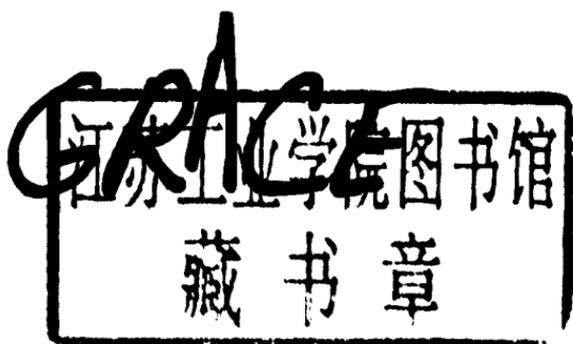


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Give Peas a Chance

Once

Then

For my parents, Philip and Pamela

Chapter 1

In the beginning there was me and Mum and Dad and the twins.

And good luck was upon us and things were great and talk about happy families, we were bountiful.

But it came to pass that I started doing sins.
And lo, that's when all our problems began.

Chapter 2

At first I didn't know I was a sinner.

I knew I was probably a bit naughty from the way teachers used to look at me and mutter things under their breath. Which was very kind of them. Teachers aren't paid to pray for you, they do it out of the goodness of their hearts.

But nobody ever accused me of having a sinful heart. Not until the day of our backyard barbeque. The one that turned into a disaster, and not just because Mum set fire to her hair and Dad put too much chilli in the sausages.

It was a very important barbeque for our family.

We were celebrating Uncle Vern's big day. Earlier that morning Mum's brother had been made an elder, which was as high up as you could go in our church if you weren't God.

Our backyard was packed. All the other church elders were there, and their families. The sun was shining and friendship was upon us all.

My brothers Mark and Luke were doing a top job of organising games with the other kids. Everyone always said Mark and Luke were the most energetic four-year-old twins in our whole church.

The first game was Daniel In The Lions Den. Mark and Luke were both Daniel. The other kids were the lions. Before they started, Mark reminded the lions how in the Bible story Daniel had mega amounts of faith, so God protected him.

‘So no biting,’ said Mark to the lions.

‘Only waddling,’ said Luke.

‘Lions don’t waddle,’ snorted one of the kids.

‘It’s a lions den and a penguins den,’ said Luke.

Soon most of the church elders had taken off their jackets and rolled up their sleeves. Uncle Vern even took off his tie. It was a fun day.

At first.

I was handing round cheesy toast triangles with my friend Delilah. But I could see her mind wasn’t on the job. She kept standing on tip-toe and staring over the fence into the neighbours’ gardens.

‘You are so completely brave living here,’ said Delilah.

I knew why she was saying that. My family was a bit different in our church because we didn’t have other church members living next door. Our neighbours were all outsiders. Our place was surrounded by the outside world.

‘You are so not safe living in this street,’ said

Delilah. 'What if an ungodly sinner neighbour wants to borrow your lawnmower?'

If I'd been as completely brave as she reckoned, I would have told her the truth. That we lent it.

But I didn't. Some of the church elders were listening. And they were looking almost as tense as Delilah. Our next door neighbour Mrs Benotti had just put her washing out and a breeze had sprung up and everybody was keeping away from the fence in case a peg snapped and they got a face full of unbeliever's undies.

'Grace.'

I turned to see who was calling.

It was Grandpop. He was standing near the back door, frowning. I was surprised to see him looking grumpy today. This was meant to be a happy day for him. All morning he'd been getting heaps of congratulations for being Uncle Vern's father. Plus earlier in the week God had spoken to him in person. They had a blessed conversation and God told him the celebration barbeque should be at our place so he and Nannie wouldn't have to worry about their flowerbeds being trampled.

'Grace, come here.'

Grandpop was gesturing impatiently. He'd been a church elder for years and he was used to people doing what he said.

As I hurried over, I saw that Grandpop had somebody with him. Mr Gosper, who was an elder too. Mr Gosper was holding a green folder.

I stared at the folder.

It was my school project.

Confusion came upon me. I'd left the project in my desk drawer in my room. How come Mr Gosper had it?

I realised what must have happened. Mr Gosper must have gone into the house to use the bathroom and afterwards he must have decided to cast an eye around. Church elders often did that when they visited houses to make sure people were obeying church rules. Poor Mr Gosper did it a lot now because he had so much spare time since his wife died.

I wondered if I should whisper to Mr Gosper that the long strands of grey hair he brushed over his bald patch had flopped down over one ear. It's probably what Mrs Gosper would have done.

But Grandpop didn't give me the chance.

'Grace,' he snapped, pointing to my project. 'Did you do this?'

I hesitated. Not because I was planning to commit the sin of lying. Just because sometimes it's hard to get words out when a very tall person is cross with you and you don't know why.

'Yes, Grandpop,' I said quietly. 'It's my school project.'

In church that morning Grandpop had hugged Uncle Vern and announced that this was the happiest and proudest day of his life. He didn't look like it was now.

Mr Gosper was looking pretty annoyed too.

I didn't understand. This project was some of my best work. I'd spent all Saturday doing it. Dad reckoned I had a good chance of getting an A for it, and possibly even a Nobel Prize for Literature.

Suddenly I had a thought.

Perhaps Grandpop and Mr Gosper were cross about my untidy handwriting. Maybe they were annoyed because they couldn't read it.

'May I?' I said.

Politely, I took the folder from Mr Gosper and opened it.

'It's called The Family Bible,' I explained. 'It's like the real Bible except it's about my family and how lucky I am to have them. I've even called the chapters Books like in the real Bible. It's got The Book Of Dad and The Book Of Mum and The Book Of Twins.'

I waited for Grandpop to ask if it had The Book Of Grandpop, which it did. I'd been saving that as a surprise. Grandpop loved the Bible more than any other book in the world.

But Grandpop didn't seem to be feeling the same about my bible.

'Sausage anyone?' said Dad, stepping between us with a platter of his homemade sausages. 'Lamb and mint or pork and chilli.'

Grandpop gave Dad an angry glare. I wasn't sure if it was because Dad was interrupting, or because he was wearing a Pink Floyd t-shirt when all the other men were wearing their Sunday suits. Or

maybe it was because Dad had cooked lunch when in our church only women did that.

‘Some of her best work,’ said Dad, nodding towards my project. ‘Grace, give them a quick reading from *The Book Of Mum*.’

I hesitated. From the look on Grandpop and Mr Gosper’s faces I was starting to think maybe I was wrong about them wanting to read my project.

But Dad gave me a big encouraging smile. Whenever he did that, I always glowed inside. It was like the feeling I got when I said my prayers.

I opened the folder and cleared my throat.

‘The Book Of Mum,’ I read. ‘Chapter four, verse one. And behold, Mum’s nineteenth birthday was upon her and that day in church she did look twice at a young bloke and she did like what she saw, and lo, even when his parents moved to America he stayed here and got betrothed to Mum and love came upon them and so did a really nice wedding with cake afterwards at Grandpop and Nannie’s place. Verse two. And the bloke’s name was Dad and a kind heart was within him and upon his driveway was a Toyota Hilux –’

‘Enough,’ snapped Grandpop.

I could see he definitely didn’t like it.

I glanced at Uncle Vern and the other guests. Nobody seemed to like it, apart from Dad. Some of the other elders were looking like they’d been slapped in the face by one of Mrs Benotti’s bras.

Mr Gosper shook his head grimly.

‘That child,’ he said to Dad, ‘is mocking the word of our Lord. Look at her, so young and already learning the ways of sin. If I was her father I’d be ashamed of what is happening in her heart.’

‘Amen,’ muttered Grandpop.

I was shocked. Mr Gosper was known for exaggerating, but Grandpop wasn’t. He knew my heart wasn’t sinful or bad. Every Saturday we fed the birds in his backyard together.

‘I’m sorry, Grandpop,’ I said. ‘I didn’t mean to upset anybody. But I don’t get it. Why is it mocking God to write bible things about my family? About their good points and loving habits? I don’t think God minds that.’

Grandpop and Mr Gosper were both scowling. I could see they didn’t agree. But Dad had taught me to be true to my views.

‘Actually I think God likes it,’ I said quietly.

‘How dare you?’ Mr Gosper hissed at me. ‘How dare you argue with the Lord’s judgement?’

Dad stepped forward and looked Mr Gosper right in the eyes. The heat from the platter of sausages made the air shimmer between them.

‘If your heart,’ said Dad to Mr Gosper, ‘was half as big as Grace’s, you’d see what her project is really about. And you’d rejoice instead of making a kid feel small in front of her family and friends.’

I wanted to hug him.

‘And insulting her faith,’ Dad went on. ‘And

destroying her self-confidence. And belittling her handwriting. And crushing her spirit.'

'Actually,' I whispered to Dad. 'It's not quite that bad.'

Mr Gosper put his face even closer to Dad's.

'And what do you think her so-called project is about?' said Mr Gosper.

Dad didn't flinch.

'Same thing as all the best bits of the Bible are about,' he said. 'Same thing as this church of ours should be about.'

Mr Gosper frowned.

'Love,' said Dad.

The screen door banged open and Mum hurried out from the kitchen. Behind her were Nannie and the other women.

Mum stared anxiously at Dad and Mr Gosper, who were still face to face.

'Come on everybody,' she said. 'Let's eat. Mr Gosper, please, will you say grace for us?'

Mr Gosper didn't even look at Mum. He just kept glaring at Dad, his breath whistling in his nostrils.

Mum gave a cry of alarm. But it wasn't about Dad and Mr Gosper. It was about the next lot of sausages, which had just burst into flames on the barbeque.

Mum leapt across the patio, pulling off her apron and swatting at the flames with it. The violent movements made a couple of her hairpins fall out.

Her bun started to collapse. Wisps of her long hair tumbled down towards the burning sausages.

Suddenly I saw flames climbing up one of the wisps.

People yelled. Mr Gosper called on the Lord's protection. I grabbed a glass of lemonade and threw it over Mum's head.

The burning hair hissed and the flames went out.

'Thanks, love,' said Mum, wiping lemonade out of her eyes. As she pinned her other wisps back up, she muttered to herself.

'Flaming hair.'

I was shocked.

Mum never swore.

But I knew how she felt. There were lots of good things about being in our church, but the rule about women and girls having long hair as a sign of obedience to God was a real pain.

Dad put his arm round Mum.

'Are you OK?' he said gently.

He dabbed her hair with his apron.

Mum nodded and they looked at each other for a moment. I could tell Mum knew that Dad had been standing up for me.

They both turned to the guests, who were all looking a bit stunned.

'Drama's over,' said Mum. She put her arm round Uncle Vern. 'Let's get back to celebrating my big brother's special day.'

'Help yourselves, folks,' said Dad. 'We've got

three types of sausages now. Lamb, pork and charcoal.’

‘And penguin,’ said Mark, stabbing the air with his plastic sword.

While Mark and the other kids went on a hunt for penguins that might have been mocking the word of our Lord, Luke came over and squinted up at me.

‘Mum was on fire,’ he said. ‘Why was she?’

I explained it was just a little accident and things were OK now.

But for the rest of the afternoon I kept seeing Mr Gosper and Grandpop and Uncle Vern and the other elders talking in groups and throwing looks at me and Dad.

‘You are so judged,’ Delilah said to me. ‘It’s cause your Dad put too much chilli in the sausages.’

I beheld that it probably wasn’t.

And slowly I started to have a horrible feeling that things weren’t OK.