



GRACE

A novel by

Jane Roberts Wood

Author of The Train to Estelline

GRACE



*Jane
Roberts
Wood*



DUTTON

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For
Annabel, Thomas, Alex, Catherine Jane,
Victoria, Clinton, and Charles.
With love, Jane

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during the writing of this book, my thanks to
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Prologue

COLD Springs is an East Texas town of forty thousand inhabitants or so. It was named by the earliest settlers, long before the Civil War, who, when they saw the lake and found the spring that fed it, rested under oak and linden trees in full leaf, and marveled at the greenness, at everything surgent with spring, said: "*Here. Here is where we will cast our lot.*" The next wave, most from Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, the Carolinas, a few from Virginia, was swept here by the aftermath of the Civil War when GONE TO TEXAS was crudely scratched on shattered doors all over those states. The last immigrants, and by far the largest number, have come from the North to work in the defense plant and the prison and the army supply depot. They have come to a town whose inhabitants (not counting the soldiers of two wars or the sons sent off to Princeton) have seldom traveled far from Cold Springs—a mere handful to Europe and several dozen families to New York during the 1939 World's Fair.

It is a town where people boast about being southern, although few would attempt to define the term. "A proud way of looking at the past," ventures the history teacher at Cold Springs Junior College. "Nonsense," replies the government teacher, a cynic marking time until his draft number is called.

"What do we have to be so proud of? It's all hot air. Hot air nurtured by a defeated people."

But the word *southern* conveys more to the people here than a lost cause, a romantic past. It is a state of mind and a way of life. It means fine linens and good cooking and a courteous way of speaking. It means close family ties and good breeding and respectability. This last most of all.

And *northern*? This from a biology professor at the college: "Well, they're just different."

"How? In what way?" Again the government teacher, now poised to report to Fort Belvoir in Virginia.

"In every way!" they chorus.

The newcomers, desiring nice kitchens, are hurriedly building nondescript, rather shabby houses in the far north part of town. The natives live in the older sections where the streets are numbered and thus named: First Street, Second Street, Third Street, and so on, through Twenty-ninth Street. The streets that run north and south have names that are only slightly more imaginative: Pine, Elm, Olive, Wood. The town is not zoned, for this is the South, and who ever heard of zoning in the South! Zoning implies snobbery. And unfairness. Still, all these new people, so many of them, moving in. It was better before the War. Everything was better.

Four houses, as distinctively different as are those who live in them, sit on the 900 block of Pine Street. The Moore house, built just after the Civil War, rising slightly above the others, once stood alone, the only house on the block. But three generations ago the property on the south end was sold, and then—who knows when?—a little miserly scrap at the north end of the block was sold by an improvident, careless ancestor. The Moore house is a nice old Georgian with its hip roof of tin over shingles, its plastered walls and simple, elegant cornices. The only ornate thing about the house is its entrance with the marble steps leading to a carved mahogany door. The house is well kept. You have to say that for Robert Moore. Half the time

some worker is over there, painting, repairing, replacing, propping up the old house. It, the Moore house, is clearly Robert's house, for what did his Yankee wife bring to the marriage? Nothing that anyone can touch or polish or hold up to the light. But Robert is crazy about his wife. That counts for something! And Robert's old aunties, the Little Brontës the town affectionately calls them, have nothing but good to say about Barbara. It is a fact that the whole town, having grown used to her ways, is markedly charitable toward her.

Although the Moores have come down in the world, it is only a monetary decline. There is still family—the two aunts, who are beyond reproach, and Robert Moore's ancestors—a great-grandfather who had been a Texas congressman and a great-great aunt who had become the fifty-three-year-old bride of a man who had once been the governor of Texas.

Although the Balderidge house is on the north corner, right next to the Moores', it is firmly separated from their house because it faces Ninth Street rather than Pine, and it is separated by the thick and ancient crepe myrtle hedges that surround it. It is even further separated, irrevocably separated, by the lack of family and money and education of those who live in it. This house—unpainted, unrepaired, *unloved*—has four small rooms and a front porch furnished only with a rush-bottom rocking chair, it, too, unpainted. It is here that Mrs. Balderidge sits and talks, sometimes quite angrily, to people no one can see. From her rocking chair, she can look across the street and see the row of houses the church rents to the "coloreds." Those houses—identical, two rooms, junk pine—that have never known a coat of paint, sit behind an open drainage ditch.

Grace Gillian's house sits on the south side of the Moores'. And what she's done to that house since Bucy Gillian left her! First, painted it turquoise, a ridiculous color. Hardly respectable. Then moved her stove and refrigerator upstairs, moved the whole kitchen upstairs! Who knows how much that cost! The very next year, she closed in the long, narrow, upstairs

porch (calls it "the gallery"), and put her dining table and chairs up there. That's where she spends her time. But the town understand the roots of all this. Grace is a Cold Springs girl, the daughter of Molly and James O'Brian, and so all this decorating foolishness is just that wild Irish streak that runs in the O'Brian blood. And, thank goodness, the front of the house, a simple, two-story clapboard, looks the way it has always looked, except for its turquoise color and the dark green (so dark it looks black) front door.

The Appleby house on the south corner, right next to Grace's, was built before the First World War. John Appleby bought it in the thirties when he, invited by a cousin to join his law firm, came to Cold Springs from North Carolina. It is a restrained, old Victorian—modest gingerbread trim along the eaves and gables, a steep roof, floor-to-ceiling windows, a simple front door, robust porch posts and a generous porch that sweeps across the front of the house. What with Anna being sick so long, John has not kept it up. And who could blame him? The green shutters need retouching, and in the back, the white paint just above the kitchen door has begun to peel.

The people in Cold Springs do not enjoy change. Things on the 900 block of Pine have gone along for years just the same, but now everything is changing. It's the War. Changing everything. Changing everybody.

Part
ONE

Spring 1944

Chapter 1

• 1 •

GRACE Gillian kneels before her hyacinth bed, her bare fingers raking the accumulation of decaying leaves from around the plants. She has long since shucked off her gardening gloves. She loves the feel of the earth's awakening, the humid, fertile smell of it.

Grace is thirty-eight years old. Slender. High cheekbones. Generous mouth. Dark brown hair, almost auburn with the russet highlights around her face. But it is her eyes, soft gray eyes tilting up at the corners, that one remembers. When she reads a poem she loves or when a student makes a perceptive comment, her face lights up and her eyes become radiantly blue. But she does not know she is beautiful. And, although her name is Grace, neither does she think of herself in meta-physical terms, such as, *state of*. When she thinks of herself at all, it is in sensible, nearly mundane terms—teacher, gardener, friend. But she is neither sensible nor mundane. And on this day, as she rakes the sodden leaves from the hyacinth bed, she is thinking of John, whom she loves beyond the telling. *My true, pure love. A love not fueled by desire.* This is what she believes. She feels she has long since turned away from desire.

The pecan trees, arching high over her and over her turquoise-colored house, have not yet leafed out. Nor has the elm by the

front door. But the magnificent live oak is in full leaf. And a single wild plum and a domestic peach in the northwest corner of her garden are dizzily in bloom, infusing the blue air and the yellow grass with the colors and scents of spring.

A song from the kitchen radio drifts out into her garden. "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places," Jo Stafford sings tenderly. Since the War, all the songs are heartrending to Grace. Looking closely at the hyacinth buds, she can faintly discern the color—purple or white—each will become. Colors of mourning.

She, Grace, although not in mourning, is deeply sad. Anna, her next-door neighbor, is sick. Sick to death. When she thinks it again, *sick to death*, the phrase takes on its literal meaning. Anna is sick, and in a day or two she will go to her death. And then John will leave. He has told her this. "If something happens to Anna"—*if* not *when* said carefully—"I'm going to get into this War." Raising an eyebrow, he smiled. "I'll probably end up with a desk job. But if they'll have me, I'm going." Remembering, her eyes fill, and she sits back on her heels and with the sleeve of her sweater wipes the perspiration and tears from her face.

It's true that the tide has turned. Yesterday the Allies bombed industrial targets in a town called Brunswick, deep inside France. The Allies are winning. Everybody knows the War will soon be over. Farmers meeting on muddy, country roads trade shots of whiskey and hope through windows of pickup trucks: "This time next year, my boy will be home, helping me get the fields ready for cotton." Then, unable to voice the unthinkable, they add, "if the creek don't rise," or "if nothing don't happen." Women, boldly tempting the gods, lean from under hair dryers at Chic-les-Dolls Beauty Salon: "I didn't have the heart to put up a tree last Christmas. But this year we've already picked out the biggest one on the place!" So! It was agreed. Probably by September. Certainly no later than Christmas. All the sons and

lovers and husbands—just boys, so young—will be coming home.

Young, until lately. Now they are calling up men as old as forty-five for active duty. And all over town, men even older are trying to get into the War. Some are fathers, desperately trying to follow their young sons—living, dead or missing-in-action sons—into battle. Everybody longs to play some part, however small, in the great and terrible—made unbelievably romantic by Hollywood—War.

Now a small gray spider, its filament of newly spun web invisible, appears before Grace's eyes. She moves her finger through the air above it, finds silken thread and deposits the wiggling spider on a hyacinth. By Christmas. *Maybe by Thanksgiving*, she tells herself, getting up, stretching.

In her kitchen, she fills the soup kettle with water, drops in cubes of beef (two red points, but never mind, she can get more from her washwoman), adds fresh vegetables, a can of tomatoes, garlic, a dollop of vinegar. She rolls oregano in her fingers, sniffs it, drops it in. Adds thyme. Rosemary. A witches' brew. Then she takes a bottle of red wine from the cupboard.

She has bathed and, dressing, got as far as her slip and stockings when Amelia calls. "Heard anything? From the hospital?"

"No."

"Call me."

"I'm fine."

And in the space between Amelia's question and her reassurance, she sees the evening, imagines it stretching before her—she, sitting with John while he eats, talking quietly about her garden and the good news from the European front, and John, comforted by the news and the soup, gradually relaxing, able to get through another night, another day.

After the briefest pause, "Good-bye," Amelia says.

Within the strong bonds of friendship between these two East Texas women there are carefully drawn boundaries that must not be breached. When Bucy left, Amelia had asked,

"What would have happened if John had come to your door first? A blind date? Do you suppose—?"

Plucking a grocery list from the kitchen table and Amelia's questions from the air, "Let's go to the grocery store. Get our shopping done early," Grace had said quickly, strengthening a barrier, redrawing a line. But in the small neighborhood grocery (bread on one side of the aisle and canned goods on the other), Grace had imagined an eighteen-year-old girl, herself, in a white dress, running to answer the doorbell, opening the door to John—tall, blue-eyed, dark. And John, laughing, teasing, "I'm selling magazines, ma'am. Can I interest you in a *McCall's*? *Redbook*? In me?" And she, recognizing (a preternatural recognition) that here—in his arms, this!—is home, would have stepped through the doorway into John's arms. And in that single golden moment, she would have fallen in love with John, rather than slowly, sensibly (she tells herself this), through the long years.

"Grace, four cans of asparagus! I didn't think you liked canned asparagus," Amelia had exclaimed, calling her back. And she, astonished by her asparagus-filled basket, had laughed, "What could I be thinking of!"

John, that's what! Amelia had told herself. And since Grace's husband had gotten on a train and gone to New York with never a word to Grace or anybody else, Amelia kept her thoughts—*always impossible, completely inappropriate*—about her best friend's marriage to herself.

However, Amelia feels free to give certain kinds of advice: "Grace, you ought to get out more." She says this frequently.

But where in an East Texas town does an abandoned wife go? Grace wonders. Although she is not expected to climb upon a funeral pyre, she is psychologically shielded by the mystery of abandonment, the *awfulness* of it. For why would a man do that? Cold Springs asks. Just up and leave his wife! And one so pretty!

But Grace keeps her counsel about the *whys* of her hus-

band's leaving, and John is there, next door. She is consoled by John's presence in the house next door, comforted by long summer evenings overhung by pewter-colored skies and John's telling of this or that trial and laughing at his own foibles, solaced by autumn's ripeness followed by the smell of pines drummed into the cold, crisp air by winter rains and the three of them before a bright fire in the Appleby dining room and, now, a new spring with the hyacinths and daffodils, the plum and peach trees once more in flower.

Listening to the evening news, Grace hears that guerrillas have killed four hundred Nazis near Mount Olympus in Greece and that the Germans in retaliation have shot 317 citizens at Messina. And our boys are still on the beach at Anzio, desperately fighting to gain a foothold. *Oh, God, this horrible war. Let it be over soon*, she prays.

When the soup is done, she goes outside to watch for John. She sits under the oak tree in the swing that John, under Anna's close direction, had hung for her. Clouds have rolled in, big cumulus clouds, the lowest one darkening, and it is this cloud, growing ever darker as it sweeps across the sky, that brings the wind. Thunder rumbles distantly. Over her head the huge branches of the oak lift and sway, propelling her back to her childhood. As a little girl, on just such a day, she would climb up into a tree as high as she dared, reveling in the wind that tossed the branches about.

She stands and, hands on her hips, gauges the height and the distance between the swaying branches. *Could she climb this tree? Now? Maybe.* Kicking off her shoes, she puts a foot on the swing, holds the chain by which it hangs, and then, grasping the highest limb she can reach, she sets her foot upon a strong, thick limb and pulls herself up. Turning to sit snugly against the trunk, she is immediately caught up in the revelous frenzy of the leaves.

Watching the branches tossing in wild abandon all around her, she thinks: *If he were to see me now, what might he say?*

"Move over. I'm coming up there with you." Or holding up his arms: "Jump! Come on! I'll catch you."

She stays in the tree until she hears the phone, runs to answer it. John is calling from the hospital, his words so closed off, so choked by grief, she barely recognizes him. "The doctor says Anna will die tonight." His voice, sandpaper tearing, coming harshly from his throat: "Grace, could you—?"

"I'll come, John. I'll come right down," she says, but when she gets to the hospital, John has gone.

She sits outside Anna's door, knowing her friend is on her last journey. She listens to the staccato sounds of the crisply ticking clock, watches the sun dapple the brown linoleum floor. *"Glory be to God for dappled things."* She thinks of apples at the A&P and oranges. Lemons. Traps! Her mind veers away from Anna, trapped by death, on the other side of the shiny gray door.

Sometime later—who knows how long?—the nurse appears. Her look sweeps the waiting room. "Where is Mr. Appleby?"

"I don't know."

"Mr. Appleby's been drinking."

"Mr. Appleby's been suffering."

There is no compassion in the nurse's voice. "Mrs. Appleby is dead."

"I'll tell him."

Both houses are dark when she turns into her drive. She calls Amelia.

"Poor thing," Amelia says. "Two years is too long for anyone to suffer. How's John?"

"He's anesthetizing himself right now, or was. I'll take over some soup when he comes home."

When John has not returned by nine o'clock, she takes a tray—the soup, hot cornbread, fruit cocktail—to the gallery table. She eats slowly, listening for the sound of John's car in the drive.

When he has not come by eleven (*Is he at the hospital? At the funeral home?*), Grace puts on her gown and goes through