

an Ellis Island novel



# GRACE'S PICTURES

CINDY THOMSON

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*Grace's Pictures* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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*Seek his face evermore.*

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# I

DECEMBER 1900

“May I take your photograph, miss?”

Grace McCaffery spun around. She had passed through the inspections without a problem and was on her way downstairs, where she would meet the aid society worker. What now?

“A photograph?” A man stood smiling at her, next to a large camera. She’d only seen one of these machines before, and that was on the ship.

“Why?” She bit her lip. Was everything about to fall apart now?

“For prosperity. It’s your first day in America.” He handed her a small piece of paper. “My name and address, should you later wish to see it. It will only take a moment of your time, and then you are free to continue on.”

*Free* sounded good. “What do I do?”

“Stand under that window—” he pointed toward one of the massive windows—“and look this way.” Streams of late-afternoon sun shone in through the ornamental ironwork, tracing odd shapes on the tiled floor.

She did as he asked.

“Now look up, miss.” He snapped his fingers. “Look toward the camera.”



Her eyelids were iron weights, but she forced herself to look his way, wanting to get it over with.

After she heard a slight pop coming from the camera, he dismissed her. "Welcome to America!"

*America!* Ma should see Ellis Island and all the people milling about. Grace sat down on a bench just to the right of the stairs to collect the thoughts rambling around in her head like loose marbles. Imagine, a girl like her, now free in America. She would not have envisioned it herself a few weeks ago. Exhausted, she dropped her face to her hands as she relived what had led her here.



"Must go to the workhouse." Huge hands snatched wee Grace from her bed. "Your da is dead. Behind in your rent and got no means."

Grace kicked with all her might. "Ma!"

An elbow to her belly. Burning. She heaved.

"Blasted kid!" The policeman tossed her onto a wagon like garbage.

"Ma!"

"I'm here, Grace. Don't cry." Her mother cradled her as the wagon jolted forward. "Oh, my heart. You are special, wee one. So special to God."

Heat emanated from the burning cottage, the temperature torturing Grace's face. She hid against her mother's shoulder.

Later, they were pulled apart and herded into a building.

A dark hallway. The sound of water dripping.

Stairs. Up the stairs. Following other children. So many children. Was her mother dead?



The sound of heels clacking down steps brought Grace back to the present. She sat up straight and watched hordes of people march down the stairs. They were divided into three groups according to destination.

She knew her mother had loved her, but God? Her mother had been wrong about that. God loved good people like Ma. Not Grace. Grace knew she was not good enough for God.

So many of the people passing in front of her were mere children, most with parents but some without. Grace wondered if they were as afraid as she had been when she was separated from her mother in the workhouse, the place Irish folks were taken to when they had nowhere else to go. All these people now seemed to have a destination, though. A new start. Like her. In America she hoped she could mend her fumbling ways and merit favor.

A wee lass approached the stairs with her hand over her mouth, the registration card pinned to her coat wrinkled and stained with tears. Grace was about to go to her and tell her everything would be fine. After all, this great hall, this massive building, was not in Ireland. They were in the land of the free. They'd just seen Lady Liberty's glowing copper figure in the harbor, hadn't they?

But the lass, obviously having mustered her courage, scrambled down the steps and into the mass of people. Would the child be all right? No mother. No parents at all. It had happened to Grace. Free one day, sentenced by poverty the next.

She pulled her hand away from her own mouth. In the workhouse she'd had this nightmare and cried out. She'd been whipped.

Not now.

Not ever again.

She struggled to remember the song her mother sang to her at bedtime. "*Thou my best thought by day or by night . . .*" She couldn't remember any more of it. She'd forgotten. The truth was, she didn't know if everything would be all right.

She rose and followed the orders she'd been given right before the photographer had approached her. Down the steps to the large room where the lady from the charity would meet her.

She rubbed her free hand along the handrail as she walked, barely able to believe she was in another country now, far across the Atlantic Ocean. If it hadn't been for the miserable voyage in steerage, the stench from sweaty, sick passengers that remained even now, and wobbling knees weak from too little food, she might believe she was dreaming. Had it really been just a few weeks ago when she'd sat opposite the workhouse master's desk and twisted the edge of her apron between the fingers of her right hand as he spoke to her?

"Eight years you've been here, Grace," he'd said.

"Aye." She'd stopped counting.

"You are a young woman now, with some potential to be productive. Yet there is no employment in this country of yours. Nothing you can do." He was British and had little patience for the Irish.

She'd held her head low.

"And so, Grace, you've been sponsored to leave the workhouse and go to America." He dipped the nib of his pen in an inkwell and scribbled, not looking up.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"America. You leave from Dublin in two days. I've got your papers in order. And this." He pushed an envelope toward her.

She remembered that at the time she'd worried about her fingernails when she'd held out her hand. She looked at them now. Grime on the ship had taken its toll. The master would not like that.

*He is not here.*

She touched that very same envelope now, crinkled in her apron pocket. It contained the name of the ship, the destination, and at the bottom, *Sponsored by S. P. Feeny.*

She mumbled under her breath. "Ma married him for this." To provide a future for Grace.

The line of people moved slowly. Grace sucked in her breath. Not long now.

"Mama!"

She turned and watched a red-faced lad scurry down the steps and into the open arms of his mother, who reprimanded him for wandering away.

Grace had begged to speak to her own mother the day the workhouse master told her she was going to America. He hadn't sent for her because her mother was no longer an inmate, but a free woman married to that lawman, that peeler named Sean Patrick Feeny.

But Grace's mother had come anyway, not to the workhouse but to the docks.

"Hurry along," the immigration worker urged her now.

Grace thought about S. P. Feeny's note again as she entered a room packed with people. Not knowing whether the charity lady would need to see it, she reached into her pocket and pulled it out. She glanced around and found a vacant spot on a bench.

"Wait until you hear your name called," a man in a brown suit said to the crowd.

There were more workers in that place than she expected. In Ireland only a handful of employees kept the inmates in line. She reminded herself again that she was in America. *People care about folks here, now, don't they?*

She opened the note and reread the part at the end, the words her mother's husband had scrawled there.

*Your mother wants you out of the workhouse. With no other options, I have arranged for you to go to America, where you will find work and no doubt prosper. Pin this to your dress for the journey. It is the name of a man my connections say will take good care of you in New York and arrange a job. I have written him to let him know when you will arrive.*

*S. P.*

The immigration official upstairs had told her not to expect this man to meet her, but rather someone who worked for him, mostly likely a woman from an immigrant aide society. "Don't worry," he'd told her. "They'll have your name."

As much as Grace wanted to crumple up the paper and toss it away, she dared not. Following directions had been essential to getting along in the workhouse, and she had no reason to abandon that thinking now. She had managed to survive back there, even though she was apart from her mother, who had worked out of Grace's sight until she got married and left the workhouse altogether. Surviving was a victory and perhaps the best she could have hoped for then.

She glanced down at the writing again. S. P. Feeny was a peeler, a policeman, like those who tore Grace and her mother from their home when Grace was but ten years old. Grace had

thought her life was as good as over when she heard about the marriage. But now she was in America.

She blinked back tears as she thought about her unknown future. What if her father had been right when, so long ago, he'd told her she needed him to survive, could not do it alone? His death had forced them into the workhouse, and she had survived without him then, hadn't she? But now? Now she really was alone and she was not sure she could endure. And yet, she must.

She mentally rehearsed her instructions, the ones Feeny had written down. She'd done what she'd been told so far.

Now she was supposed to wait. But how long?

Running her fingers down her skirt to wipe away perspiration, she hoped she would not say the wrong thing when this stranger claimed her. Would they understand her in America? Did she speak proper English well enough? As much as her stomach churned, she mustn't appear sick, even though the doctor had already hurriedly examined her along with her fellow passengers. She'd heard stories. They sent sick people to a hospital and often they were never heard from again. Perhaps they executed the ones who didn't die. Or they put them back on the ship to return to Ireland. As bad as it was facing an unknown future in America, at least there was hope here that could not be found in the workhouse. So long as they let her stay.

She glanced over at a family. Mother, father, son, and daughter clung to each other. They would make it. Together they had strength. Grace had no one.

Soon a crowd of tall men jabbering in a language she didn't understand entered the room. Grace squeezed the note in her hand. As much as she didn't want S. P. Feeny's help, she'd needed a sponsor to start this new life. She had no choice but

to trust his instruction. *If there is one thing a policeman like Feeny knows, it's the rules. Whether or not they abide by them is another matter.*

"Where you from?" a tawny-haired lass sitting next to her asked.

"County Louth." She thought it best not to mention the workhouse.

The girl nodded.

Good. She didn't seem to want to ask anything else.

After a few moments, sensing the girl's nervousness, not unlike her own, Grace gave in. "And you? Where are you from?"

The girl sat up straight. "County Down."

"Oh. Not far." Grace swallowed hard. They were both far from home.

An attendant stood on a box and raised his voice. "Mary Montgomery? Miss Mary Montgomery, please."

The girl next to Grace stood and went to him.

"I'm afraid there's been a mistake, miss."

A brief moment later the lass was gone from the room. Escorted off somewhere. Grace turned to the men seated behind her. "Where are they taking her?"

They shrugged. Only one of them met her gaze. "Don't be worrying, lass. Could be she's in the wrong place. Could be her family didn't come to claim her. Could be 'bout anything, don't you know?"

Grace tried to breathe, but the room felt hot and noisy. "*You can do this,*" she heard her mother say from the recesses of her mind.

In the workhouse, everyone was the same—wore matching gray uniforms, used identical spoons, slurped the same watery stirabout, marched together from dining hall to dormitory at

the same exact time day after day, month after month, year after year. It was a routine she could count on.

She glanced around at the faces near her. Square jaws, rounded chins. Black hair, locks the color of spun flax. Brightly colored clothing, suits the color of mud. So many differences. And so many tongues. Where she'd come from, there had been no question of how to act, what to say, who to look at. But here?

She turned and kept her eyes on her feet and the trim of the red petticoat her mother had given her to travel in when she'd met her at the docks.

*Oh, Ma!* When Grace had been able to look into her mother's green-gray eyes, she found assurance. On the ship, Grace had tried to emblazon her mother's face on her memory so it would always be there when she needed to see it. She'd even sketched her mother on some paper with a charcoal pencil another passenger gave her. She had the sketch in her bag with her meager belongings. Not much, but all she had now.

*"Thanks be to God." "God have mercy." "God bless our souls." "The grace of God on all who enter." . . .* Her mother never failed to acknowledge God. She was a good woman. The best. Grace was so far away now from that umbrella of assurance.

She focused on the immigration official calling out names. Survival was human instinct, and humans adapted. She'd learned to do it once before. Perhaps she could manage to exorcise her father's voice from her head, the one that told her she was incapable, and actually make a life, a good life, for herself in America.

Grace's mother had held her at arm's length when they said good-bye on the docks in Dublin. She'd rubbed Grace's cheeks with her thumbs. "The best thing for you is to go to America. You are not a child anymore. I could not let you stay in the



workhouse. Don't I know how hard it is for a grown woman to keep her dignity there."

Grace had tried pleading with her. "Take me home with you. I'll be polite to S. P. . . . I promise."

But her mother wouldn't hear of it. "There's no life here for you, Grace. Fly free, Daughter. Find your way. 'Tis a blessing you can go."

Grace had told her mother she couldn't do it. Not alone. Not without her.

"Listen to me," her mother had said, tugging Grace's chin upward with her finger. "I don't care what lies your father once spoke to you, darlin'. To us both. Pity his departed soul that he left us with no choice but the workhouse. But promise me you will not think of the things he said to you. Remember instead this: You are smart. You are important. You are able."

If she could prosper as her mother had asked her to, then perhaps her mother might choose to come to America too, a place where she would not need S. P. Feeny. Grace would make it happen. Somehow. She had to. Her hands trembled as she held tight to her traveling bag.



Grace's face grew hot. She lifted a shoulder to her chin, hoping her embarrassment didn't show. She didn't want to speak to a peeler—or whatever they called them in America. But she was stuck, shoved into a hot electric-powered car with more people than she thought it should safely hold. The man had addressed her and asked her a question. She had to respond. She spoke toward her feet. "I am well. I come from County Louth."

The large man leaned down toward her. "You say you are from County Louth, miss?"

“I am.”

“Is that so?” He let loose a low whistle. “My people come from Tullamore. We might be neighbors or cousins or something.”

The woman with Grace, who’d introduced herself as Mrs. Hawkins, chuckled. “You’re all cousins, love, all of you from ole Erin.”

Grace was no kin to men like that, and if she were, she would disown them straight away. *These are the men who force poor families from their homes and send them to workhouses the minute they can’t pay rent.*

There was a lull in the conversation as the car pulled them through an intersection. She heard the peeler’s breath catch. She dared to look at him. He was staring out at the street. He did not seem formidable at all and perhaps was even a little uneasy riding on the streetcar. Odd, that.

Grace glanced back down, studying the shoes surrounding her, trying to focus on the future instead of dwelling on the past. She was in the “Land of Opportunity,” after all. She hoped not to associate with folks she didn’t care to.

She clutched the bag containing her treasured drawing pencil, wee pad of paper, and a small card bearing the address of that Ellis Island photographer, Mr. Sherman, who had taken her photograph.

## A Note from the Author

NOW THAT MOST EVERYONE carries a camera-equipped smartphone, snapping a candid photo is commonplace. But at the turn of the twentieth century, amateur photographers taking pictures on the street was an alarming novelty. A comment in a contemporary newspaper opined about how this new invention might invade privacy. At the affordable price of only one dollar, soon everyone would have a box camera. So I wondered, *What if someone took a photograph of a person who did not want his picture made? What could happen, good or bad?* After I determined that I wanted to write about an Irish immigrant struggling to make her way in the huge city of New York, the germ of the idea about the Brownie box camera began to work on me.

The Brownie camera was a marvelous invention during a time when many of the modern conveniences we enjoy today were being created. What an exciting time it must have been. But for the streams of immigrants coming through Ellis Island (the ancestors of many of you reading this), it was also a scary time to be in New York—corrupt police, greedy tenement owners, various dangers from those preying on naive new arrivals. I've often asked myself how our ancestors survived at all.

I love research, and I value accuracy and honesty, so I must note here that I've taken a couple of liberties with the historical record. I hope readers will allow me these slight manipulations of the timeline. First, the John Ericsson statue in Battery Park was not erected until 1903. After spending some time in Battery Park, I admired the statue and imagined Grace pondering it, wondering why it was there. There are several statues and monuments in the park today, but at the turn of the century this one must have stood out. So I decided to include it, even though my story takes place in 1900–1901. Second, historians note that Ellis Island was closed after a fire in 1897 and did not reopen until December 17, 1900. I've stretched that a bit to allow Grace to arrive a couple of weeks earlier than that.

If you've never been to the Statue of Liberty or Ellis Island, I hope you'll consider making the trip. You will come away, as I did, with a greater appreciation of the sacrifices scores of immigrants made to come to America. Work is still being done on Ellis Island to restore some of the buildings and to maintain the museum. To learn more and perhaps become a part of the effort, visit [www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org).

When I imagined how difficult life was for my character Grace, I admired her for fighting against the negative voices from her past. I know there are many people today who struggle with the results of emotional abuse. My heart goes out to them. Overcoming such adversity requires a drive to grasp for an anchor. I can think of only one worthy anchor. At first Grace did not know it was Jesus Christ she was searching for, but she saw the light of Christ in others and reached for it. My hope is that you and I will continue to shine that very same light so people like Grace will find the anchor they seek.