tell her I'd have to end our lessons: that I was taking a full time job, that I was moving away, that my mother was sick and I had to devote all my time to taking care of her. I planned speeches that I promised myself I'd deliver before we began our next lesson. But Grace's expression always stopped me dead. There was iron in her calmness, something steely in the placid way she looked at me. I bit my tongue and got on with the lesson.

I found that if I wrote the letters with my finger on the palm of Grace's hand while she repeated it, she was more likely to remember. She closed her eyes and tipped her head to the side like she was listening as her skin sucked in the letters. It was hard work. I called out letters and asked her to tell me the sounds they made. She watched my face as she pursed her lips to see if her answer was going to be the right one. We made it through the alphabet. We started on words again: IT, THE, BOY. Then we moved to simple sentences: SHE READS THE BOOK. HE WALKED HOME. Sometimes my praise was so lavish the homeless men raised their heads to see what the fuss was about.

Grace went back to the poetry she'd written before her stroke. She traced the letters with her finger. My heart ached. How I wanted to quit! Words evaded her. She struggled, trying to dredge up the phrases she wanted from her memory. I wondered how I, who wanted to be a writer and had so many words at my disposal, could have so little to say when Grace—who had so much to say—had such trouble finding the tools to say it. She finally solved the problem.

“You write,” she said, passing the pencil. “I’ll tell you what to say.”

We spent our last sessions that way. The words came easier when she didn’t have to struggle with the letters. She fixed her eyes on the high ceiling like she could see the hills and rivers of Georgia exactly as they’d been when she was a girl. I simply listened and wrote. I began to understand that Grace’s desire to write poetry, her sense of purpose about it, lived in a different part of her brain than the section that had been wiped clear by the stroke. That other part, the part that some people might call the soul, was untouched—as strong and fresh as ever.

Just when Grace was starting to get her footing back, she had another stroke. She didn’t come back after that. I saw her one more time before she died, at a ceremony for the students who had graduated from the literacy program. A large group gathered in one of the tall-windowed rooms. Grace was there with her daughters, sons, grandchildren, and neighbors. Except for the wheelchair where she sat, she looked exactly the same. Her hand was warm and her grip was strong when she grasped my hand. Her daughter pushed her up to the front of the ring of people, where she’d have a good view of the podium.

The woman who ran the program had compiled a book of students’ writing. Everyone got a copy. I had submitted almost all of Grace’s poetry because it was too hard for me to choose just a few. The poems were all one poem, I discovered, the song of Grace’s heart. Let someone else decide which ones to include. Reading them all at once, it dawned on me that beneath Grace’s silence, behind her mild smile and stubborn ways was a fiercely happy person, one who had worked hard and struggled all her life and who now enjoyed a joyous relationship with her Creator. She knew exactly who she was and where she belonged. When I opened the book, I was stunned to see that the collection was more a showcase for Grace’s poetry than a representative sampling of everyone’s work. While each student had one or at most two pieces in the book—usually just a couple of paragraphs—Grace’s poems spread over page after page. It was almost embarrassing, but at the same time it made sense. Grace was unstoppable. One by one, students came to the podium to read their pieces. A young mother told how, for the first time, she was able to help her kids with their homework. Another young woman read about the new feeling of self-worth she got from filling out a job application. A thirty-something guy read

a paragraph about how good it felt to get on the bus with a newspaper under his arm. An older man in his fifties confessed that, until this program, his wife was the only person in the world who knew he couldn't read. Each person's story was heartfelt and the pride he or she felt in reading from the printed page was evident. It was very moving and the applause was thunderous.

But no one was prepared for Grace.

She didn't read her own poems. The woman who ran the program stepped up to the podium and simply began reading. It was one of my favorite poems, about a rock in the river where Grace's mother had washed the family's clothes. A sudden, listening silence filled the room. I felt the distinct presence of each and every person there, felt their concentration, as intense as my own. In that instant I understood the power of Grace's commitment, of her devotion. She didn't question where she was going or how she was going to get there. She didn't stop to measure how much progress she'd made or how far she still had to go. She didn't ask if her effort was worth it or when the payoff would come. She simply took the first step and kept going, moment by moment, never taking no for an answer. Her devotion was spiritual in its persistence, and she served her purpose like she served God, without asking why. She simply trusted that the words would come, that sooner or later they would find their way to the light. When the poem was finished, no one clapped. We looked around at each other. Everyone was crying, except Grace. She sat in the wheelchair with her hands folded in her lap and a slight smile on her face. Then, as the applause broke out, she nodded toward the woman who had read as if she agreed with her, as if she were satisfied. Finally she looked around at everyone, acknowledging us, and for that moment everything was just as it should be.