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Kim Vogel
A NOVEL
Sawyer

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The Grace That Leads Us Home

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When Grace Sings

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All Scripture quotations and paraphrases are taken from the King James Version.

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*For Connie and John
with appreciation for your southern hospitality*

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As ye would that men should do to you, do
ye also to them likewise.

—LUKE 6:31

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Dear Reader,

In 2015, my husband and I spent a week in Georgia with some friends. While there, we visited several museums, and in one I came upon a huge photograph with the heading *Atlanta Exposition 1895*. I immediately experienced “author tingles.” Before I came home, I purchased a few books about the exposition, and a story began to take shape in my head.

I admit I was nervous about including a thread about racism, even though it was historically accurate for that time and place. It’s so easy to offend, and I did not want to do so. I wanted to use the elements of story to show the injustice and unfairness of treating people differently based on something as inconsequential and out of one’s control as skin color.

Talking about racism isn’t easy, but it’s a topic that needs to be addressed. Racism—bigotry—is ugly. Treating people unkindly because of their skin color, religious practices, or how much money they have (or don’t have) is, simply put, wrong. It contradicts the biblical instruction in Luke 6:31, “As ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise.”

While writing this story, and especially the part about Willie and Quincy’s friendship, I couldn’t help but think back to my childhood in Garden City, Kansas. My family lived in what we would call today an ethnically diverse neighborhood. All my brother and I knew then was that we had a lot of playmates. And play we did! Our favorite family was the Browns. They had four children, and the middle two—Chipper and Crystal—were just the right ages for Brad and me. We were in and out of other’s houses, their aunt was our favorite babysitter, and their Grandma Jennings became like a surrogate grandmother to us.

I will never forget the day my mom, with my brother and me in the back seat of the car, drove past a playground where Chipper was engaged in a football game with several other boys. Brad gasped and exclaimed, “Mommy!

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Chipper's face is brack [black]!" Not until Brad saw Chipper in a group of white children did he realize his friend's skin color was different from his own. Because in Brad's eyes, Chipper was just Chipper, his friend.

It may seem simplistic, but I think the key to overcoming bigotry is becoming acquainted. When we take the time to get to know the *person* underneath the clothes or the skin or whatever else might seem different to us, we discover that most people have commonalities. We all have the same desire as Laurel in the story: to love and be loved, to belong, to matter. We can help others feel accepted and valued when we choose to look past their exteriors to their hearts. That's what God does for us. As His followers, should we not emulate Him?

I truly hope this story will provide you a few hours of entertainment, and—admittedly—I also hope it helps you view the world a little differently: through God's eyes of love and acceptance.

May God bless you muchly as you journey with Him,
Kim

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Sunday, September 1, 1895
Pine Hill neighborhood, Atlanta, Georgia
Baurel Millard

Laurel swung her feet from the armrest of the sofa to the floor and sat up. The book she'd been reading slid from her lap and landed with a soft thud on the faded square of carpet that formed an island in the middle of the scuffed hardwood floor. Ordinarily, retrieving a book—a precious thing to both her and Mama—would take precedence over all else, but the mutter of voices from the porch and the click of a key in the front door stole her attention. Which of her siblings had chosen to disturb Mama's afternoon nap?

The door creaked open, and her brother Alfred, the oldest of the Millard siblings, stepped over the threshold with his usual air of importance. Their sister Nell followed him in. Worry smote Laurel, and she bounded to her feet. There must be a family emergency if both pompous Alfred and strong-minded Nell, who couldn't even sit together on the Millard family pew in the Episcopal church without breaking into an argument midsermon, had come together.

"Alfred, Nell, what—" Laurel's jaw dropped. Eugene, Raymond, and Mayme trailed in behind Nell. Never before had all five of her siblings shown up at the same time, no spouses or children in tow, for a visit. Her knees gave way, and she plopped onto the sofa's center cushion, gaping in both confusion and apprehension.

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Alfred fixed his unsmiling brown-eyed gaze on her. “Is Mama sleepin’?”

What else would Mama be doing at three thirty on a Sunday afternoon? Laurel kept the question to herself. Nineteen years her senior, Alfred tended to construe nearly everything she said as insolence. She nodded.

“Good.” Alfred flicked his hand at the others, and they removed their light cloaks and hats and draped them on the hall tree beside the door. Nell pressed her finger against her pursed lips, her frown giving a warning, and then they all chose a seat—Alfred in what Laurel always called Papa’s chair, although she had no memory of her papa sitting in it, Nell in Mama’s rocker, Eugene on the round stool in front of Mama’s loom, and Raymond and Mayme on either side of Laurel on the sofa.

Her stomach fluttered. Was this how a rabbit cornered by a pack of hungry coyotes felt? Needing to do something to calm her jumping nerves, she leaned forward and reached for the book.

Raymond clamped his hand over her knee and shook his head.

Laurel pointed at the book. “But I only wanted to—”

“Hush.” Mayme retrieved the green-fabric-covered volume of Verne’s *Cesar Cascabel*, smoothed the rumpled pages, and closed it, then placed it on the table next to the beautiful hand-painted oil lamp Papa had gifted Mama on their last wedding anniversary before his death over fifteen years ago.

The moment Mayme released the book, Alfred cleared his throat. As if it were a secret signal, everyone—Laurel included—folded their hands in their laps and turned their attention on him. He crossed his legs. “We’ve come about Mama.”

Laurel’s mouth went dry. “Is somethin’ wrong? Is she ill?”

Of course Mama was fine. If she had been stricken with some sort of disease, Laurel would have noticed. After all, she lived with Mama, worked with her side by side at the loom or on stitching projects, and sat with her in the parlor every evening, taking turns reading aloud from one of the books on their single, overstuffed shelf. It had been only the two of them since Mayme, the closest in age to Laurel, married and moved into her own home

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ten years ago, so Laurel would know better than anyone the state of Mama's health.

Nell made a sour face. "Of course not, Laurel. Don't be dramatic."

Did she mean more dramatic than all of them swooping in at once? "Then what?"

Alfred bounced his foot. Sunlight from the uncovered parlor window flashed white on the toe of his highly polished boot. "Mama turns sixty next week."

Laurel wrinkled her nose. "Yes, I know. But she's already told me she doesn't want a party, so if y'all are here to help organize one, then—"

"She's getting up in years"—Alfred, probably construing her comment an interruption, gave her a severe look—"and shouldn't be left to take care of the house and yard on her own."

Nell pressed her lips together and tsk-tsked. "Ideally, she would have a husband to help her." The room was stifling despite the open windows, but even so, Nell's icy stare sent a shiver down Laurel's spine. "Had you not chased off the only prospect, we wouldn't be havin' this conversation."

Would they never forgive her for crying every time Mr. Davis paid Mama a visit? Laurel held her hands wide. "I was barely three years old."

Nell rolled her eyes. "It doesn't matter. After your caterwauling, he abandoned the attempt at courtship, and Mama has been alone to this day."

Eugene, always the quietest of the group and Laurel's favorite of all her siblings, twisted back and forth on the stool. "At her age, it's not likely another chance for marriage will come along." He glanced at Alfred, as if questioning whether he'd gotten his lines right. "So that one chance she had with Mr. Davis . . ."

Laurel gritted her teeth. She couldn't even recall Mr. Davis, let alone her reason for bawling when he looked at her. If Mama hadn't confirmed the story, Laurel would suspect Mayme or Raymond had made it up to have another excuse to torment her.

She had come along late in Mama's life, following the loss of three babies in a row, and the others always accused her of being Mama's favorite. After all

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these years, she wouldn't change their opinion, so she didn't waste her breath by defending herself. But, oh, how hard to stay silent against the unfair accusation. She pinched a loose strand of hair falling from the nape of her neck and coiled it around her finger.

Eugene seemed to have run out of words, so Laurel turned to Alfred. "What is it you're trying to tell me?"

Alfred uncrossed his legs and leaned forward slightly, his dark brows descending. "Someone will need to care for Mama into her dotage, and we believe the rightful person is you."

Laurel's mouth fell open. She touched her fingertips to her bodice in silent query.

Nell nodded so hard the knot of dark hair atop her head lost a pin. "That's exactly right. Mama risked her life bringing you into this world. She nearly died along with your twin."

Sadness struck with such force that tears stung Laurel's eyes. How could she so deeply mourn someone she'd never met? She'd spent her life missing two important people—her papa and the twin her parents had named Lily.

Nell continued in a strident tone, unaware of—or, perhaps more accurate, unconcerned by—Laurel's inner pain. "Why, at forty-two she should have been preparing to spoil her first grandchildren, but instead she was suckling you at her breast. You owe her a debt of gratitude, Laurel, and you can repay it by agreein' to remain here with Mama until that day we lay her to rest next to Papa."

Laurel released a disbelieving laugh. "You can't mean that."

Mayme folded her arms over her chest and peered down her nose at Laurel. "Oh, she does. We all do."

"It only makes sense," Raymond said. "The rest of us have our own homes."

"And our own families," Mayme added.

Raymond snorted. "You can't expect us to ignore those responsibilities."

"You can't possibly be that selfish." Mayme's voice turned wheedling. "Not after everything you've already cost her."

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Laurel looked back and forth from brother to sister so rapidly her head began to swim. She held up both hands and closed her eyes. “Stop. Please . . . be quiet and let me think.”

“There’s nothing to think about.”

She popped her eyes open and met Alfred’s stern frown.

“We’ve given it much thought, discussed it at length, and all agree this is the best way to ascertain Mama’s needs will be met.”

“But . . .” Laurel swallowed. What of her needs? Her wants? She’d largely stopped socializing with her girlfriends two years back when they all became so boy besotted, it embarrassed her. But since the passage of her eighteenth birthday, she’d often contemplated the joy of becoming a wife and a mother. Why, Mama must be considering Laurel’s future, because she’d allowed Patrick Brinkley to call on her. Twice!

Twirling a loose strand of hair around her finger, she looked around the room and examined each of her siblings’ faces by turn. Was there a hint of understanding in at least one pair of Millard coffee-brown eyes? She saw none, although she suspected if Eugene raised his head and met her gaze, she might witness sympathy from him.

She dropped the strand of hair and blinked back tears. “You really want me to give up on having my own family?”

“For a time, yes.” Nell snapped the answer. “It’s only right. You’re the baby. She doted on you. Now it’s her turn to be doted upon.”

“And your turn,” Mayme said, “to be the doter.”

“So that’s settled.” Alfred slapped his knees and stretched to his feet. Nell, Eugene, Raymond, and Mayme also stood and moved to the hall tree. While they retrieved their items, Alfred turned a somber look on Laurel. “I trust you to make sure Mama’s final years are not spent in loneliness and want. You won’t disappoint me, will you?”

Laurel remained seated, her muscles too quivery to support her weight. A part of her rebelled against her siblings’ expectations, but Alfred had never vowed to trust her before. The grown-up big brother she’d always

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tried—and failed—to please now offered her a chance to redeem herself in his eyes.

The hopeful child residing deep inside of her shook its head. “No, Alfred. I won’t.”

Peachtree Street, Atlanta

Langdon Rochester

“Langdon, I am sorely disappointed in you.”

Langdon choked back a snort. When was Father not disappointed in him? Langdon maintained his relaxed position on the sofa—head resting on a tufted pillow, feet crossed on the opposite armrest—but angled his face and followed his father’s progress from the library’s wide doorway to the wingback chairs in front of the cold fireplace. His mind tripped backward through the day’s happenings. Church with his parents, during which he’d stayed awake, followed by an insufferably long lunch, during which he’d engaged Mother in cheerful conversation. He’d even denied himself an afternoon cigar. For what reason had Harrison Faulk Rochester found fault with his son today?

His expression distorting into a grimace, Father held both hands toward Langdon. “Look at you. Twenty-three years old, a university graduate, and you have nothing better to do than lie about reading . . . reading . . .” He scowled at the magazine propped against Langdon’s stomach. “What is that you’ve got?”

Langdon turned the *Harper’s Weekly* cover toward his father. “It’s an older issue—January of ’93—but the article about the International Monetary Conference in Brussels is quite interesting.”

Father huffed. “At least you aren’t filling your brain with drivel.”

Langdon sat up and tossed the magazine aside. Father would have had a conniption fit if he’d come in while his son was caught up in the serial story about a soldier named Connors. Romantic drivel at its best. Or, as Father would term it, its worst. “If my reading magazines on a Sunday afternoon of

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fends you, Father, I'll gladly choose a book instead." He rose and perused one of the twenty-four floor-to-ceiling bookcases.

Father dropped into one of the chairs and slapped the brocade armrest. "It isn't your reading on a Sunday afternoon that offends me. Of course Sunday is a day of rest practiced by the religious and nonreligious alike. It's your lazy attitude the remainder of the week causing my indigestion and your mother's fretfulness."

Mother was fretful? Langdon faced his father and folded his arms over his chest. He had shed his suit jacket and unfastened the top buttons of his shirt after the church service. Here it was after four o'clock, and Father still wore every bit of his formal attire, down to the black-and-gray-striped silk tie fashioned in its crisp four-in-hand knot. The collar of his shirt, bound by the tie, bit into his neck and forced the flesh to mushroom above the band of white. So stodgy and stuffy he appeared. Had Father ever been young and blissfully unburdened? Likely not.

Langdon crossed to the second chair and seated himself, taking care to mimic his father's dignified pose. "I only finished with university two and a half months ago. I wasn't aware my enjoying a few weeks of relaxation was a source of angst to Mother." He ran his hand through his hair, sweeping the thick strands away from his forehead. "What would she have me do instead?"

"Grow up." Father barked the words, then bowed his head and massaged his graying temples with his fingertips.

Langdon gritted his teeth and dug his fingers into the chair's carved handholds. Those weren't Mother's words. Gentle Mother never spoke abruptly. And Father never spoke anything but abruptly. As a matter of fact, it seemed the only time Father spoke to him was to deliver reprimands. While living in university housing, Langdon had decided that since he couldn't please his father, he may as well please himself. But if he truly was causing Mother heartache . . .

Father fixed Langdon with a weary yet firm look. "I tolerated you repeating several classes, which meant an additional year at the university. At your

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mother's insistence, I've held my tongue when you've come in late night after night, often disheveled and reeking of cigar smoke, and then stayed in bed until noon." He shook his head, his cheeks mottling crimson. "I admit, I am partially to blame. I allowed your mother to overindulge you because you are our only child. But those days are over. You're no longer a child to be pampered. You're a grown man, Langdon. You must behave like one."

"You're six years old, Langdon, old enough to buckle your own shoes."

"You're nine years old, Langdon, too old to cry over a skinned knee."

"You're fifteen years old, Langdon. You will remain at the dinner table and engage in intelligent conversation."

Expectation after expectation rolled through the back of his mind. He'd learned to buckle his shoes, had learned to control his tears, had learned to contribute to conversation around a dinner table. All without ever receiving a word of praise. He swallowed his resentment and forced a disinterested tone. "What is it you want from me, Father?"

The older man stood and glared down at Langdon. "I want assurance that the company I've worked so hard to build will be well cared for into the future." He drew a deep breath that expanded his midsection and strained the buttons of his vest. "Thus, beginning tomorrow, you will rise at six and accompany me to the factory."

"But tomorrow is Labor Day." Although the national holiday recognizing both union and nonunion workers was still relatively new, Father was a stickler for honoring presidential dictates.

Father pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them, determination gleamed in his blue-gray irises. "Yes, tomorrow is Labor Day, but I will be in the office in the afternoon so my workers may collect their pay envelopes. Payday was already delayed, given the first of the month has fallen on a Sunday. I won't ask them to wait another full day."

"If you'll only be there in the afternoon, why must we rise at six?"

"Because you are sorely out of practice at finding your way to the breakfast table, and you need the opportunity to change your sleeping-late habit." Father

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sank into his chair. “Beginning tomorrow you will be my apprentice, for lack of a better word, and you will learn every aspect of managing the factory as well as overseeing my rental properties.”

Narrowing his gaze, Langdon leaned back in the chair and cupped his chin with his hand. His studies at the university—engineering, accounting, and business management—had been chosen by Father to prepare him to assume ownership of the factory. Langdon had long known his life’s course, and he’d accepted it, had even anticipated it. Being in charge of nearly a hundred workers? Having them heed his orders the way he’d always heeded Father’s? His chest swelled as he considered the power he would possess.

Of course, he’d hoped for a few more months of holiday before assuming the reins of leadership. But he’d learned to bluff his way through poker games. Playing the dutiful son and dedicated trainee until which time Father released the business into his keeping shouldn’t tax him overmuch. He gave a decisive nod. “Very well.”

Father’s brows pinched. “I’m not finished. Learning to manage my holdings is my expectation of you. Your mother expects something as well. She longs for a grandchild.”

Langdon sat up straight. Father couldn’t mean—

“Having a wife and children dependent upon you has a way of quickly maturing a man. Thus, I require you to court a young woman. By this time next year, you will be married.”

Langdon shot to his feet. He would do most anything for Mother, but saddle him with a wife and squalling babies? Father had gone too far. “And if I choose not to?”

Father shrugged. “I can’t force you. It’s your decision.”

Langdon blew out a relieved breath.

“But I’ve already put a proviso in my will. If you haven’t proven yourself adept at handling the business and settled into family life by September 1 of next year, your mother’s oldest nephew, Timothy, who has been my faithful floor supervisor for the past three years, will become my heir.”

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Workers' quarters on Factory Street, Atlanta
Willie Sharp

Willie carried two steaming bowls to the scarred square table in the corner of the small kitchen. Pa already waited in his chair, a cloth napkin tied around his neck, and a spoon held awkwardly in his left fist. Even after a full four months, his right-handed father didn't do too well using his left hand. Willie didn't mind that Pa scooped up food like a two-year-old, but he hated the napkin hanging across Pa's chest like a baby's bib. But if they didn't use it, Pa would stain up every shirt he owned. Which was worse—having to wear a bib, or always being stained up? He could never decide for sure, and he wouldn't ask Pa to choose.

He placed one bowl in front of his father and put the other at his spot. "No fatback in the beans tonight. I went by the butcher after I collected my pay, but he wasn't open. Probably takin' advantage of Labor Day. I'll stop there tomorrow on the way home from work and get a pound or two of fatback. And some ham. I know you like ham with your eggs."

Willie talked to Pa even though Pa couldn't talk to him. At least not in understandable words. But sitting in silence was worse than doing all the talking. Besides, seemed like Pa enjoyed the sound of Willie's voice. His eyes always lit up, and most times he nodded or shook his head in response to questions. That was enough encouragement to keep Willie talking.

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Willie slid onto his chair and put his hand over Pa's limp fingers. "Let's pray, huh?"

Pa's head bobbed—two short jerks.

Willie bowed his head. "Dear Lord, thank Thee for—"

A firm knock at the door intruded. Probably Mr. Rochester coming to collect the monthly rent, like he always did on payday. Some young fellows from the factory squandered their wages, but Willie always made sure to have the rent ready to hand over. He couldn't risk losing their home. What would happen to Pa then?

He rose and gave Pa's shoulder a gentle squeeze. "Go ahead and eat. God knows we're thankful. I'll see to the door an' be right back." He strode to the pie safe and picked up the stack of coins he'd set aside. He bounced them on his palm on the way to the door. Two gold half eagles and one Morgan silver dollar—eleven dollars in all, a third of his pay. Another third went to food, then half the remaining third to Mrs. Blaricum, the neighbor lady who looked after Pa while Willie was at the factory. It didn't leave much, but they got by, probably because Willie faithfully dropped a tenth of his wages into the offering plate every month, the way he'd been taught to.

"*God blesses those who honor Him.*" Ma's voice echoed in Willie's thoughts. He sure missed her. Pa did, too.

He opened the front door. A young man dressed in a three-piece suit and brown bowler waited on the stoop. A salesman, probably, although peddlers didn't visit the factory-owned neighborhood much. Willie offered a weak smile. "I don't know what you're sellin', mister, but me an' my pa don't have extra to buy anything."

The man scowled. "I'm not peddling wares." He held up a small notepad and pointed at one of the lines. "Can you read this?"

Heat flamed in Willie's cheeks. They might not've been wealthy, but his folks had sent him to school. All the way through the eighth grade. "Sure I can."

"Well, then, you can see a name there—*Sharp*. Is that you?"

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Willie nodded.

“And you see the amount right behind it?”

Willie nodded again.

The man jammed the pad into his jacket pocket and looked at Willie. “Well?”

Willie hunched his shoulders. “Well, what?”

The fellow sighed. “Do you have the rent money?”

“Oh! Right here.” He dropped the coins into the man’s outstretched hand.

The man counted them, then clinked them into a leather pouch exactly like the one Mr. Rochester always carried. He turned to leave.

Willie stepped out on the stoop. “Can I ask . . .” The man looked over his shoulder. “Did Mr. Rochester take sick?” He’d seemed fine three hours ago when Willie received his pay, but sickness could attack a man fairly quick, the way it had Pa.

“Why?”

“Cause he usually collects the rent. Just wondered if somethin’ happened to him.” If so, he’d say a prayer for his boss.

“He’s fine, but I’ll be the one collecting the rent from now on.” The man tugged his bowler a little lower on his forehead. “Or at least for a while.”

“Oh. All right.”

The fellow took a step.

“Somethin’ else.”

This time he turned clear around, glowering.

Willie pointed to the notepad sticking out of the man’s pocket. “Mr. Rochester always has me put a mark behind the payment. Says it’s his way of makin’ sure I get credit for it.”

With a huff, the man yanked the pad out and thrust it at Willie. “Make your mark, then.”

Willie scratched his head. “He always lends me a pencil.”

“For the love of . . .” The man scrounged in his pocket and pulled out a stubby pencil. “Here.”

Willie carefully wrote “W. S.” behind the amount. Then he returned the pad and pencil to the collector. “Thanks.” The man pocketed both items and strode off, muttering.

Willie closed the door and returned to the table. Pa’s bowl was empty, and beans lay scattered on the table and floor. Willie chuckled. The big orange tabby cat that had taken up residence under their small toolshed shortly before the illness struck Pa would have a good supper if he cleaned up all the beans from the floor. Sometimes Willie suspected Pa dropped food down his front on purpose, just so the scrounging cat would have extra to eat. Pa must’ve gotten quite a bit in his mouth, too, though. Sauce smears decorated his face.

Willie grabbed the cloth from the washbasin, wrung it out, and used it to gently clean Pa’s lips, chin, and cheeks. Then he straightened and pointed at Pa’s bowl. “You get enough, or do you want more?” He cringed. Pa couldn’t answer a two-halved question. Especially one with opposite answers. “Sorry, Pa. You get enough?”

Pa nodded.

“You sure?”

Pa grunted.

Willie grinned. “All right, I’ll quit pesterin’ you. Just wanna make sure you don’t wake up hungry in the middle of the night.”

The left side of Pa’s mouth lifted into his version of a smile. He shook his head.

“You won’t get up an’ prow around the kitchen when we’re s’posed to be sleepin’?”

Another shake that rocked his shoulders with it.

Willie unhooked the stained napkin, wadded it up, and set it aside. “You wanna go to your chair?”

Unblinking, Pa stared into Willie’s eyes.

“You wanna stay with me while I eat?”

A nod.

Willie plopped into his chair. “Sounds good. I like havin’ company.” He

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ate his beans, pausing now and then to ask Pa simple yes-or-no questions. He sure missed the sound of his pa's deep, rumbling voice. The doctor'd told him the only way to bring Pa back to how he'd been before the attack of apoplexy was to put him in a special hospital where trained folks would work with him every day. Willie didn't have money to pay for a special hospital. So he relied on prayers. If God could raise Lazarus from the dead, then He could help Pa talk and use his right hand good again. So Willie would keep praying, and he'd keep talking to Pa, and he'd keep reminding Mrs. Blaricum to get him up and walking every hour or so. And he'd hold on to hope.

When he finished eating, he helped Pa to his chair. Ma'd saved her stitching-up-clothes money for a whole year to buy it. The seat cushion had a Pa-sized scoop in its middle, and the woven brown wool was worn down on the armrests, but even if one of the springs came clear through and poked him on the backside, Pa wouldn't get rid of the chair.

Pa flopped into the seat, releasing a sigh. He gave Willie one of his half smiles, and Willie patted his curled right hand.

"Lemme get these dishes washed, and then we'll read the paper together."

Pa's gaze shifted to the floor underneath the table. His head stayed still, but his eyes slid back and forth from the beans to Willie.

Willie laughed. "All right, I'll let ol' Rusty in so he can take care o' your mess."

Pa made some soft huffing noises—his means of chuckling.

Willie didn't even have to call for the cat. As soon as he opened the back door, the big orange tom sauntered in, fluffy tail straight up and its tip flicking back and forth. He brushed against Willie's pant leg on the way to the table, and by the time Willie'd finished their few dishes, the floor was as clean as if Ma had taken a scrub brush to it.

"All right, you, outside now." Willie reached for Rusty, but the cat darted for the sitting room. With a leap that made Willie think of a mountain lion bounding onto a boulder, Rusty flew through the air and landed on the back

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of Pa's chair. He hunkered low, gold eyes gleaming, his tail swishing like the pendulum on a clock. The tail brushed Pa's ear with every sweep.

Willie shook his head, crossing the floor slow so he wouldn't startle the cat into hopping onto Pa's head. "Now, Rusty, you know you're not s'posed to stay in here. Mr. Rochester would raise Cain for sure if he knew we had an animal in the house. You gotta go out."

A sigh heaved from Pa's parted lips. The disappointment in his father's sagging face brought Willie up short. Pa wanted the old cat's company. He had so few pleasures these days. Would it hurt to let Rusty stay for a while? The rent had been collected, so they didn't have to worry about being caught with a cat in the house.

Willie rubbed his stubbly chin with his knuckles. "Well . . . how 'bout I put him out after we've read the paper. Would that be better?"

A short nod and half smile gave the answer.

"All right, then." Willie sat on the faded sofa and picked up the newest *Atlanta Constitution* he'd bought from the dirty-faced boy who always positioned himself outside the factory on payday. He perused the pages, looking for something Pa might find interesting. He read a story about an electric generator at Niagara Falls producing power. Electric power instead of steam, like came from the engines he helped put together at the factory.

Willie glanced at the tarnished brass lamp next to the sofa. What would it be like to have lamps that came on with a twist of a key instead of needing oil, a wick, and a match? Such things existed, but they cost dear. And a person had to live in a house with electric lines run to it. He doubted he'd ever be able to afford a luxury like an electric lamp, but it was fine to think about.

He shared some local news articles, and in between paragraphs, he glanced at Pa. By the middle of the third article, Pa's eyelids were drooping. Willie set the paper aside and helped his father to the outhouse.

Some of the fellows from the factory thought Willie ought to take Pa to one of the poorhouses. "Why waste your life takin' care o' somebody who can't

do nothin' for himself or for you?" they asked. He didn't understand their kind of thinking. If you loved somebody, you did what needed doing. He loved Pa, so he'd take care of him, and that was that.

After he'd settled Pa in his bed, he lifted Rusty from the back of the chair. The cat dug in his claws, but Willie gave a little tug and Rusty melted into his arms. Willie chuckled. Carrying the cat was like carrying a hairy bag of sand. "You're fatter'n a tick on a hound dog, you big ol' brute. Pa should've named you Goliath." He set the cat outside and watched it hop-skip over the sparse grass for the hollowed space under the toolshed. Willie called good night, then closed and locked the door.

He headed for the lamp by the sofa, intending to turn down the wick, but since he hadn't done a lick of work worth mentioning on this Labor Day, he wasn't tired enough for bed. So he flopped onto the sofa and reached for the paper again. Ma always said that not being in a classroom wasn't an excuse to quit learning. So Willie grabbed every chance he had to read. He had a lot fewer chances since Pa fell sick, but tonight the house was quiet and Pa was tucked in.

He read every article on the front page, then turned it over. Most of the second page was taken up with information about the upcoming Cotton States and International Exposition. There'd already been an exposition in Atlanta, back in 1881 at Oglethorpe Park. Willie'd only been eight or nine at the time, but he remembered Pa and Ma talking about it and wishing they could go.

This one looked to be bigger than the last, with brand-new buildings going up for exhibits and six states contributing displays. Willie used his finger to underline the words as he read, excitement quivering through him at the mention of speeches and bands and visits by celebrities, including Buffalo Bill Cody. Wouldn't it be something to see Buffalo Bill? Pa would smile for a week if he got to see the marksman in action.

Willie's spirits fell. Even though the exposition was scheduled to last more than three months, he probably wouldn't get to see even one day of it. Not while working at the factory six days a week. And he sure wouldn't be able to

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take Pa. Pa could shuffle short distances, but all over the park grounds? Nope, and he was too big for Willie to carry. If only Pa could go to one of the special hospitals where he'd get stronger again. Then if Atlanta hosted another exposition, they'd be able to go together.

He started to close the paper, but a small box at the bottom of the page caught his eye. He angled the page toward the light and read slowly.

HIRING laborers, security guards, silk weavers, and custodians to work grounds for duration of exposition (Sept. 18–Dec. 31). Monthly salaries range \$54–\$65.

Willie stared at the dollar amounts, his heart thudding like a bass drum. Even if he took one of the lowest-paying jobs, he'd be able to set aside ten or twelve dollars a month—money he could put toward a hospital stay. He read on.

Apply to Mr. Grover Sterling at First National Bank, Atlanta, Mondays through Saturdays, Sept. 3–12, between 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

Willie rubbed his knuckles against his chin, thinking hard. If Mrs. Blaricum agreed to stay late tomorrow or on Wednesday, he could hurry to the bank after work and put in an application with Mr. Sterling. If he got hired, he'd have to quit his factory job, though. He'd counted the days until he turned fourteen, old enough to put in to work at the big factory that'd been rebuilt after Sherman came through and burned any business that might benefit the Confederacy. He loved his job. Loved putting parts together—almost like playing with pieces of a giant puzzle. Loved seeing steam blow from the whistle when all the parts went together right. Could he really give it up?

And if he quit, would Mr. Rochester make him and Pa move out of factory housing? Harrison Rochester was a fair man. Willie'd worked for him now going on eight years, and Pa had worked for him more than twelve years before

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that. Mr. Rochester had always treated them good. He might let them stay if they kept up the rent and nobody else needed the house. But the exposition would last just a little over three months. Should he quit at the factory when he might not be able to hire back on when the event was done?

He looked again at the possible salaries. Dollar signs seemed to dance across the page. He closed his eyes and turned his focus to his heavenly Father. “God, I’ve been prayin’ for some way to get Pa better. If this is the way, then will You let me get hired? But if it’s not what You want, have Mr. Rochester or Mr. Sterling tell me no. I’ll accept whatever You decide. But, God?” He licked his dry lips. “If You tell me no about the exposition, please at least say yes about Pa gettin’ better some other way. He . . . he’s a good man. He deserves to get better, don’t You reckon?”

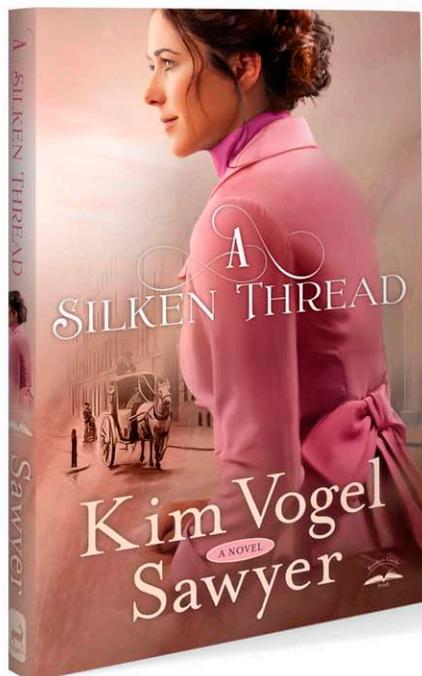
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