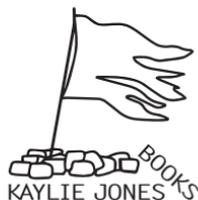


SING IN THE MORNING, CRY AT NIGHT

BY BARBARA J. TAYLOR



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Dedicated to my father, Carl

In memory of all my Pearls

This is my story,
This is my song . . .
—Fanny J. Crosby

PART ONE

*Where Leggett Creek, in beauty springs,
In fair Chinchilla's shade
Where the Red Robin sweetly sings:—
Her holy dust is laid.*

—George W. Bowen

TO REVIVE WITHERED FLOWERS

Fill a bowl with water so hot that you can scarcely bear your hand in it; throw a little salt in the water and put the flowers in immediately. The effect is wonderful.

—Mrs. Joe's Housekeeping Guide, 1909

Widows and spinsters. We're the backbone of the church. Visit the shut-ins, polish the collection plates, wash and iron the baptismal robes. Wrap them in blue paper to keep them from yellowing.

Every Saturday morning we clean the sanctuary. Takes a good deal of water. And elbow grease. Start in the front and work our way back. No reason. Just habit.

Mix a spoonful of kerosene into your bucket. Adds a shine to the woodwork. Glass too, if you dry it with newspapers.

Cleaning's more difficult after a funeral. The family takes the flowers graveside, but you can still smell them. Stronger when it's a child. Don't know why, but we've all said it. We'll say it again soon enough. That's how life is.

Buried the Morgan girl this past summer. Tragic. Only nine years old. The candle of Grace's eye, as we Welsh say. And Owen's, most likely, since Daisy was the first of their two children.

Reverend Halloway preached himself proud. Not easy under such circumstances. Seen better than him fall to pieces while performing a service for a youngster.

Owen too. A rock, if we ever saw one. Patience of a saint. Holding his wife on the right and that other daughter of his on the left. Job himself could not have done better.

Of course, strength like that can't last forever.

Now, Grace, she's another story. Just have to look at her to know. She'll take the easy way out. Go batty, like her mother. Not that we can blame her. Who's to say we'd manage any better? Hope we would, though.

And then there's Violet. Lost her only sister—accident or not. Can't hold a body accountable at eight years old. Probably didn't do it out of meanness.

Makes us wonder is all.

C HAPTER ONE

GRACE LAY IN BED, listening to Violet mill about the kitchen, but for what? Breakfast, that was it. Something to eat before heading off on the first day of school. “I’m her mother,” Grace murmured. “Her mother,” she repeated, pushing herself up, swinging one leg onto the floor and then the other. She heard a milk bottle clank against the lip of a metal cup and pictured the eight-year-old sitting at the table. “I’m *her* mother,” she said again, this time tasting the anguish as it rose from her stomach. She leaned forward, wretched into the pot beside the bed, crawled back under the covers, and shut her eyes. “Lord, forgive me,” she prayed, waiting for the back door to close behind Violet.

An hour later, Grace dragged herself into the kitchen for a cup of tea. Neither the blackberry root nor the quince seed had done much for her dyspepsia. She’d try the spearmint leaves this morning. After putting the kettle on to boil, she stared at the wall calendar—an advertisement for the George Sherman Coal Company.

Cleanest Anthracite in Scranton, PA.

Every miner in the neighborhood had one tacked up in his house. “Sherman’s idea of Christmas cheer,” Owen had

said last December, tossing it on the table along with what was left of his wages, after paying his tab at the company store. Grace had been the one to hang it. She'd waited until noon on New Year's Day, to avoid the bad luck that comes with putting a calendar up too soon.

As if luck were that easy.

As if found pennies or four-leaf clovers could have saved her child.

September 4, 1913. Had it been two months already? Fresh tears started down Grace's face. My Daisy, she thought. It's really true.

When Grace turned, she found Grief sitting in his usual chair at the table. His wasted appearance and blanched complexion always startled her. He had first come to her twenty years earlier, a few days after her father's suicide, just enough time for one so young to grasp the finality of death. Grief would sit on the corner of her bed, attired in a slim gray suit, loose about the shoulders, but clean and ironed. "What's to become of us?" he'd whisper, opening and closing the glass buttons on his shoes with the sterling silver hook he carried in his pocket. For several months, his gangly frame cast a long shadow over her bedroom. "My poor Gracie."

He showed up a second time after her sister Lizzie passed away, and later that year when her mother followed. He'd grown into his clothes by then and had a hint of a beard. And he began coming around again once the miscarriages started. He'd undo his coat and loosen his tie, lingering a bit longer each time. Daisy's birth eventually shooed him outside, and Violet's seemed to have chased him off for good. But he reappeared soon enough, after Rose, Grace's blue baby, died at the hospital. That night he rolled up his shirtsleeves, unpacked his belongings, and made himself at home. She knew then that he'd always return, so she prayed

to have long stretches between visits. Her prayers went unanswered, and now, nine months later, he sat across from her, his hair matted, collar soiled, shirt unbuttoned below a rope of neck.

She shuffled to the sink and started in on Violet's breakfast dishes. *Busy yourself*—Owen's advice when she'd tried to talk to him about her pain. Easy for a man who spent twelve hours a day in a mine. Backbreaking work, yes, but still, it was time away from home. How could he know the torment of changing a bed in the room where Daisy's dresses hung on a bar, waiting for Violet to grow into them? Or the agony of discovering Daisy's favorite hair ribbon wedged between the cushions of the couch?

"He'll never understand." The soothing ripples of Grief's voice lapped against Grace's ears.

She brushed the crumbs off Violet's plate and ran a wet dishtowel across it. "He's a good man."

"Who's gone back to the drink?"

Without turning toward him, she wagged her finger at the reflection in Owen's shaving mirror propped on the windowsill. "You have no proof of that."

"But *you* do. I saw you catch the whiskey on his breath last night."

"You saw no such thing." She abandoned the dishes and slumped into the chair across from him.

He slid his hand toward her, but she did not offer hers in kind. "So be it," he said, as he fished the buttonhook out of his pocket. "But what about Violet?"

"What about her?"

"I'll say it if you won't." He scraped at the sludge under his fingernails. "Violet's the one who killed Daisy. It's her fault. We both know it."

"Those words have never passed my lips!" Grace pounded her fist, knocking an empty teacup off the table. Porcelain

shards peppered the floor. “Now look what you’ve done.” She swept the pieces onto a rag rug, lifted both sides, and shook it into the wash tin. “You’re not wanted here. Never were.”

“Just the same. You hold the words inside.” He pulled out his shirttail, wiped the hook clean, and put it back in his pocket.

“Where they belong.” She set the rug in place and went to the stove to brew her tea. Grace thought about the words, those words, beads of buckshot—solid, heavy, cold. Each leaden syllable primed to explode. All along, she’d been swallowing them whole, choking them down with roots and seeds and leaves.

“Come now. Ease your pain.” Grief pressed up against her back and pecked at her ear. Blood rose to his pallid cheeks. “Blame Violet. Give voice to your heart’s truth.”

Grace trembled at both his touch and his suggestion. I’ll not say the words, she thought. Better to push them deeper into her belly. What if the accusation shot past her lips while she scrubbed floors or sipped tea? *You killed Daisy!* What if she opened her mouth to pray, and fired the words instead? *Our Father, who art in heaven.* What happened to Eve when Cain slew Abel? Did she still love her child?

Grace pulled away from Grief and sat down at the table. “What do you know of me?”

“I know your fears. Your pain.” He tucked in his sullied shirttail and combed his parched fingers through his oiled hair. “We’re two halves of the same whole. Twins, born on the same day, tied together for eternity.” He stepped closer.

“Not another word about Violet, do you hear?” Exhausted, she dropped her head and wept.

“Poor Gracie. What’s to become of us?” Grief lifted her chin and blotted her tears with the back of his hand. “Stay with me,” he whispered. “I won’t leave you.”

A late-summer breeze pushed through the screen door, momentarily rousing Grace to a larger world, one with Owen, and yes, even Violet, and love. Her feet stirred, but her body remained rooted to the chair.

“Let’s do something about that pain,” Grief cooed. Grace nodded but held onto the words. “So much pain,” he continued. “So many tears.” He wiped her cheek again.

Grace leaned forward and pressed her lips against the hollow of his open hand.