



# *Saving Grace*

PENELOPE EVANS

First published in Great Britain in 2007 by  
Allison & Busby Limited  
13 Charlotte Mews  
London W1T 4EJ  
*www.allisonandbusby.com*

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ISBN 0 7490 8075 2 (Hardback)  
978-0-7490-8075-4

ISBN 0 7490 8091 4 (Trade Paperback)  
978-0-7490-8091-4

Typeset in 11/16 pt Sabon by  
Terry Shannon

Printed and bound in Wales by  
Creative Print and Design, Ebbw Vale

PENELOPE EVANS was born in Wales and grew up in Scotland. She read Classics at the University of St Andrews before becoming a criminal lawyer in London. Her previous novels, *The Last Girl*, *Freezing*, *First Fruits*, *A Fatal Reunion* and *My Perfect Silence*, were published to critical acclaim. She currently lives in Buckinghamshire where she combines writing fiction with journalism.

**ALSO AVAILABLE FROM**  
**ALLISON & BUSBY**  
*My Perfect Silence*  
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*First Fruits*

**Other titles by Penelope Evans**  
*Freezing*  
*The Last Girl*

## Prologue

*Author's introduction to Richard Ortega's thirteenth novel.  
(Untitled)*

*Sometimes a writer – if he is a true writer – is compelled to write true. True, that is, to his own experience, to the people and events that have overwhelmed him with the force of a tsunami. A personal tsunami, laying waste a personal horizon, destroying everything in its path, leaving only devastation. When such a force of nature strikes, everything may be lost, and a man left with nothing except what he is. A man.*

*But how much of a man?*

*He may, if strong, be left physically standing – as I am standing. But what else of him is there? What of his humanity, his trust? His ability to have faith? **His ability to love?***

*These of course are the true qualities of a man, and if they are lost, then he must ask: can he, by his own measure, still call himself a man?*

*There is an answer. A writer's answer, and it can be found in the words of The Master. For it was Henry James who said: 'try to be one of those writers on whom nothing is lost.'*

*In this, as in so much else, I intend to follow his lead. This book has been written true to that lead. I have written true.*

6 PENELOPE EVANS

*Which means that these pages – though a work of fiction – will be the test of whether the qualities that Make the Man are indeed, even now, to be found.*

*Is this writer still a man? The reader must be the judge. Is he a man still able to have faith in his fellow man? A man able to forgive? Is he, above all, still able – still willing – to love?*

*Out of the darkness has he, in truth, brought forth light?*

**Note to self # 1.**

Maybe better to attach the above as introduction to *second* edition. Although, of course, before then Publicity (hopefully) will have done its job. Everyone will know the full history behind the book. Terrible traumas et cetera, et cetera. The chance meeting, the hounding that came after, the threats, the stalker who never goes away. The woman who never goes away. No need to dwell, not in the introduction. But v. important to make sure there's an *up* note. Goodness prevails and all that.

No, on second thoughts, attach to first edition. Reader's got to know there's light at the end of the tunnel. Don't want anyone to be put off buying the fucking thing.

**Note to self # 2.**

'*Tsunami*'. Like it. Never really used to hear it much. *Tidal wave* – that's the expression we all grew up with. Sounds positively old-fashioned now. No, tsunami's good. Gets it across better, the damage it can do. Complete destruction.

Tsunami's good.

So where was I?

Damn. Lost the plot.

## Chapter One

*Grace.* Gracie when young. By the Grace of God. *Disgrace* (rarely). Good Grace (often).

Grace had always tried to be good and happy, even when she was a little girl. And shut out bad thoughts.

But the thought hit her now, the way thoughts so often did hit her. That's to say with the force of an invisible hand thrust against her chest, stopping her, freezing her to the spot. This time it happened when she was halfway down the stairs with her husband's shirts in her hands, gathered out of the laundry basket. A week of them, all smelling of him. Familiar. Familiar as her own scent.

Was it something to be proud of? Knowing she could have divided an entire laundry-load of their clothes, with her eyes bound and her hands tied behind her back, just by using her nose. Two piles. His and hers. Is this what it had done for her, being married so long to someone? Given her the talents of what? A sniffer hound?

Yet she had never scented anyone else on him, not in all those months.

It had never occurred to her: that she should have, could have, smelt anyone else lingering on her husband's shirts. It was only now, in retrospect, when it was all over, that she

8 PENELOPE EVANS

marvelled at how it was she had never lifted the scent of another woman off her husband's shirts and translated it as meaning to her brain. She had never smelt anything but him. Yet he had worn nothing else next to his skin. He had never been a vest man. And she had never guessed.

Now, motionless on the stairs, she knew why. It was because he hadn't been wearing his shirts. Not when it happened. He hadn't been wearing anything at all. He had been naked. Completely. With *her*, the other one. If Grace had been determined to seek the scent of another woman, she would have had to bury her face in her husband's skin, not his shirts.

The invisible hand pressed harder against her chest. She had to tell herself to breathe.

And so she did. Grace took a breath, pushed away the hand and carried on downstairs, through the kitchen, into the utility room, to the washing machine. On the way, she stepped past her son putting an empty bottle of milk back in the fridge, and her daughter frowning over the buttons of her mobile phone. Neither of them seemed to notice her and, still heading for the washing machine as if it were some distant goal, she had the feeling she had simply passed right through them like a cloud of particles through solid bodies.

Grace. Good Grace. How had it come to this?

She put the shirts into the washing machine, pushed the buttons and left them to drown.

Yet it was over. Simon had stayed with her. If she were to bury her nose in his skin now, she would smell nothing but Simon. Her friends had been gentle when she told them it was finished, and not one of them had said what Grace

*Saving Grace* 9

knew they were thinking. How did she know?

Well, she did know. Simon had taken weeks to make up his mind, mulled over his decision, weighed up the pros and cons. She had watched him – frowning, considering, comparing. He was an accountant and she had imagined his mind turned into a tally sheet, divided into columns of profit and loss. Her good points versus her bad. Life with Lucy versus life with her.

And when, almost embarrassed, she had suggested that really such a decision could not be made while they still shared a bed, he had retreated to the loft conversion, to the empty but quite comfortable spaces beneath the eaves. There was a bathroom up there, and a kitchen. Even a small sitting room. All of it prepared for another kind of life, for when the children were grown up, but not quite ready to leave home. An in-between place.

All the same, he had seemed surprised that she had put him there. As if it had been one of the children that she had edged towards the outside of the family circle, before they were ready to go. It was that very surprise that had been the clue for her. In his – Simon's – ideal world, everything would have stayed the same. He wouldn't have had to make any choices. He could have carried on, safe in the centre, venturing every now and then into the outside like a teenager. In an ideal – no, make that a *perfect* – world, he would even have been able to bring Lucy home to meet her. The way he had brought Grace home to meet his mother.

*So that's what I am*, Grace had thought to herself. *His mother*. And deep down inside her, still there, sixteen-, eighteen-, twenty-year-old Gracie had giggled with shock.

But that's where he went to make up his mind, to the loft;

10 PENELOPE EVANS

ideal for a man not quite ready to leave. Not quite ready to stay.

One evening, late at night, he came down and called her name from the door. She had put down the book she was reading (tried to ignore the mental image of his mother putting down her sewing) and waited.

‘I’ve decided to stay,’ he said. ‘With you. If you’ll have me.’

She touched the pages of the book. ‘Why?’

‘Because of the children. I know they’re older now, but they’re still children. They still need me. And I need them. And because of *us*. All these years we’ve been together, all that history – I don’t want to let it go, Grace. Not for something that’s come out of the blue like this. And,’ here he had hesitated. ‘And I love you, of course. But you’ve always known that.’

He had stopped there, making no effort to elaborate, to explain the nature or the quality of that love. The depth or the shape of it. Nothing.

‘I want to stay, Grace. And I won’t see her again. Not in *that* way. It’s over.’

Suddenly she was too tired to look at him. Instead her eyes had sunk to the book lying on her lap, to meet the eyes of the author staring out of the back cover. Dark eyes, quizzical and amused. Eyes older than Simon’s, that seemed to understand exactly what was going on, and were asking her now: *is that all? Is that all he has to say to you?*

That was all. But if nothing else, she knew Simon and his decisions. When he made up his mind, he meant it. If he had said it was over, then it was over. Finished. And so, slowly, she had nodded. He nodded in turn and stepped into the room,

*Saving Grace* 11

came and sat beside her on the sofa. For a moment neither of them said anything. Then he shifted in his seat, awkwardly, to remove something hard from under him, and came up with the remote control. He frowned at it and for a terrible moment she was afraid that he was about to turn on the television.

But he didn't. He put the remote down and felt for her hand, still not looking at her, and there they had sat for hours, hardly speaking, waiting for the world to settle back into its familiar places, like an animal home from the vet's.

But what had *she* done before and after the time Simon had been pointed to the loft to make up his mind, in those weeks when Simon was absent, but never in the way he should have been?

She had been able to hear his footsteps in the night, his voice murmuring through the ceiling as he talked to *her*, the other one, on his mobile phone. Still there, appearing for supper and breakfast, talking to the children, putting his shirts into the dirty wash. Still assuming he was part of the circle which included her.

What had she done? At first, in the very beginning, she had done nothing. Not for days, a whole week. Grace, good Grace, had been stunned as a female ox. Hardly human, she thought later. Her brain had ached from trying to make sense of it, and then shut down. Every night she had cried herself to sleep and woken heavy-eyed. Then she had got up to make breakfast and school boxes for the children.

The children. The next shock had been through them. Simon had left it to her to tell them, knowing she wouldn't

12 PENELOPE EVANS

paint him too hard. And she didn't. Robert, who was sixteen, had actually laughed. 'You mean, he's been...you know, *doing it...at his age?*'

'Shut up, Rob,' Anna, fifteen, had elbowed him. But even her face, pretty and peachy smooth, was uncreased. 'Must be terrible, Mum, really terrible.' She reached out a hand. 'Don't worry though. It's just a phase. You know what men are like. It doesn't mean anything, that sort of thing. It's you he loves. He'll realise it for himself, you watch. They all do, sooner or later.'

Grace had stared at her in wonder. *Where was she finding the words?* Then it came to her – it was all culled, syllable by syllable, from *EastEnders* or *Holby City*. Some soap where people were having to comfort each other all the time. Where couples were having TV weddings one week and slamming doors against each other the next. Another week, and it would all be different again.

So Grace had nodded, just to keep within the script, and immediately felt better, more human, knowing there was a part she could play. Simon came home that night, and his relief was palpable when he looked at her. The smudged out, blank look had vanished from her face. She was wearing make-up. There was a proper supper in the oven. Everything was back to the way it was before the bomb had dropped, when weeping and drunk with guilt he had confessed all to Grace, unable to live with himself until it was off his chest – and loaded onto hers. The only thing not the same was that then she had pointed him upstairs, to the bed all made up in the loft, the in-between place.

The next evening they had even gone to a dinner party

together and nobody guessed. Grace drank a little more, and Simon drank a little less and at least two people commented on how well they were both looking.

Home again that same night, with the sounds of Simon rolling over heavily in the bed above – the loft was proving to be anything but soundproof – Grace had stared at herself in the mirror. Forty years old. Slimmish. Darkish. Small breasts, still high. Small hands. Small feet...

Then she had started to cry. She couldn't see herself. Her face was a blank, her eyes good for nothing except to stop her walking into doors. She could find not one distinguishing feature. She knew if she came across her double in a crowd she would walk straight on by without even noticing. Yet she remembered a time when she had been as vain as Anna was now, searching for and welcoming her reflection wherever she found it – in shop windows, car mirrors, even the reflecting lenses in the sunglasses of old boyfriends.

Not now. She could use the mirror as an inventory, ticking off the nose, the mouth – slightly too large, the curls – still brown, the fine lines above her brow. Put it all together, though, and it fell apart as if some necessary glue had stopped working. And the reason that she cried was because if *she* couldn't see herself, then how could she expect Simon to see her?

How long had she been invisible? She hadn't even noticed.

And then it was all over. Simon had come downstairs, she had put down her book, hiding the picture of the author with his quizzical stare, and they had held hands.

Lucy (*say the name*) was still there, working in the same

14 PENELOPE EVANS

company as Simon, his exact equal in position and pay; but even that wasn't anything to dwell upon. Simon had made up his mind, and he had told her the reasons. Because of the children, because of all the history they shared. Because he loved her.

'I'm back, Grace,' he whispered to her that night as they climbed into bed. And he was. When he slept, which he did easily, Lucy's name never crept out of him in a dream. When they made love, which happened occasionally, rather formally, he looked directly into her eyes, so she knew she had all his attention. He bought her flowers, and left holiday brochures for her to browse through.

'You choose, Grace.'

Over. They were both agreed.

And that's what she had tried to believe at first, in those few days after he came down from the loft. But then, she was forced to acknowledge what she always knew. This wasn't the end; it was the beginning. The thoughts kept hitting her, even when she wasn't thinking. Stopping her, like now, halfway down the stairs with her arms full of shirts, because she had finally made the connection about why she had never smelt a woman on her husband's shirts. One thought after another, waiting in line to ambush her. How could it be the end, when the aftermath was worse than the actual event? Back when it was all happening, when Simon had still been maundering in his loft, she had had a kind of energy. After the first paralysis, there had arrived the adrenaline of shock to keep her moving. She had used the few close friends she needed to confide in – especially Tamsin the lawyer. She had signed up for an IT course. She had kept busy. She had even detected – in those

rare nights when Simon was not overhead making his presence felt – a kind of shiver, a curiosity about what might happen next, where she would end up. A first ripple of excitement of a new life.

But most importantly, she had had the book, the one she had been reading (re-reading) when Simon came downstairs and told her he had decided to stay. The book with that face on the back cover, whose eyes had quizzed her own, and asked *is that all?* as if the eyes' owner had been the only person in the room who knew that she needed to hear more, so much more.

Not a book she would have picked up for herself. Deborah had pushed it into her hand one night. 'Give it a go, Grace. We read it in book group. The others hated it but that was all Tamsin's fault. You know how she always gets people thinking her way. But I thought it was brilliant. It's...' she searched for the word she wanted '...empowering.' She pronounced the word, triumphant. 'Completely empowering.'

Which was, Grace noticed, the very word printed down at the corner of the cover, a quote from *Cosmopolitan*. *Empowering*.

The cover itself was a study in light, with a naked, seated woman shown sideways in silhouette, arms wrapped around her legs. In the small triangle between her arms and her body the sun flared and blazed as if she was the channel.

'*The Maid And The Magician*,' she read the title aloud.

'Richard Ortega – he always uses titles like that,' sighed Deborah. 'Sort of mysterious. His first one was called *The Hierophant*. I didn't even know there was such a word until I read the book.'

'I see,' said Grace. And she thought she did. Deborah was

16 PENELOPE EVANS

one for the self-help books, for remedies. Deborah tried to comfort her with Indian head massages and made Tamsin snigger with her crystals. Deborah was kinder than anyone she knew.

‘You know, it’s a little hard to concentrate. Just at the moment.’

‘Try it anyway, Grace.’ Deborah was pleading with her, desperate to help.

She had picked the book up at three o’clock in the morning. Upstairs under the eaves, Simon’s mobile phone had beeped. Not that it had woken her. She hadn’t been sleeping. Nobody was sleeping, it seemed to her – except Lucy’s husband, which must be the reason she was phoning Grace’s husband now.

She lay in bed, trying not to hear Simon’s voice. Yet she couldn’t help but see him, murmuring into the phone, propped up on pillows, his hair tousled. He was a man who had grown better looking as he had grown older. Probably Lucy would never have looked twice at him when he was twenty-five and fresh-faced and single. Middle age and marriage suited him. Football with his son had kept him sleek and muscled. His daughter’s friends fancied him.

And now here he was, his voice rising and falling, filtered through the ceiling when he was supposed to be absent. Grace stuck her fingers in her ears, pictured herself stamping upstairs to demand that he not be talking to his mistress here, under this roof. Or any roof. And she pictured *her*, Lucy, smiling into her own phone at the sound of a jealous wife making demands. Enjoying every second, hands playing with the lace on her negligee.

She had to be wearing a negligee. Grace was wearing pyjamas.

*That* was the moment, the very moment in which to sink or swim, and Grace knew she was about to sink, dragged under by pyjamas and tiredness and betrayal, by the sheer weight of self. As if on a far bank she had a glimpse of other selves, images of sixteen-year-old Grace, twenty-year-old Grace, watching her go under, their firm young faces mystified that it had come to this, that here she was, sinking under nothing but her own weight.

Ashamed, Grace looked away, turning from the bank to what was closer to her. And her eyes fell on the book and the picture of the woman with the sun shining through her. As if it were a straw floating past she clutched at it and let her fingers find a page. Wild and dim, her eyes slid over the first sentence of the first chapter.

*There once was a man who looked at women. Really looked at women. When he gazed into their eyes, he saw the girl inside. Never mind how old a woman, never mind the years that greyed her hair and parched her flesh – never mind all that, he looked and he saw the girl, shut up like a captive princess behind the face that betrayed her. He looked at her and his glance was like a kiss, and set her free.*

*To see like that – it was both a blessing and a curse. When a woman feels a man's eyes, intuitively she knows what he is thinking, even if she cannot admit it to herself. This is the way of the world, the way of women. This man had only to look and instantly a woman would know: something magical was happening. Her soul would laugh and leap like a salmon inside her, waking up to the memory of being alive and being*

18 PENELOPE EVANS

*young. And so, naturally, women fell in love with him. All of them. Every woman that he looked at.*

*And here is how a gift can be a curse: when a woman falls in love with a man, she imposes on him a duty. A woman's love is a precious bind and when a man is thus bound, he must vow never to harm, never to hurt. But how can one man be so dutiful when all the women in the world are in love with him?*

*So he did the only thing he could honourably do. He looked away. He bound his eyes – not with scarves or ties but with careful sideways glances, guaranteed never to meet anybody's eye. Naturally people saw this and took him for cunning, untrustworthy and shunned him. And so it came about that the man who could have made every woman in the world love him was alone. Lonely and without comfort...'*

Grace read this. She knew that if she had come across these lines at any other time, she would have tossed them aside. Even now she could imagine Tamsin with her dry laugh, snorting over *precious bind* and *captive princess*. Another time and Grace might have laughed too. But not this time. Not tonight, when her husband's voice continued to filter through the ceiling, and whose eyes next morning would glance at her and see only what she had become: invisible. With a mind's eye full of someone else, he wouldn't, couldn't, see the Grace inside.

Yet she was still there. Twenty-year-old Grace, who tried to be good but very often was attractively bad. Who, twenty years ago, had smiled at her reflection before walking over to the man standing at the edge of the party, and kissed him on the lips, simply to laugh at his surprise. Twenty-year-old Grace knew she could have kissed any man in the room. But then she

had kissed him and smelt him. Smelt *him*, and she was lost. And Simon, well, he had been hers from that moment on. Young and fresh-faced and single – now he was bound to the girl who had unsingled him, rescued him from the party’s edge and brought him into the centre, where he had stayed.

What had happened to that girl, to twenty-year-old Grace? *He’d* know, the man in these pages, the one who looked at women, really looked at women. He would have looked at Grace, wrapped up in pyjamas and years, and he would have seen *her*, the Grace inside. And here, Grace’s aching heart almost burst. He would have honoured her love, with all its *precious bind*. He would not have hurt her.

And that was the reason she read on, page after page, hour after hour. Simon must have stopped talking into his phone, rolled over and gone back to sleep. But Grace didn’t hear. The man who looked at women, *really* looked at women, worked his magic in the world, despite himself. Because a gift is a gift, even when it’s a curse, and this was his destiny – to take a woman who had been betrayed and find the girl inside, curled up in a ball. And give her back to the woman who had lost her...

Dawn was staining the bedroom wall pink as Grace turned the last page. In the final paragraph a woman walked towards a town, her footsteps firm on the long straight road that lay in front of her. Behind her, in a monastery cell, a man lay exhausted, tended by monks, who murmured over their tasks and filled his ears with the sweet honey balm of prayers. He was blind and he would never have to look at another woman. Yet neither would he now be lonely or without comfort. For the road the woman walked, that seemed to take her further with every step, was in reality no more than a

20 PENELOPE EVANS

thread, binding them together so they would never fall apart.

Grace put the book down. At the same moment the morning sun slid across the wall and touched her eyes. She sighed. And then sighed again with surprise, aware that something had changed. Wide awake, she felt touched by more than just light. She lay in bed and tested herself. The heaviness that had been set to drag her down and drown her – it had almost all gone. She felt different. She felt...she felt...

...She felt like a girl again. That's what she felt. If only for that brief moment as the sun slid across her eyes and flooded them with light. Then, above her in the loft, she heard Simon snore, and she blinked as sense and memory hit her. A man who saw the girl inside – it was nonsense. The whole story was nonsense. No wonder Tamsin had laughed, and made every one else laugh at it too.

The heaviness descended harder than before. Tiredly, cynically, Grace turned over the book to look at the author. And saw *him* – Richard Ortega. Dark eyes, slightly hooded, looking out of a face where the lines were deeply etched. Warm eyes, watching and quizzical, with a hint of humour in them. A playfulness. Eyes that might meet your own and touch something deep within. Eyes that wanted to understand.

He was the one who had written about a man who could see. As if such a man could actually exist, in the same way that in olden days dragons and mermaids and dog-headed birds could exist, simply because someone had named them and thereby made them real. He was the one who made *him* possible – the man who could see the girl inside and give her back to the woman who had lost her.

*Saving Grace* 21

Grace stared at those eyes. Then, instead of trying to snatch an hour of sleep before the house woke around her, she turned to the front of the book and started to read, all over again.

Of course, it couldn't last, the magic of the dawn light coinciding with the ending of the book. But it had given her something that couldn't be taken away now. Not even when she caught Simon's eyes resting on her, puzzled, as if half wondering who she was, perhaps wondering if she was anyone at all. She had caught the children looking at her like this often, suddenly afflicted by the suspicion that she might be someone in her own right. Only to shake themselves out of it.

But the book had reassured her. Somewhere there was a man who knew that inside every woman was a girl, who was nobody's mother, not even her husband's. He, the author, might not have the gift of sight himself, but he had written about a man who did. He knew such a thing existed. Grace gave the book back to Deborah without saying much, but then quietly went and bought a copy of her own. And all the time Simon was in the loft, mulling over the direction of his future – and therefore her future – she kept it close to hand. She didn't even have to read it. There was the picture on the cover, with the author's eyes, playful and questioning, looking deep into her own.

It carried her through the dark days. Her rock. Her safe place.

But then Simon had come downstairs and suddenly the book couldn't help her, not any more. The affair was over and Simon was back. Yet nothing could stop the thoughts hitting her and freezing her. Thoughts of shirts and smells and things he had never said.

22 PENELOPE EVANS

Simon was staying. She should have been happy, and she wasn't. Not remotely. He was staying because of the children, because of their history, because he loved her in some way that he knew better than to specify. And her one grand, overriding thought was she wanted him to stay for none of these reasons. She wanted him to stay because of *her*. Because of the woman she was now. But it was no good because Grace knew the truth. She didn't even have to put it into words; the truth hit her anyway, like a hand thrusting against her chest.

If Simon were to set eyes on her now, for the very first time – forty-year-old Grace – she knew that despite the slimmish figure, the small hands and feet, the brown curls, the still high breasts, despite the warmth she felt for him, and the (now shy) desire that reached out to him, none of it mattered. If he met her for the first time now, he wouldn't see her.

He wouldn't look twice at her.

The knowledge was there, it never left her. Even with her face pressed against his shoulder, breathing the warm, familiar, accountant smell that was his. Back in her bed, waking to the radio in the morning, turning off the light at night. He seemed more lost to her now than he had been when upstairs murmuring into his mobile phone to his mistress. She knew what he could see, and what he couldn't see.

Poor Grace. Good Grace. Trying to think good thoughts and block out the bad. And failing. Simon had made up his mind and now her energy had gone, the adrenaline was gone. There wasn't a book in the world that could help her. And this was only the beginning; she understood that now, better every day.

It would have been easier if he had died.