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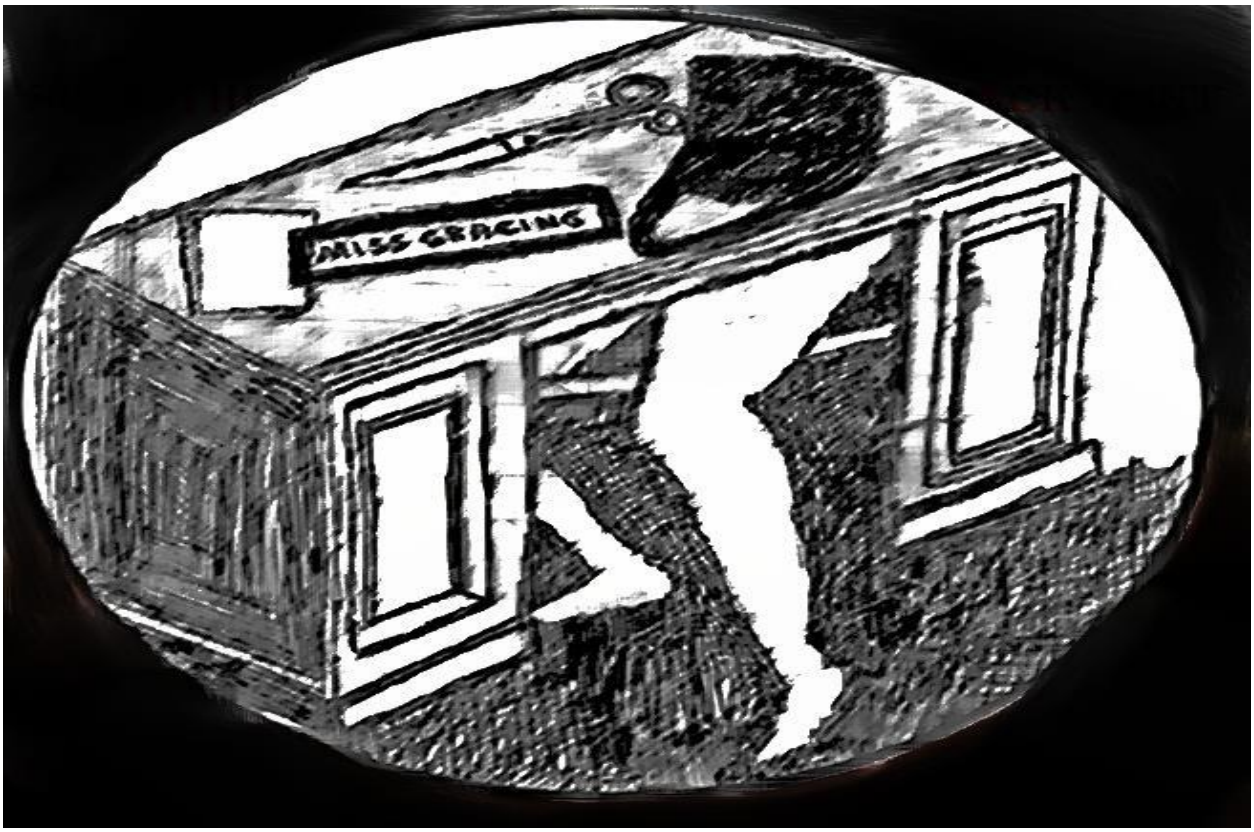

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Old Miss Gracing

Dedicated to the overworked, overwhelmed, underpaid and unsung heroes and heroines on whose hearts and minds this world depends. -- Our teachers.

Chapter 1

"What a lousy birthday present. I wish this one was returnable," thought five year old Zeke Carmichael, as his eyes opened to the would-be light trying to impress the shut window at the foot of his bed. It was another of those days when the sky couldn't decide whether it wanted to be blue, gray, or white resulting in a color best called blayite, perhaps trying to invent a new sign of drudgery, or perhaps trying to approximate a sound made after having too much to drink. He viewed the non-descript color, clucked his tongue and grimaced, thinking; "I'll bet there's a north wind on top of it." It was September 8, 1954, the days before rock 'n roll and the first day of the beginning of a common misery, most often identified as kindergarten. **SCHOOL!**

His cheerful mother walked into the room, clapping her hands twice, saying; "C'mon, Zeke. It's 7:00AM. Time to start getting ready."

"You don't have to make a celebration of it. It's more like a funeral. -- Mine."

"C'mon, c'mon. You're a big boy now. It's time to start acting like an adult."

Up until now the only advantages Zeke saw to being an adult was that they got to make all the rules without having to go to school. He was told time and again, that his mom and dad did, indeed, go to school when they were required to a long time ago. Zeke put that idea on hold, as it was a very convenient argument today, with no means of verification open to him.

"If I act like an adult, do I get a say so in what goes on around here?"

Mom grabbed Zeke under the arms, picked him up and gave him a big kiss on the cheek and an interminable cuddle. She said; "I'm going to miss having you around here all day. I won't know what to do with myself. I'll have to have another baby."

"What a horrible thing to say," he thought, as he acted appropriately, pretending some degree of understanding, by putting his arms around his mother and sloppily kissing her. As she wiped her face with her perennial handkerchief, he thought; "She's planning to replace me already."

Zeke ate his breakfast and dressed for the occasion, brown cuffed baggy long pants and a white long sleeved button up shirt, topped off with a spiffy blayite bow tie. Mom was waiting for him in the kitchen, took his hand silently and together they were off. Down two flights of stairs they went,

to the corner and across the two-way street controlled not only by traffic lights, but also crossing guards in bright orange jackets, confusing the motorists in their disdain for the electronically precise signals working above. They walked, hand in hand just like the old days, only now to a new destination. To Zeke it was more of a dirge this time, as he recalled singing and skipping down the street with her on the way to the park or library, seemingly eons ago. The three story brick building now in too close a view must have been built before the dinosaurs, or by one. Its color was now that of blowing dirt and its bricked in windows were obviously there to keep one from escaping, the hard way.

Zeke said; "Mom, you can still change your mind."

"Don't make it harder on me than it has to be. I've told you that if I don't bring you to school, I'd get arrested and sent to jail."

He didn't want to imagine her in jail, but said; "How will they find out? I won't tell."

She looked at him, widened her eyes and said; "The mind police will find out. We'll be thinking about it and they'll break down the door and come get us." As they got to the schoolyard's entry, she picked him up, holding him once more, put him down and said; "Go ahead, now. You'll meet lots of new

friends." She quickly turned and left, not wanting her little one to see the tears in her eyes.

Zeke stood at the gate and watched his mother disappear into the crowd at the corner. He ran to that side of the schoolyard and gripped the chain link fence. He could see her cross the street and go back to their apartment building. He started to cry, perhaps instinctively knowing that the best part of his life was officially over, the horror now born, like the strange beast slouching its way to Bethlehem. As he cried, he thought; "Mom, you've already taught me reading, writing and arithmetic. Don't let these 'professionals' foul it up, at least not yet. God, they'll probably try to socialize me, too."

The tears got worse as he looked around to see all the other kids, now on the opposite side of the schoolyard, right next to the school. "Wasn't there already an adequate supply of willing victims?" he thought. He saw some kids cross the street running and laughing, probably not wanting to be late for the hanging. "They couldn't possibly want to be here, could they? If this is an improvement, I'd hate to see where they're coming from."

His crying became even more intense as he stared at his apartment's entry, hoping that at any instant Mom would pop out, defy the law and rescue him. Instead, in her absence, the bells of hell split the dismal morning and he saw all of the kids

forming lines. "The tigers don't even have to bother running and pouncing," he thought; "The sheep are trained to make it easy for them." He gripped the chain link fence tighter, maybe trying to rip open an escape route and riveted his eyes on the apartment door, hoping for some last second miracle. Sensing the end, his crying became as violent and wet as the time some kid told him that there was no Santa Claus. He felt a hand rest gently on his right shoulder. He turned around, trying unsuccessfully to hide his tears and saw the lady who he would soon find out was called Old Miss Gracing.

She said; "Come on, now. You don't want to be late, do you?

"I'm trying my best."

She reached for his hand, which he pulled away and she said; "Trust me. No one wants to hurt you."

Though the "trust me" reminded him of some used car ads he had seen on television, her kind, smiling face compelled him to take her hand. At least this one didn't look like an Indian after his scalp. He said; "I'll believe it when I see it."

She said; "You can't think like that;" a phrase that would come to mean more to him with each passing year, but right now his response was; "I can't help what I think. Are you part of the mind police?"

She was surprised and intrigued at that reply coming from a five year old. She said; "No, I think I'm your kindergarten teacher. Don't worry about things. I cried my first day of school, too. When I got in, I hated it so much that I stayed there nineteen years."

Zeke half-heartedly gave her his hand as now he was somewhat intrigued. He took a good look at her. She was a tall woman with a pleasant spectacled white face, big soft blue eyes and long gray hair blowing gently in the breeze. No makeup could be detected and her plain pink dress, adorned in frills only at the buttons, conveyed a feeling of dignity and grace. But, she looked even older than Mom and therefore even less likely to have ever been five years old. And, if she ever was a kid, she was certainly a weird one to stay in school nineteen years. Zeke took another look at her face, now displaying a combination smile with a far-away look in her blue eyes and instinctively he said; "I like you."

She said; "You'll make a lot of new friends."

He replied; "I've heard that one already."

She stopped, looked down at him, put her hands on her knees and put her amused face right in front of his cynical one and said; "In the future, I'll try not to be so trite."

Zeke didn't know what trite was, but thought that it must have meant something like repetitious and thought that he

probably liked the reply and the curious, lined but pretty visage one foot from him.

She again took his hand and led him to the end of one line of boys, went to the front and directed everyone up the fire escape into the ominous institution. From his vantage point he saw other kids his size, turning around to scrutinize the one who required special attention. Not certain whether their looks conveyed envy, disdain, curiosity or mixtures thereof he pretended not to notice, keeping his eyes on the friendly old lady in front. He thought; "I can tell that she thinks I'm special and she's the one in charge here."

The interior was a good match for the exterior. Walls of peeling, jaundiced, probably at one time, yellow paint covered the top of the wall, separated from its peeling, nauseous, probably at one time green, lower counterpart, by a brown stained railing, which seemed to have as much broken, bent or missing as it had in its right place.

When Miss Gracing led the group into her room, Zeke's outlook perked up some. Despite the walls being identical to those already encountered, these displayed decoration; pictures of various birds, large cards containing the letters of the alphabet, both upper and lower cases, letters or essays done by former occupants, crayon drawings of God knows what and some miniature wooden depictions of animals. The item that kept his

attention the longest, however, was a black and white realistic drawing of the backs of an elderly man and woman holding bare hands, carrying umbrellas in the other, walking down a dark, rainy city street. A glimpse of the surrounding three story apartment buildings was difficult at best, as the blackness of the night intruded on large areas. At some points one could not differentiate between parts of the structures and the equally black starless sky dead ahead.

The teacher walked to the large chair and desk at the front of the room in front of a blackboard background. Forty much smaller identical chairs were lined up in an orderly fashion, one presumably his, as the others instinctively sat; the girls careful not to pick a seat with some deficiency. She picked up a light purple piece of chalk and wrote her name on the blackboard. She turned to the approximately forty children, smiled and said; "I'm Miss Gracing," seeming to display ease, elegance and friendliness. "Please take any seat available." She smiled and paused before continuing; "Well, I see you already have. Now, you can tell me who you are." She slightly shook her head when uttering a few of the words, causing some of her loose long gray hair to fall on her face, which she brushed back with her right hand. She pulled some papers out of her middle desk drawer, focused on them and said; "Michael Adler?" Zeke saw a little boy take a nervous look at the kids near him,

then look at Miss Gracing, pointing his index finger at his chest. She nodded, smiling, saying; "Michael?" When she got no objection, she continued; "What is your home address and phone number?" He answered, apparently correctly and this routine went on with about four more students. Zeke had been intently surveying the procedure and had his answers prepared.

She said; "Zeke Carmichael?" Zeke promptly smiled and waved from the back of the room. "Zeke, what would you like to learn in this class?"

Zeke's smile ended as he started to spout his prepared answers, at the same time realizing they were no longer appropriate. He didn't know what he wanted from this class. Five minutes ago he wanted to go home. He glanced at the old black piano facing the room from one corner and said; "I'd like to hear you sing and play the piano."

"No, Zeke, the question was, what do you want to learn?"

Not really knowing what to say, he improvised; "I guess I'd like to learn to sing and play the piano with you."

She blinked a few times, as if she were pleasantly surprised and said; "Very good, Zeke. We will try to accomplish that." She made some notes on her papers and continued the roll call, sometimes throwing in tricky questions. After they got over their nervousness, the kids started to laugh at some of her questions and more often at the responses.

After everyone was identified, Miss Gracing pointed at the red, white and blue sitting in a notch just above the blackboard and asked a black girl why she thought that flag was there. The girl fidgeted in her seat and mumbled; "I don't know." She paused a while in the silence and said; "I guess it's there to remind us that we're in America." Miss Gracing said; "That's not a bad answer, but mine is that it's there because the government says it has to be."

Her answer struck Zeke as odd for some reason, so he called out; "What would happen if someone removed it?"

She said, "Probably nothing."

Zeke was surprised, but liked the answer, as it showed that some rules may be broken without penalty. He made a mental note to bring that one up with his mother someday.

On this day Zeke was to hear the Pledge of Allegiance for the first time; "With liberty and justice for all," desiring more of the former for himself. He played "Roll the ball" for the first time, though with the large number of students standing in a circle, he never got the ball. He didn't really care, as the game seemed silly to him. Three kids stood in the middle of the circle and the others rolled a soccer ball slowly at them, with the object of hitting one, at which point the roller became part of the inner circle. With the requirement of the slow roll, the kids inside had no problem getting away from

the ball. Besides that, he wasn't sure it was desirable to be in the middle.

As she picked up the ball, indicating the end of the game, she pointed at Jimmy, a tall, thin white boy, who wore black dress pants and a disheveled white shirt undone to the second button with a black tie and said, "What kind of movies do you like?"

Jimmy promptly replied; "Monster."

"Why?"

"They're different."

"Better?"

Jimmy took the question as applying to the monsters themselves, not understanding that she was alluding to the movies.

He hesitated before weakly replying; "Well, no, not all of them. There are bad ones, too."

By his response, she wasn't certain, but thought she understood his direction, decided to follow it and said; "So, you like the good monsters?"

"Yes."

"What makes them good?"

"That's easy. Some are misunderstood and have a hard time, but they do something for somebody else, like 'King Kong'."

"Did you ever see '*The Hunchback of Notre Dame*'?"

"No."

"Try it. I think you'll like it."

After the break for lunch, Miss Gracing had the class put the small chairs in some semblance of order, before sitting. It was amazing how she remembered everyone's name. Zeke sure couldn't. The kids spent the rest of the afternoon trying to learn songs Miss Gracing sung while playing the piano. "Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go. The horse knows the way to carry the sleigh through the white and drifting snow."

Zeke particularly liked that song and from the words, he unconsciously developed his idea of what a house was. Unlike the things called houses in Bayonne, NJ, a house was more like the structures he had only seen in paintings, surrounded by trees, open space and water.

When the bell rang, everyone looked at her and she said; "I'll see you all tomorrow."

Zeke brightly deduced that class was dismissed and got up to reform the entry line and everyone got behind him. It was 3:15 and Miss Gracing led the group out the way they had come in. When the contingent got to the fire escape, Zeke saw his Mom waiting at the gate. He also saw kids ranging in ages from five to sixteen doing and yelling, all kinds of things. It

reminded him of some movie he had seen in which the Bastille was stormed.

Zeke walked over to his protector and she said; "How did it go?"

"It was okay. There was one really stupid game, though."

"That's not bad. I think I was involved in five stupid games, myself, today."

"What?"

"Never mind. It's impossible to explain."

"Were you rolling a ball at anyone?"

Mom just laughed at that one and he felt like he was missing something. She asked him what he did all day and what the teacher was like and he told her at length as they held hands and skipped home.

Miss Gracing went back to the classroom to shuffle papers, put some in her purse, which she carried over one shoulder as she walked home. The first half block happened to be the same route as Zeke and she watched the skipping duo, thinking thoughts too numerous to crystallize into anything other than that she wondered about him and how he got the way he had so far appeared.

Chapter 2

She walked three more blocks to her apartment over a candy store, accessed through a back alley. On the way she made polite "Hellos" to a few unremembered kids from prior years, who chose to greet her in some fashion, one boy of about twelve, yelling; "Hey, Miss Gracing." She smiled, waved and wished she remembered the name belonging to the loud rambunctious youngster, who was too busy running, playing and showing off to care.

She walked through the alley behind the candy store and took the stairs to her apartment. It was three railroad rooms heated by a huge black iron stove in the kitchen. She used her key and entered it. Simon came out from behind the stove and jumped into her arms. He was an orange cat with white markings, who wasn't afraid of anything. He didn't want to hurt anything himself and consequently seemed to assume that everything else felt the same way. His sequestered existence kept his illusions alive, as the only person he ever met was Eloise. "Simon, are you hungry?" she said as she put him down, heading for the white painted built in kitchen cabinets. She found his favorite easily, looking through the predominantly glass doors. She sat at the kitchen table, where she could keep a loving hand on Simon's neck while he ate as if he were near starvation. The