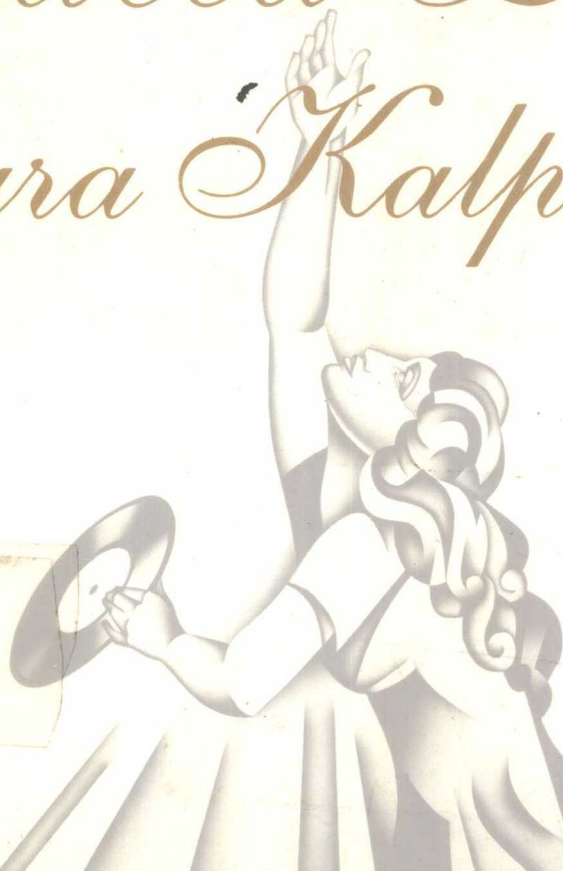




*Graced Lana*  
*Laura Kalpakian*



# Graced Land

Laura  
Kalpakian



GROVE

WEIDENFELD

NEW

YORK

*All of the characters in this novel are fictitious, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.*

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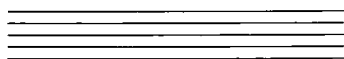
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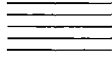
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The  
Old  
Maid's  
Prayer





# ONE



esting. Testing. Emily Shaw here. Caseworker 1766. Today's date: April 9, 1982. Reporting on Home Visitation made Wednesday, April 7, 1982, County Case Number 68-46784. Address: 2924 Santiago Street. Living in the home is the client, Mrs. Joyce (aka Rejoice) Jackson, and her two daughters, Priscilla, age thirteen, and Lisa Marie, age nine, both in good health, as is Mrs. Jackson. The children's father, Warren James Jackson, Jr., pays some child support, but not reliably, though Mrs. Jackson seems to manage well. Mr. Jackson lives in the next county with another woman and children he has fathered by her. On her. With her?" Emily hit PAUSE, envisioning how this would look on paper after the typist got through with it. She reversed, erased, so the sentence had a neat ring to it and no doubts. "The children of this other woman . . ." Emily hesitated, playing with her engagement ring; she hated the cliché, *other woman*. So Gothic. ". . . are two sons. Mrs. Jackson has their pictures up amongst other family photos and seems genuinely fond of them, speaks of them in terms of such affection that, well, that seem unwarranted by the situation." Emily thought of Rick. She thought if Rick had fathered children on another woman, she would die. She would die first and then she would kill him.

"The Jackson home was clean without being neat. There was a lot of laundry stacked and ironing everywhere and there were boxes with neat

piles of clean mended clothing marked MEN, WOMEN, CHILDREN, and BABIES and the ironing board was up and the sewing machine was open and it had sort of center stage. When I arrived, Mrs. Jackson had a mouth full of pins. She took the pins out of her mouth,” Emily added lest the girls in the typing pool think Mrs. Jackson spoke through pins the whole time. “Mrs. Jackson is forty-two, older than most of my clients, though I do not think that age alone can answer for the, well, she’s the sort of woman who gives the impression of, well—you know, ‘age cannot wither her, nor custom stale’—” Emily reversed to *clients* and added quickly, “Mrs. Jackson was very gracious. I should perhaps here note Mrs. Jackson’s undue, unusual attachment to the late Elvis Presley.”

Emily hit PAUSE and stared at the dotted walls of the taping booth. Social Services had seventeen such booths so that caseworkers could record in privacy. There was no graffiti. Emily could not think why Elvis ought to be noted. He had already been noted in the file. Naturally. Elvis Presley had died five years before. But if she didn’t say something, people might think she hadn’t noticed. “We spoke of him briefly,” Emily lied blithely, and continued. “Mrs. Jackson is a very able manager and her home is comfortable, not at all welfare-ish but really sort of middle-class,” Emily said, before pushing REVERSE to take off the last few words, which suggested that welfare-ish was low-class and betrayed, moreover, her mother’s sense of values. Emily detested her mother’s invidious shorthand: there was LC and LMC, MC and HC. The best of these was high-class. The worst of these was LMC, suggesting that low-class types had tried to pull themselves into the middle class and failed, hung precariously by their thumbs from the lowest possible rungs. Emily had tried to stay free of these prejudices, even when they were cast theoretically and pompously at USC in Sociology 414: Class in American Society. Emily backed up to *able manager* and stopped there.

According to the guidelines given her in training class, she had touched on nearly everything required of her: names, dates, numbers, health, state of the home, family history, that’s all, unless the family was *in extremis*.

*In extremis* was the phrase welfare workers used to designate a family in a state of emergency, of one sort or another. Every time Emily heard *in extremis* it made her think of Oscar Wilde, who spent his whole life in one *extremis* or another. She confused *in extremis* with *De Profundis* and pale anguish at the gate. But if the Jacksons were not *in extremis* or *de profundis*, then how to explain the hours she had spent there? Thirty or forty minutes



would ordinarily do. Mere curiosity would not answer. Mere curiosity has no place in the social worker's quiver of aids.

*The quiver of aids* was a metaphor used continually by the man who had conducted their training class, Mr. Hansen. Mr. Hansen was a font of information and experience and metaphors like *the quiver of aids*. Emily wondered if she was the only one who thought of sex toys. Anyway, she wasn't simply curious. Emily wanted to help people, to bring the Less Fortunate into fuller participation in society and see people lead full and happy, useful lives. That's why she became a sociology major at the University of Southern California, though she had started out in English. By her junior year, though, she had to agree with her peers and parents and boyfriend that sitting around reading a bunch of novels and absorbing useless frippets of poetry "battered no bread." Unbattered bread (in her mother's parlance) was the metaphorical equivalent of sloth, decay, squalor, waste, and want. Welfare mothers went about with unbattered bread.

Unbattered bread was probably as good a description as any for the welfare mother's lot, but it was not what Howard Hansen had stressed in the monthlong training period. Howard Hansen had dutifully walked them through the Thou Shalt Nots of social work, the county and state regulations, forms for refiguring budgets and procedures should your clients, for any number of reasons, be caught with overpayments, but the thrust of his presentation, what he had to teach, indeed, what he had clearly learned, was a sense of shared humanity. Mr. Hansen advocated listening skills, compassion, good-natured regard, sturdy, democratic tolerance, all of which sounded like something Jesus or Saint Francis might have practiced. But in her three months on the actual job, Emily had discovered that veteran social workers weren't the least like Jesus or Saint Francis. They did their paperwork, made Home Visitations, handled those cases *in extremis*, and washed their hands before they left the building. They did not take their jobs home with them. Nearly all these people were married.

Emily wished she could shake off the habit of looking first at people's left hands and imagining where they had got up that morning, from which beds and whether naked or clothed, if they had reached to touch or tousle a much-loved head or set bare feet on bare floors and gone directly to the bathroom. During the training session, these thoughts about her fellow trainees (some thirty of them) often usurped her attention from Mr. Hansen's instructions, particularly when he was waxing on about Procedure. In training class Emily had used the skills she had never perfected

in Sociology 381: Statistical Analysis for the Social Sciences. She did a statistical tally of her fellow trainees: who was married and who was not. All the good-looking men were married. All the average-looking women. The really attractive women were not married, though Emily did not count herself, really, in that last category, at least not statistically, because she was engaged, and while that wasn't married, neither was it exactly single.

In fact, it wasn't exactly anything. Emily found herself clinging to her engagement ring as though it were a life ring thrown to her in rough, rude waters, there to keep her afloat in a sea of desire, need, expedience, and simple longing.

Emily longed to be married to Rick. She hated her smart new apartment in the Raintree complex with its three swimming pools, a pond with ducks, a sauna, and a tennis court, congenially close to the freeway, the soon-to-be mall, and the high-class chain restaurants. She hated driving by the no-man's-land of the dead and ripped-up orange groves, that desolation of weed and wildflower that soon would sprout a drywall, neon-new mall. She hated the Raintree's manicured landscaping and little camphor trees held up by wires. She hated her own bathroom with female things only and her mother's old Avanti towels. She hated the decor, motifs, and touches (finishing and otherwise) courtesy of the Blue Goose, a Laguna boutique her mother favored. Emily loathed geese. She loathed country blue. Politely, she never said so, and her mother never guessed.

An instinctively neat young woman, Emily kept her new apartment tidy, except for the bedroom, which fell into sloth, the squalor reflecting the disarray of her most intimate life. Clothes and towels, like wounded in battle, lay where they fell. Unanswered mail hunkered in the corners and a trail of *Cosmo*, *Redbook*, *Glamour*, and *Mademoiselle* led to the bathroom. The novels she devoured at night were stacked by the bed until they too fell over into a rubble of print and glossy covers. Always an avid reader, at particularly unhappy times in her life Emily read bulimically, binging on novels, searching for fictional solace. Every night she read till she could not keep her eyes open, but before she went to sleep, Emily always reached across the double bed to the undented pillow where Rick should be. In the half-light her rocklike diamond ring mocked her. Engaged indeed. Emily Shaw wanted the man in her bed and the plain gold by-God band that tells the world you are a married woman. That was all she wanted. Sometimes she was afraid it was all she would ever want, feared that when she got it, she would cramp up from lack of longing and collapse. This was not quite the same thing as being fulfilled.

Of course, she wanted to be independent too. Naturally. That's why you go to college and train yourself to have a career and your own life and sense of self-worth. Self-worth cannot be dependent on your husband. First, though, you needed a husband. Emily needed Rick. To be married to Rick. Some mornings she wrote this feeling off to her being old-fashioned. "You're old-fashioned," she said to her pretty image in the mirror, applying Estée Lauder makeup. She had Renoirish coloring and bright blue eyes. "Just an old-fashioned girl." Expertly she fluffed her light brown hair. "Woman. Just an old-fashioned woman."

In an old-fashioned way, Emily had been excited about law school for Rick when they both graduated, University of Southern California, class of '81. But in August—after a summer of tennis and swimming and sailing on her parents' twenty-eight-foot sailboat, *Breaking Wind*—Rick had left for Georgetown University. Rick left and Emily was left with the discovery that, while being a wife might be a full-time job, being a fiancée was not. For the first time ever, her life was not mapped out with required lessons, school, sorority functions. She had no place to go and nothing to be. Rick, by contrast, filled his days with new friends, experiences, challenges. He told her so on the phone. The present was far more exciting to him than his shared past with Emily, or their mutually assured future: after law school, Emily's father had promised him a place in the prestigious Newport Beach firm Shaw, Shine, Brill, Syme, and Turlock.

In September, Emily's parents had suggested she join a couple of Tri Delts touring the European capitals. Emily declined (without saying that her parents themselves had forever soured her on cold churches, mute pictures, and oversized monuments during their European trip after she graduated from high school). She had had quite enough, thank you, of the Old Country.

Perhaps instead she would explore a new country: while Rick was in law school, Emily would get a job. She had a degree in sociology. She would be a social worker, which, she figured, would be a lot like being a Candy Stripper. She'd always enjoyed being a Candy Stripper at St. Luke's Hospital By-The-Sea, helping patients, going to meetings, planning events to cheer the less fortunate. Emily took the social worker tests, the interviews, and the job in St. Elmo County when it was offered to her. But it was not at all like being a Candy Stripper. Deserty St. Elmo was not like Laguna Beach. The people she came in contact with were not like the grateful patients at St. Luke's By-The-Sea. The meetings did not plan events to cheer the less fortunate, but clumped over needless acres of barren

bureaucratic ground, during which Emily doodled sailboats. That was not the worst of it. Worse, by far, to go home to the empty apartment, to have no friends, no fiancé, no sorority sisters. No one. Emily felt cut off, left out, abandoned, and lonely, pictured herself getting on a plane, flying to D.C., finding Rick, and the two of them eloping on the spot. She jokingly suggested as much to him on the phone. He said he'd love to, but studying consumed his life and he would have no time for a wife, and Emily would be cut off, left out, abandoned, and lonely.

Bravely, Emily set out to find friends. She went to one ghastly meeting of the St. Elmo Chapter of the USC Alumni Association, which met the first Thursday of every month in a banquet room at the Cask and Cleaver for dinner and drinks. The whole experience was so dreadful that Emily was forcibly reminded of that gruesome scene in Michener's *Hawaii* where the new arrivals to the leper colony, people yet whole, got pounced upon and mauled by the really ghastly lepers. She did not return, despite repeated entreaties from some of the alumni, mostly married men.

At work she struck up a lunchtime acquaintance with another social worker, Penny Pitzer, who was about thirty, single, and seemed to have a perfectly full and happy life. Penny urged Emily to come out for softball on the county team, but Emily begged off (without quite saying she was unequal to any sport that required physical finesse beyond the ability to zip up your own pants). Anyway, Emily didn't need the exercise. Lunch with Penny Pitzer was enough to kill your appetite and a good way to shed those extra five pounds, because it was very hard to eat while Penny talked about her caseload. Penny had five years' experience with the welfare department, and all her clients, it seemed, either were being or had been beaten, molested, robbed, mugged, drugged, raped, arrested, abducted, defrauded, or were defrauding somebody; their teenage children were always running away with someone who had VD and their little children were caught shoplifting. Every one of Penny's clients was either violent or retarded.

"Don't you have anyone normal?" Emily had asked plaintively.

"If they're normal, they're not on welfare," Penny replied, biting into her Whopper. "You've got to remember—there but for the grace of God . . ." Penny grinned. "Take it in stride."

Perhaps, Emily thought. But it did not seem quite the spirit of shared humanity that Mr. Hansen had stressed in training class.

She thought she might be able to share a little humanity and make friends around the Raintree apartment pool, taking her novel and a diet

Coke and suntan lotion and a towel. Friendship was out of the question, and even acquaintance unlikely, because the young women at the pool regarded her as just more competition for the few men. Emily tried to make it clear she wasn't looking for a man. She was engaged, after all. She kept mementos and gifts and pictures of Rick up all over her apartment, so that anyone who came over would know she was engaged. But no one came over.

At work she drank her coffee from Rick's valentine mug and kept their engagement party picture on her desk in a charming country blue ceramic frame. In the picture Rick wore his Winning Team Smile and Emily beamed in her Laura Ashley party dress. In the messy sprawl of welfare paperwork, Emily sometimes eyed that picture, wishing she could crawl back inside that framed moment, just about a year ago now at the Laguna Hills Country Club. No one had had a more splendid engagement party than Rick and Emily. Right out of *Gatsby*. All their friends said so, but in the year following graduation those friends had had weddings, and Emily once reckoned up she'd spent over a thousand dollars on their weddings, on presents, clothes, and travel. That was the way she saw it on bad days. On good days she did not doubt that true love was beyond all calculable worth, that Juliet would as soon be inconstant to Romeo, Desdemona to Othello, Antony to Cleopatra, that the moon would be unfaithful to the tide and the stars pay no worship to the garish sun before she, Emily, would slacken her devotion to Rick. Stout of heart. Clear of purpose. She returned to her dreary caseload and the omnivorous paperwork spread out on her desk and put from her mind that glorious engagement party, with its three hundred guests, its nine-piece orchestra, buffet supper, champagne enough for everyone to toast the happy couple, for everyone to think, even if they did not say, *Imagine the wedding. If this is the engagement party, imagine the wedding!*

But when Emily fathomed the vast desert of time between *imagine* and *the wedding*, she canceled her subscription to *Bride*. By the time she got married, all the fashions would have changed. Of course she understood how important it was that Rick have an eastern degree to join her father's firm. This scrap of time was but a small price to pay for their high-class future. But there were moments when Emily Shaw didn't give a shit for the high-class future, would trade it all for a tender present. Sometimes she had to ask Rick to explain it all over again when he called twice a week, regularly, reliably, at 8:03 Pacific time. Occasionally he surprised her with a call, which pleased her more than the twice-weekly expectables.

Occasionally she called him on impulse. But the time difference argued against it. She knew how Rick hated to be waked up once he had got to sleep.

When he called, Rick would tell her of the challenges of law school and funny stories, anecdotes about people he had met. Emily would laugh without thinking they were funny. She wondered if his laughter was equally unfelt when she told him funny stories about her work, especially her supervisor, Large Marge.

Marge Mason had been a Wac and she still wore clothes with a martial air, uniforms of checked dresses, gray gabardine skirts wrapped round her impossible bulk, and white polyester blouses rippling over her enormous breasts. Marge wore support hose and sensible shoes and her steel gray hair was cut in a no-nonsense bob. She had a way of sucking on her bottom lip that made Emily shiver. When Marge's heavy-hooded eyes met Emily's during staff meetings, Emily always remembered what she'd left undone, or done wrong, felt tarred with inadequacy and feathered with silliness and she doodled whole pages worth of sailboats that might take her away from all this.

When Mr. Hansen had introduced the supervisors to the trainees, Large Marge had prefaced her own remarks with words that Penny Pitzer later recited right back to Emily over their Whoppers at the Burger King on Brigham Boulevard. "I'll bet Large said, *I have raised three children on my own and no one knows better than I the daily demands on a single mother.*" Penny dipped one of her french fries in the ketchup and nibbled it. "Something like that?" Emily nodded. "Did she tell you about the son who graduated from Chico State and the daughter who graduated from Long Beach State? And did she save it up for last about her son at the Air Force Academy?"

"Well, yes, she did."

"A sorrier bunch of emotional cripples you've never laid eyes on."

"You've met them?"

"The county Christmas party is an obligatory event. She always brings them. We call them the Geek, the Gook, and the Grubber. The Grubber's the one at the Air Force Academy."

(When Emily repeated this bit of folk wisdom to Rick on the phone, he chuckled, though admittedly he did not shriek with laughter as Emily had when Penny told it.)

"You watch out for old Marge," Penny cautioned when their mirth subsided. "She's a ball-buster."

"But I'm not a man."

"Have you ever slept with a man?"

"Well, yes, of course. I'm engaged."

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Naturally, but I don't see—"

"That's enough for Large. Think about it. Who do your clients sleep with?"

"Men."

"Right. That's how they get knocked up and have a lot of children they can't support, but they never learn, do they? They go to bed with men who go to prison, with men who dump them for other women, with men who spend one night and are gone in the morning. They end up pregnant and poor and it doesn't stop them. They fall in love. They hit the sack. And since Marge hates all men, it follows automatically, she hates all women who love men."

The clarity of this argument was not lost on Emily, not exactly, though she asked in the interest of understanding, "But that's everyone. Everyone in the world."

"Almost."

"There's only men and women."

Penny shrugged.

"Well, how did Marge get—"

"The Geek, the Gook, and the Grubber? Adoption. The military can do whatever they like. Sweep children right off the streets and give them to ball-busters like Marge. It's a shame, really." Penny bit into her Whopper and chewed thoughtfully. "I probably shouldn't tell you this, but why do you think Sid quit fieldwork? Sid Johnson, that black guy who had your caseload? That man is a born social worker, but he asked over and over for a new supervisor, and they said no. Finally Sid just told Howard Hansen the truth about Marge. Old Sid, he really laid it on the line. He *had* to leave after that. Lucky for him he got transferred to a different division, or he'd have been out of a job. Nothing can budge Large. She *likes* to cut and slash clients' grants, benefits too, if she can get to them. She spends whole days at it and you can see the satisfaction on her face while she's working up how much they owe, or how long they're going to be without grants. Oh, and it's all legal. That's what she likes best. Sid said there was one of your cases, old Marge wouldn't even let the file go down to Library for his first two years. Every time he wanted that file, he had to ask Large. She kept it in her desk."

"I don't suppose . . . did Sid mention the name?"

"Can't remember. It's those people, though, there at the corner of Santiago and Sultana—Westminster Abbey for Elvis. Heartbreak Hotel. You can't miss it. It's only about half a mile from the county complex. You know the one: Flags! Flowers! Music! You don't? Over on Santiago? Everyone drives right by it on their way to work."

"I don't. I live out the other direction."

"Well, you should drive by just to see it," said Penny emphatically. "In five years it's become a local landmark, like the old Mormon Adobe downtown. Florists donate flowers. People drive by just to look. Like some kind of holy shrine—and you ought to see it on Christmas and Easter! And if you think that's a circus"—Penny wadded up her Whopper wrapper—"you ought to see it January 8!"

"What's that?"

"Elvis's birthday. Oh, you wouldn't believe it, Emily. She puts big signs out on the porch, HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO THE KING. All day long she plays the same Elvis songs loud, so you can hear it all up and down the street. It's unbelievable. She gives cookies with 'E.P.' in sugar frosting to passersby. You pull up at the stop sign in front of her house and she's there, giving out goodies in honor of his birthday. On August 16 she does the same thing, only then she just plays the gospel songs. She stands in the street there at the stop sign and gives away candy. *In memory of the King*, she says when she comes up to your car."

"What's August 16?"

"The day Elvis died. Oh, this woman is a fruitcake. A fearless fruitcake. Sid told me that she goes to garage sales and buys all the leftover clothes at the end of the day, takes them home and washes and mends them, and then she'll just go right down anywhere in this town—and there are some pretty rough areas in this town, if you haven't noticed—"

"I've noticed," Emily confessed.

"—and go up to people's doors and say, *Here, Elvis Presley wants you to have this coat, or this warm sweater. Here, Elvis wants your little girl to have this dress*. Sometimes she goes to that halfway house, the one for drug addicts and ex-cons. She walks right in like there's not a perv in a hundred-mile radius and gives them boxes of clothes, everything neat and washed and starched and mended. Looks like it came right off the shelves from Sears. Sid says the guy who ran the halfway house found out Sid was her social worker and called Sid and wanted to know if this woman was nuts."



“What did Sid say?”

“He said it depended on your taste in music. This woman is really a fruitcake. They had this article in the paper a couple of years ago, her friends went to the bank and set up this fund for anyone who wanted to contribute so that she could fly to Memphis, fly there and see Elvis’s house, and Elvis’s grave.”

“I bet Large Marge loved that.”

Penny snorted. “Large called up that bank like she wants to contribute to the fund, finds out what she needs to know, and gets ready to pounce on that woman the minute she lays hands on the money. And it was a lot! The paper said this woman’s friends collected enough for a round-trip ticket to Memphis—hotel and everything. And she never touched it.” Penny finished her Whopper.

“What do you mean? Did she just leave it there?”

“No. She gave it away. Honest. There was a picture in the paper of her with the bank manager, signing the check over to the principal of Adobe Elementary for the children of that school.”

“Adobe’s that school—” Emily pointed vaguely to the east. “The one out by the flood channel where there’s all those shacks.”

“Migrant workers. Send kids to school who can’t speak a word of English.” Penny clucked sorrowfully. “Anyway, she told the principal and the bank and the paper that she would never forget her friends’ kindness and their love, waxed on with all that rubbish, but if Elvis was alive, this is what he would do with the money. She said something like—she could better serve Elvis Presley’s spirit here in St. Elmo and she didn’t need to go to Memphis. Well, we all thought it was a hoot! Sid Johnson, he even has the balls to go up to Large and ask if she saw that in the paper and didn’t she think that was nice.”

“Why did I have to get Sid’s caseload?” Emily moaned. “Why did I have to get Large Marge?”

Penny grinned. “Well, all I can say is I hope you like Elvis.”

Emily didn’t. Neither did Penny. The two young women agreed that long before he died, Elvis Presley was nothing but a relic of the Age of Greasy Kid Stuff. Unsophisticated music, compared to punk rock, and nothing in comparison to Air Supply or Foreigner or Journey. Elvis and his bedroom voice and doo-wop music and all those goofy gyrations. Funny. Fat. Pathetic. Neither Penny nor Emily could understand how people could get so worked up, so broken up, when Elvis died.