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Sin Boldly

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Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Falsani, Cathleen, 1970-

Sin boldly : a field guide for grace / Cathleen Falsani.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-310-27947-1 (hardcover, jacketed)

1. Grace (Theology) I. Title.

BT761.3.F35 2008

234—dc22

2008016853

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Published in association with Yates & Yates, www.yates2.com.

Interior design by Beth Shagene

Printed in the United States of America

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Appoggiatura: An Introduction

Why grace?

Because some days, it's the only thing we have in common.

Because it's the one thing I'm certain is real.

Because it's the reason I'm here.

Because it's the oxygen of religious life, or so says a musician friend of mine, who tells me, "Without it, religion will surely suffocate you."

Because so many of us are gasping for air and grasping for God, but fleeing from a kind of religious experience that has little to do with anything sacred or gracious.

Because you can't do grace justice with a textbook, theological definition, but you can get closer by describing it with music and film, pictures and stories.

Trying to explain or define grace is like catching the wind in a cardboard box or describing the color green.

For instance, by way of explaining how Martin Luther defined so-called "common grace," the esteemed Christian Reformed scholar Louis Berkhof, in his book *Systematic Theology*, said such grace "curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men."

That's helpful intellectually, I guess, but for most people it does little toward explaining the experience of grace when we're in its presence. Such a heady definition, while eloquent, isn't something we can exactly wrap our hearts and souls around.

For centuries, theologians have defined, parsed, and categorized grace. Some say there are different kinds of grace. Depending on which flavor of theologian you look to there are two kinds of grace, or maybe three, or seven or nine.

There's common grace and special grace. Divine, irresistible, and prevenient grace. Convicting grace, saving grace, growing grace; protecting, keeping, and dying grace.

Some theologians argue that one kind of grace is better than another, and that some people think they're experiencing "divine" grace when it's actually just "common."

To me, that's like bickering about what color God's eyes are. (They're hazel, in case you were wondering.)

Such arguments remind me of a scene from Woody Allen's movie *Manhattan*, where a group of people is talking about sex at a cocktail party and one woman says that her doctor told her she had been having the wrong kind of orgasm. Woody Allen's character responds by saying, "Did you have the wrong kind? Really? I've never had the wrong kind. Never, ever. My worst one was right on the money."

Grace works the same way. It is what it is and it's always right on the money. You can call it what you like, categorize it, vivisection it, qualify, quantify, or dismiss it, and none of it will make grace anything other than precisely what grace is: audacious, unwarranted, and unlimited.

This is a book primarily for people who say they've never experienced grace, that it doesn't exist, or at least they don't believe it does. It's also for those peculiar folks who relish trying to figure out whether the grace they're experiencing is common or divine. (The answer is, Yes.)

Turning that particular theological lens on my own life, I have attempted herein to describe grace as I have experienced it—in relationship with others, in nature, in my own backyard, and in its most feral state—startling, staggering, and wholly bewildering. In that vein, I embarked on a series of new adventures to see how grace would turn up in travels, in experiences with new people and exotic creatures, in strange lands, and in ways I could not have anticipated had I tried.

This book is meant to point out grace when and where it happens—and I'm an excellent pointer—to show folks what it looks like, tastes like, sounds like. Because everyone experiences grace, even if they don't realize it.

It's kind of like Moby's music. You could ask your average sixty-something-year-old retired banker in Connecticut if he's ever heard of Moby and/or his music and the response you'd receive more than likely would be a resounding, "No—what's a Moby?"

But if you say, "Remember that American Express commercial where Tiger Woods is putting around New York City? Remember the song playing? That was Moby."

"Oh, then, OK. I guess I have heard Moby," our theoretical retired banker in New Canaan might say. "So . . . what exactly is a Moby?"

That's like grace. Not that grace is a pretentious vegan techno-rocker, but you get the idea. Grace is everywhere, all around us, all of the time. We only need the ears to hear it and the eyes to see it.

It is much easier and, I would argue, more helpful to describe what grace *feels* like through stories and images that illustrate the varied ways grace is experienced when encountered in the wild than it is to attempt to define it conclusively, to trap it or cage it.

Maybe that's why Jesus was so fond of parables: Nothing describes the indescribable like a good yarn.

So, let me tell you a story . . .

When I left the newspaper office here in Chicago on the eve of Thanksgiving a couple of years ago, it was sleeting sideways. I had neither gloves nor a handheld windshield scraper thingy, but I did have writer's block, a screaming headache, and a zit between my eyebrows.

Mired in the self-pity ring of my own private *Inferno*, I was feeling anything but thankful.

The worst part of what could have been dismissed as a simple preholiday funk was that I knew exactly how ridiculous I was

being for not feeling grateful for the blessings that have come my way — and they are many.

This unpleasant realization plunged me into the quicksand of self-loathing, which manifested itself most festively in waves of vehicular-induced misanthropy. By the time I arrived home, more or less without incident, about ninety minutes later — a commute that usually takes twenty to thirty minutes — I was so foul of spirit, I had to put my head down for a few minutes and then locate some emergency comfort carbohydrates.

Hey, no judging.

If recent news reports are any indication, apparently even God has the occasional need for comfort food. Why else would God and/or the Mother of God appear on grilled cheese sandwiches, fish sticks, and tortilla shells? (Have you noticed that the Divine never seems to turn up in a mixed-green salad or a nice plate of heirloom tomatoes?)

While my take-out lasagna was warming in the oven, I flipped on the TV and found *Bruce Almighty* on one of the 129 HBO channels we get. Sure, I'd seen it before — about a dozen times — but it had just started, and, well, familiarity is comforting, or the devil you know is better than the one you don't, or . . . fine! Jim Carrey makes me laugh. I'm not proud, but it's the truth.

After a few silly scenes, I walked into the other room, leaving Bruce (Carrey) to have his meltdown on the Maid of the Mist at Niagara Falls while I checked on my comfort food.

Not cooking fast enough. Figures, I grumbled to myself, storming around the house, scaring the cats.

Then it happened. The cosmic chiropractic.

I checked my voice mail at work, and there was the message

I'd been waiting for. Good news. Great news, the marvelous, expectation-blowing sort that catches you off guard. By the time I put the receiver down, the pall had lifted. I could see clearly now, the . . . um . . . sleet had gone.

In fact, the sleet had turned into big, fluffy snowflakes dancing on the other side of my window, decorating the street outside with the first snowfall of the season.

It was beautiful. And the lasagna was ready.

Life is beautiful and I'm an idiot who doesn't deserve any of it.

But that's the thing about grace.

And that's why grace is what I was most thankful for that Thanksgiving. Every Thanksgiving — every moment — for that matter, but sometimes you just see it more clearly than others.

People regularly ask me why I believe in God. The simple answer — and it's MY answer, i.e., it may not be YOUR answer and that's OK — is grace.

As I understand it:

Justice is getting what you deserve.

Mercy is not getting what you deserve.

And grace is getting what you absolutely don't deserve.

Benign goodwill. Unprovoked compassion. The unearnable gift.

Scads of writers and theologians have tried to describe grace, but I think musicians usually get closer to capturing it, sometimes with words, sometimes not. Two of the best attempts I've ever heard are both found in songs. The first is from Bono of U2, in the song he titled "Grace," lest anyone be confused about what he was getting at.

"Grace, she takes the blame, she covers the shame, removes the stain," he sings, in a simple tune that sounds almost like a nursery

rhyme. “She travels outside of karma . . . Grace makes beauty out of ugly things.”

Yeah, he nails it. That’s grace.

But so is what is described in this short lyric from an old Indigo Girls song that may or may not be about spiritual rebirth. It’s my favorite idea of grace: “There was a time I asked my father for a dollar,” they sing, “and he gave it a \$10 raise.”

So on the night before Thanksgiving, I moved back to the couch and the TV with my lovely, cheesy lasagna and my spiritual \$10 raise to contemplate the recent happy turn of events. The movie was almost over and Bruce was lying in a hospital bed, having just been snatched from the clutches of death by a team of doctors and a pair of defibrillators.

Bruce, who literally had been playing God for a few weeks, looks up at a bag of donated blood being pumped into his veins, and we know what he’s thinking. Earlier in the film, he mocked his girlfriend—her name is Grace (played ever-so-graciously by Jennifer Aniston)—for organizing a blood drive.

Bruised, bloodied, and realizing the irony of the situation, Bruce hears a voice and turns to see his long-suffering girlfriend standing in the hospital doorway.

“Graaace!” Bruce says, smiling weakly as tears begin to fill his eyes.

Exactly, I thought with big fat tears running down my own cheeks.

Grace has a way of sneaking up on you like that. When you least deserve it.

That was Bruce’s way of seeing and, I suppose, saying grace.

This is mine.



Bouncing into Graceland

1

We had moseyed about halfway across the Graceland parking lot on our way from Bubba's pickup to the ticket counter, a few paces past the point where the tail fin of the *Lisa Marie* emblazoned with Elvis's personal logo "TCB" and a thunderbolt appears over the tree line, when a booming voice disrupted our reverie.

"What the heck is TCB?" the man behind us asked no one in particular.

Without turning around to see who had uttered such a question on this hallowed ground, Bubba stopped in his tracks, threw up his arms in disbelief, and bellowed, his own voice dripping with

Mississippi Delta disdain, “Are you *kiddin’ me?! ‘Takin’ Care of Business in a FLASH!’* Come on, man!”

“Actually, I wasn’t kidding,” said the man, looking more cowed than offended. “I didn’t know.”

Hhmmph, Bubba grunted and picked up the pace.

I just continued laughing, even though my stomach already was hurting from our fun-filled three-hour drive from Yazoo City, Mississippi, where Bubba’s farm is, to Memphis. I didn’t have the heart to tell him, of course, that I, too, had no idea what TCB meant before that unfortunate soul asked aloud precisely what I’d been wondering privately.

You have to understand: Elvis is no laughing matter. Bubba and I were on a mission (from God), a pilgrimage nearly twenty years in the making. We’d been threatening to take a road trip to Graceland since we first met as college freshmen in Chicago in the late 1980s. We finally had made it to Elvis’s home, and a certain amount of decorum and respect was due as we approached the visitor’s center.

“Gloooooory, glory Haaaaahleeluuuuuuuuujah,” Bubba sang, doing an impressive (and loud) impression of the King singing the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” portion of his signature “American Trilogy” while we waited in line to purchase our “Elvis Entourage VIP Tour” tickets. For \$68 apiece we received laminated VIP passes on lanyards, didn’t have to wait in line with most of the other tourists, and got our pictures taken in front of a blue-screen Graceland backdrop. (We had them made into nifty refrigerator magnets!) It was all terribly exciting and long overdue.

Bubba is my “best good friend,” as in Forrest and Bubba in *Forrest Gump*. He calls me Kitty and I call him Bubba, even though neither is close to our given names. We can’t remember

why we adopted those particular nicknames — inside jokes lost to our approaching-middle-age memories. Nevertheless, they stuck. Since we were both eighteen years old, we've gone together like peas and carrots. (I'm the carrots.) It is an entirely unlikely friendship, miraculous you might even say. Bubba is a politically conservative Presbyterian, cotton-farming, goat-herding good ol' boy from Mississippi. And I am . . . really not. We bonded quickly over the one thing we did have in common, a mutual obsession with music — to this day I can't hear Elvis or Steve Earle without thinking of him and, often, picking up the phone to tell him so.

I don't remember how we first met, but we both recall vividly our first marathon conversation in the lobby of Fischer Dorm at Wheaton College. We talked about relationships, more specifically about our unrequited crushes on, respectively, the gorgeous bad-boy son of a preacher and a tall, willowy blonde teen model with the sparkling wit of a kneesock. Neither would give us the time of day, much to our utter soul-crushing dismay. Bubba determined that my beloved was a truckload of trouble that I was better off avoiding. I insisted that he had a problem with liking the women who were completely wrong for him. In hindsight, we were both spot-on. After that long night (we talked until dawn, if memory serves), we would spend hours driving around in the powder-blue Saab he had christened the "Pork Chop Express," listening to music and talking about life. I accompanied him to buy his first 12-string guitar, and he came with me to see my first Springsteen concert. On the way home from that particular show, my Tahitian-green-pearl Honda Civic ran out of gas on a deserted stretch of highway south of Chicago. Bubba is the only human being I know who could get me to laugh about being caught in that kind of predicament, even when

we were in the back of a police cruiser on the way to a gas station with a cop who was decidedly not a fan of the Boss.

Bubba is my proof text for disproving the *When Harry Met Sally* assertion that men and women can't just be friends without at some point becoming romantically involved. He is closer to me than a brother, but we've never had anything other than familial love for one another. Our extraordinary friendship is one of the great blessings of my life, clearly a gift from God because the intervention of the Holy Spirit is the only way to explain our improbable, time-tested bond. When we were freshmen, I read a book in my Theology 101 class by the British theologian John V. Taylor called *The Go-Between God*. In it, Taylor argues that the presence of God can be experienced as much *between* people as in them, and that God's grace is what makes the connections between people that wouldn't happen otherwise. That's how I got Bubba. It is the only legitimate explanation for how this liberal journalist, freelance Christian, Connecticut Yankee and the self-proclaimed "high-tech hillbilly" pride of Yazoo City, Mississippi, formed a lifelong bond. For the grace of our friendship, I am ever grateful.

When I called Bubba a while back and suggested we finally make that pilgrimage to Graceland—stunningly, neither of us had been there on our own in the intervening years—he thought it was a great idea. When I told him I figured the trip to Graceland would be great research for a book about grace, he was skeptical. "I know some people think Elvis is God, but what in the world does Graceland have to do with grace?" he said.

"Trust me, Bubba," I answered. "You'll see."

Still, when I arrived at his house in Yazoo City, Bubba cornered me in the kitchen and, good five-point Calvinist that he is,

proceeded to lecture me on his thorough and erudite theological understanding of grace, and his concern that many Christians might misunderstand it as a kind of “get outta jail free card” to sin, if not boldly, at least with abandon. “Thank you, Bubbs, but this trip isn’t a pop quiz on the theology of grace. It’s about the experience of grace,” I explained. He still looked skeptical.

Later, in his inimitably funny way, Bubba admitted he might be overthinking the whole concept of grace. “Us five-pointers should be the ones to understand and convey grace the best, but we’re not,” he said. “But grace has got me in a headlock and won’t let me go.”

Yep. Precisely.

What Bubba didn’t get at first is that he is grace to me. His friendship is one of its most vivid manifestations in my life. It is a gift, unearned and totally unexpected, one that neither of us ever could have orchestrated on our own. And this grace has appeared most powerfully not in the having each other as a friend but in *being* friends, knowing that we would step in front of a train to save the other, that there isn’t anything one of us could do to make the other throw up our arms, storm away, and slam the door forever. We show each other grace, we are grace for one another, and I’d like to think we inspire each other to be gracious to the rest of the world.

Bubba makes me laugh harder than anyone I know. One of my favorite definitions of laughter comes from the modern Christian rebel/apologist Anne Lamott, who describes it as “carbonated holiness.” I like to think of laughter as grace in its gaseous form. It’s the kind of grace that can lift you out of a funk and lighten a heavy spirit. It’s sort of like that scene in *Mary Poppins* where Bert and Uncle Albert are laughing so hard that they start to levitate, literally floating to the ceiling. Sometimes all it takes to turn a dark

mood on its ear is to hear Bubba's goofy drawl on the other end of the phone saying, "Hiya, Toots! What's shakin'?"

We were uncharacteristically solemn during our tour of the Graceland mansion on that hot July afternoon. There's a lot about Elvis that is easy to mock, and believe me, we have. (We cracked ourselves up to the point of tears when we toured the *Lisa Marie*, Elvis's Convair 880 jet, and Bubba spotted the custom-made queen-size bed with a blue suede coverlet and FAA-regulation giant seat belt and threatened to hop over the security rail and duck under the covers while I took a picture.) But there's also something tragic and endearing about Elvis's life story. I should mention that when Bubba and I first met, I wasn't a big fan of the King. But Bubba took great pains to explain, at length and occasionally with scriptural support, the brilliance of Elvis's music, performance, and persona. Eventually I came around, and we've shared a rabid love for the King, even going so far as to send greeting cards to one another on January 8 (Elvis's birthday) ever since.

Did you know the only Grammy awards Elvis won were for gospel recordings? It was one of the many surprising bits of trivia I took away from our pilgrimage to Graceland, the famously kitschy Memphis home where Elvis lived—and on August 16, 1977, died. The King of Rock 'n' Roll won his first Grammy in 1967 for Best Sacred Performance for the recording of the gospel album *How Great Thou Art*. His second Grammy, for Best Inspirational Performance, came in 1972 for his gospel album *He Touched Me*, and a third in 1974 for the recording of the song "How Great Thou Art." Offstage, Elvis, who was reared in an Assemblies of God church in Tupelo, Mississippi, spent hours singing gospel tunes with his entourage as a way to relax and, perhaps, self-soothe.

According to what his daughter, Lisa Marie Presley, says in the audio tour Bubba and I listened to as we spent a couple of hours moving reverentially from room to room in Graceland, Elvis was a real spiritual seeker, especially later in his troubled life. He was always looking for something and read loads of books on religion and spirituality.

One of the most interesting and poignant displays at Graceland is Elvis's desk. With a built-in radio and TV, it was a state-of-the-art gift from his label, RCA Victor. On it were several spiritually themed books, including a copy of Khalil Gibran's *The Prophet* and Erich von Däniken's *Gods from Outer Space*. I guess he still hadn't found what he was looking for. Or had he? A book I read shortly after our trip to Graceland argued that Elvis was raised as and remained a genuine Christian believer all of his days. As a kind of proof, the author, one of Elvis's former backup singers, revealed that at the time of his death, the record on the turntable in his bedroom — perhaps the last music he ever heard — was a recording of his favorite gospel songs. Many people — many Christians, for that matter — might scoff at the idea that Elvis, with all of his overindulgences, addictions, and peccadilloes, also could have been a believer. I think Bubba and I both left Graceland with the bittersweet impression of Elvis as an incredibly gifted, tragically flawed man who lavished love and outrageous gifts on his family and friends, desperately tried to reconcile staggering fame with personal heartache, but in the end felt alone, empty, and lost.

Yet the faith that Elvis had as a child, and that Bubba and I share, promises that it doesn't matter whether he could pull it together in the end. Grace fills that gap. While it's true that you may lose your religion during the course of a lifetime, you never lose

your salvation. Once you let Jesus in your kitchen, he just keeps on making peanut butter and banana sandwiches, and he never leaves.

Such an illustration of grace reminds me of something I experienced at Bubba's farm the day after we returned to Mississippi from our little pilgrimage. We were out in the pasture with some of the two hundred purebred and percentage Kiko goats he began raising a few years back. One young billy goat kept getting its head stuck in the fence and wailing until Bubba patiently would walk over and gently lift it out of the wire tangle. We were there with the goats for about fifteen minutes, and that dopey goat got its head stuck three times. Each time, without yelling or even displaying his frustration, Bubba calmly helped the goat out of the trap and put it back with the rest of the herd. I think that's what Jesus, the good shepherd, does with those of us who try to follow him but keep screwing up.

When we start squealing for help — every time, without fail — he comes to the rescue, frees us from the prison of our own making, and lovingly puts us back in the flock with the rest of the goats.



*Above all the grace and the gifts
that Christ gives to his beloved
is that of overcoming self.*

—Saint Francis of Assisi

