

Sacrament

by Michael Boylan

Jack's baby woke up most of the house before the sun came up, but Grant was already awake, kneeling beside his bed and praying. He had said his prayers the night before and he had prayed again two other times when he woke up during the night. He asked The Creator for the same thing each time.

"Please let my blood be worthy, Lord Father God," Grant said repeatedly in a hushed whisper. He said this prayer dozens of times over and over, adding one more every time he thought he was done. He worried that he would invoke God's wrath by asking too many times and then wondered if he wasn't praying and humbling himself before Him enough.

He heard his mother's steps creak over the floorboards on the way to his room before she gently knocked at the door.

"Grant," she said tenderly but loud enough to know she had been heard. "It's time to get ready."

"Yes'm," Grant said, standing on the opposite side of the door, his head resting on the cool wood. He felt sick but knew it was just nerves. He had felt the same way before he had asked Helen Carter's father for her hand in marriage. When he heard his mother make her way back down the hall, he fell to his knees once more.

"Please, Lord Father God, I beseech thee to make my blood worthy enough for the sacrament of marriage."

Grant got ready for the ceremony on unsteady legs. He looked in the mirror in his bathroom and continued to search for a clue as to whether or not he would be accepted today. His faith had deemed him a man three years ago and ready to receive the message of love from a woman. It had taken a long time before Grant was sure that the Creator was pointing him towards Helen. Still, he worried that he had misinterpreted God's message. He had seen other boys make it all the way to the altar only to find out that they were not meant to be with the ones they had chosen.

Grant could not be like them. He did not want to live on the old farm

and be treated as an outcast, nor did he want to hang himself in shame as several others had over the years. He tried to place a smile on his face before he went downstairs to face his family, but he kept catching sight of the haunted look in his eyes and the painted on smile turned into a grimace.

As he descended the stairs to the kitchen, he could smell the feast that his mother, sisters and sister-in-law prepared and his stomach rumbled with pangs of hunger. Upstairs he had been feeling sick, unsure that he would be able to keep anything but water down today, but now, surrounded by the smell of butter soaked biscuits, strong coffee and the sweet, smoky scent of cured bacon and sausage, Grant thought he could eat for hours.

"Here he is, the man of the hour," Grant's father said heartily, standing up and patting his son on the back. The rest of the family stood, too, all wearing bright smiles and offering their congratulations. Grant pulled his chair out from the table and bowed his head, ready to hear his father's blessing.

"Lord Father God, Creator of all that is good, thank you for the bountiful feast that we are about to enjoy today and may it nourish my youngest son, Grant, on the day that he asks for your blessing in the sacrament of marriage. May it make his blood strong enough to please you and sustain a family of his own."

"Amen," the family replied, raising their heads and taking their seats. What had been a quiet and solemn affair, now took on the air of a party. People spoke over each other, laughing and passing plates around in a well-choreographed dance. Grant, still dazed by the enormity of what lay before him, was moving slowly, so his sister, Margaret, placed a helping of everything on his plate, while his mother poured him a cup of coffee, mixing in the amount of milk and sugar that she knew Grant liked. He thought of how Helen did not know any of the things that his mother knew about him and worried that their life together would be one of confusion, anger and resentment.

"Eat up, little brother" Jack called out from his end of the table.

"The food will make your blood dance. It will be eager to mix with

Helen's."

Grant thought this was just another of Jack's tall tales, but he picked up a strip of bacon and took a large bite out of it.

"Smaller bites, son," his mother scolded. "You do not want to choke to death on your wedding day."

Ever the worrier, Grant proceeded to chew each bite of food until it seemed to melt in his mouth. He took large sips of coffee to make sure that no food would get stuck in his mouth and cause him any problems later.

Although Grant tried to prolong breakfast by taking third and fourth helpings of eggs, his father eventually called an end to the meal and told his sons to meet him outside by the chopping block.

"Ah, the secret meeting," Margaret said, winking at Catherine, Jack's wife.

"If Jack is any example, your father is a very good teacher," Catherine said. Mother clucked her tongue and the two girls giggled as they gathered dishes and brought them to the kitchen.

Outside, the day was beginning to grow warm. The insects were awake and starting to fly about and hum.

"You are nervous," Grant's father said to him, placing his giant hand on his son's shoulder, steadying him and drawing him close.

"Yes," Grant admitted softly, casting his eyes down to the ground, ashamed.

"Not about your matrimonial duty?" Jack said, alarmed that his brother may not be ready to shed his virginity.

"No," Grant shouted, hurt that his brother would even think that.

"About the test. What if our blood doesn't dance together?"

Grant's father grunted. "That won't happen."

"Can you be so sure?" Grant asked.

"I can." Grant's father stated adamantly, his gaze strong and commanding, locked on to his son. "It has never happened to a Yarbrough man and it won't happen today, either."

Grant's legs began to quiver at the thought of being the first man in his family to fail the blood test. He feared he would fail in front of the entire community and bring shame upon his family. Grant

thought of the men who had failed the blood test and understood why some of them had given up on living.

"Be strong and sure of yourself, son. The Creator smiles on His children who are sure of His love and their faith," Grant's father said warmly. "When your bride looks in your eyes, show her the strength that you will bring to your lives together."

Jack clapped Grant on the back, making it sting as he had done since they were boys.

"The test and the ceremony are over before you know it," Jack assured his brother. "Soon enough, you are learning the ways of the world and raising your own son."

"Deep breaths," Grant's father said, noting that his son still looked pale and overwhelmed. He tapped Jack on the chest. "Let's move the women along."

Grant walked aimlessly around the property, trying to calm himself down and think confident thoughts. He knew that Helen loved him. She had told him so on several of their walks around the community's lake when they had briefly separated themselves from her sister who had been serving as their chaperone, even going so far as to plant, tiny, furtive kisses on his lips in the shadows of some of the large trees. He wondered whether or not that love would be enough.

Grant glanced back towards the house and saw his family, all decked out in their finest garments, ready to walk towards the church. Jack jogged in Grant's direction.

"It's time, little brother," he bellowed in a deep and grim sounding voice, laughing at his joke. Grant was having trouble remembering how to swallow. He took a deep breath and slowly walked towards the church in the center of the village.

As he progressed down the lane, Grant could see the other families making their way to the church. The men nodded and waved at Grant's father, several approaching to shake his hand in congratulations. Grant wondered if it wasn't too premature and if they weren't jinxing the outcome. The ladies mingled in with Grant's mother and the women and children in the family, commenting

pleasantly on their clothes and bonnets, or the bouquets of flowers they held.

Grant shuddered and walked to the edge of the path, bending at the waist and placing his hands on his knees. Jack saw his brother stop and gestured for his family to go on. He quickly ran to his brother's side.

"Do not get sick," Jack hissed through gritted teeth, as if he were still trying to put on the appearance of a smile. "And stand up."

Grant took shallow breaths and wiped a string of spittle from his lips. He looked at his brother and saw the boy that had put him in headlocks through much of his youth and had tormented him into jumping from the top of the barn into a pile of hay and breaking his ankle.

"I don't think I can do this, Jack," Grant said, nearly sobbing. Jack pulled his hand back as if to hit him and Grant flinched.

"You love Helen, don't you?" Jack asked.

"Yes," Grant stated firmly. "I'm just worried that the Creator will deem my blood unworthy and I will end up on the old farm."

Jack laughed and started to walk away from his little brother.

Grant's face flushed with embarrassment and anger. He walked after Jack, reaching out to turn him when he got close enough.

"What is so funny about that?" Grant asked.

"Do you even know how the blood test works?" Jack asked. "Don't you know the trick?"

Grant shook his head, panicking that he didn't know the trick and hadn't prepared, dooming himself to failure.

"You won't fail the blood test and neither will Helen," Jack said. "Our father and her father have made an agreement. They have signed a contract and Reverend Cole served as a witness."

"But, how can they be sure?" Grant interrupted.

"Shut up, will you," Jack said. "My God, you are a ninny sometimes. For families who make an agreement, their blood is placed in the goblet, for people who are incompatible in the community, another mixture is placed in the goblet. One that sinks."

Grant got dizzy and steadied himself on the trunk of a nearby tree.

"Incompatible?" he asked, pondering what that meant and who decided who fit in that category.

"People who are mentally ill or infirm, women who are unable to reproduce, men who have revealed themselves to have unnatural proclivities," Jack explained. "It doesn't happen to families like ours, because we are healthy and we have a lot to offer other families. We helped Catherine's father build a cottage for his son and let them farm on a parcel of our land, in exchange for giving me his daughter's hand in marriage."

"And what did we give to Helen's father?" Grant asked, with an unsteady voice.

"I believe her father asked for livestock," Jack said. "Several cows, a horse and a jackass for a son-in-law." He playfully punched Grant in the arm.

"Doesn't love play a part in this at all?" Grant asked, sad to see his belief structure cracking before him.

"Of course it does," Jack said. "If you didn't love Helen, you would have never asked for her hand."

"Does Helen know about the agreement?"

"No," Jack stated in a strong voice. "And you must never tell her. It is the man's duty to protect the woman's belief that the Creator chose you specifically for her."

Grant took yet another deep breath and exhaled loudly.

"Now, little brother, are you ready for your blood test?" Jack asked, his easy grin back on his face.

Grant nodded and followed his brother up the road and to the door of the church.

Grant looked confidently upon his friends and neighbors and smiled at his brother, who walked up the aisle and took his place at the right of the altar. He followed Jack and shook the hand of Reverend Cole when he arrived.

The three men faced the entrance of the church, waiting for Helen and her family to begin their processional. Grant looked at his mother, who smiled with pride at her sons, and nodded at his father, who returned the gesture with a brief smile as well.

Grant focused on the song being played by the organist and how sweet the melody sounded. It was a song he had heard hundreds of times in his life, attending the weddings of his fellow parishioners, but today, it was if it played just for him and his wife. His heart fluttered at the thought.

The song ended and the silence made everyone stare at the entrance, looking for Helen Carter. The crowd murmured to each other and Grant broke out in a cold sweat. He turned to his brother, looking for comfort, or at least an answer. Jack walked quickly back down the aisle and out the door. Reverend Cole patted Grant on the shoulder.

"I'm sure it is just nerves, my son," he said. "She'll be here soon." Now, looking back at the crowd that he had gazed at so confidently minutes before, Grant could see several of them shaking their heads and whispering to each other. Grant desperately wanted to sit down, but thought that if he did, he would collapse and never be able to get up again.

Jack came back in to the church and walked up the aisle once more. Instead of going directly to Grant, he gestured for his father to come with him and went over to Reverend Cole. On top of the mind-numbing panic that he was feeling, a hot under current of anger charged through Grant's veins. Why wasn't he allowed to know what was going on?

And yet, in a way, he did know. In the weeks leading up to this day, Grant and Helen had not talked much, but their eyes had been opened. She had seen the truth of what her life would be like. Their stolen kisses were not enough to build a lifetime on, not here and not now.

As the town gazed at him with pity in their eyes, Grant started to cry softly, realizing that whether she was alive or not, Helen Carter was gone.

