

*A Gentle Peace*

*A Susan Rodgers short story*

*September 2015*

\*\*\*

Callused fingers are immersed in the ceramic biscuit bowl when Stella Grace's ears pick up the first hint of change. Gripping the trusty bowl's dusty milk-yellow edge ever tighter with the other hand, her knuckles pale like the doughy mixture she shapes in time to the whim of the gasping breeze outside. Her right hand is the one submerged in the flour, baking soda and salt, and in shortening and this morning's fresh milk too so that the homey ingredients have melded together. She's making him biscuits because she knows they are his favorite after long hours mucking about in the barn. Almost every day she tosses handfuls of flour into the same bowl for her man. It's been a few years so she has stopped measuring with cups. There is no longer a need.

Strong shoulders pushed back and stubborn chin thrust forward, from where Stella Grace stands on the worn linoleum she can almost see him in the barn's open doorway or, if not him exactly, then she at least spies the wild dust motes surging loosely forth from the straw he is forking into the loft. The useless particles dance on the thirsty breeze, rejoicing at newfound freedom, as they are flung forcefully into the endless blue sky of a blistering Prince Edward Island summer.

When first she hears the new sound, a distant and unrelenting hum, it triggers a momentary lull in her pre-dinner routine. The low steady undertone tickles her senses, igniting a tingling thrill that traverses up and down her legs, but then a wild higher pitch seems to join in as the mysterious object moves closer, teasing her with unsure promise and an unbidden slightly sour taste - fear. To her the mingling sounds are an exclamation – *I am here*. Yet they seem unsteady, as if whatever vessel they're powering lacks the will needed to keep body and soul afloat.

She relaxes a little. The confusing hum is evolving into a steady purr. It isn't a threat. It is just a machine, albeit a strange one, appearing from the cobalt blue above. It's unusual for these parts. It's 1922 - a dry and lonely post-war world.

Now the buzz is almost above their small farm, at least close enough to startle Cletus, the weathered old Clydesdale Jack picked up at auction after old man Harris did a nose dive into his red earth last spring while patiently laying out boundless rows of potatoes. Cletus reacts like he does when thunder threatens, throwing up his great head and tossing his wiry mane anxiously from side to side.

She lowers her shoulders and squints out the window, watching in awe as, in preparation for landing, a small biplane approaches the fallow field yonder. Like the fearful horse, Stella Grace can almost feel the stifling, ominous presence of a black cloud overhead. Out of habit she looks up above the plane but sees only infinite blue. Not even gentle white mares' tail clouds line the sky with promise. Yet the interloper seems to carry its own supercharged blue current, as if it contains some almighty power to jumpstart a barren land.

She shivers and, through her plain farmhouse window, watches the small aircraft bump its way to a halt.

Trembling now, she molds and shapes the biscuit dough as she's done a thousand times before. She lays it on the soiled oilcloth as always, flattens it with her mother's pockmarked wooden rolling pin, and then she cuts out round mounds with the slightly dulled edges of a well-worn tin can. The floury circlets emerge frayed.

She sees the plane in the distant field but the edges of her vision are blurred. The craft is out of place in her and Jack's field, a strange apparition she has yet to define. Pausing for a second time, Stella Grace glances to her right, sucks in a breath and grasps at a new memory, freezing it, willing time to suddenly cease altogether. Her husband has stepped fully into her field of vision now, his rusty three-pronged rake resting on the dry ground, its sleek wooden handle now only loosely held in his strong grip as if the arrival of the strange airplane on his small farm has cast away its need.

She tries not to notice what she knows he disdains everyday – worn leather boots ingrained with layers of dried red clay so imbued in his workdays that there is no hope to ever loosen their laborer's grip on him. His frayed denim overalls don't matter to Stella Grace, nor does the plaid cotton shirt with patches sewn tenderly onto the elbows, which he has rolled hastily up over forearms bulging with tanned farmer's muscle.

Flour still dusting her small hands, she hesitates. Her husband, Jack, has his back to her. He is lingering with his feet a hip's width apart on the hungry soil she knows he despises. This is the first time in forever that she has seen him stand so lightly, shoulders almost forward as if he is poised and ready to run, but unsure, his grip loose on the rake handle as if with the slightest provocation he might let it go.

She knows time has not been easy on this man. While he was home on wartime leave five years ago, they married in a diminutive whitewashed church in the cozy farming village of Kinkora. Yet they are still childless. Often she sees a confused loss flicker deep inside Jack's eyes, like a weakening beacon from a fogged-in lighthouse. Sometimes she wonders whether he wants a child of his own to love or just a robust young male to help out on the farm. He doesn't say. He will never say. Jack is a quiet man. But he is disciplined and works hard, as hard as any man in the area with cattle to feed and chickens to butcher and potatoes to plant.

He takes her down the violet lupin-laced hill to church on Sundays. He hitches up the clapboard wagon summers and winters with n'er a word of complaint, wraps furs snugly around her hips when the frigid cold invades her body, and carries her sweetgrass picnic basket on summer Sunday afternoons so she can catch up on her sister Jana's news. She thinks he likes to watch her play with Jana's toddlers on the crazy quilt she sewed last winter from their work-worn clothes; she lays the quilt carefully out on the beach and anchors it against the hot winds with burdening chunks of heavy sandstone.

She finishes cutting out the biscuits before she starts wiping the drying goo off her hands. She is anxious to join the men - her husband and this stranger who planted himself on their land as certainly as the crop of cow corn Jack forced into a field a few months earlier. She watches as, with an easy alacrity, the pilot of the old biplane leaps out of his craft. With a sideways grin, he is sauntering casually towards Jack. She squints harder so as to better see him. He's tall, and walks with a casual elegance that makes her wonder if he's come from money.

Dousing her tired hands under water, Stella Grace quickly wipes them with fragrant soap rendered from the lavender patch on the farmhouse's south side. She twists her fingers around the cotton apron that earlier, in the promise of the day's crackling dawn, she buttoned at the neck and waist. She forces her gaze downwards before scuttling across

the barnyard, and doesn't pause by the sun-bleached red-iron pump as she usually would so as to pacify her husband's thirst. Suddenly she has a plan. It's come on the spirited wind smack dab in the center of a sultry summer day.

She sees the pilot – Michael, she soon learns - clearly now. He has shaken hands with Jack and they are conversing quietly.

*Michael.* The name, murmured softly under warm breath, tastes clean and pure, water from a well.

She grew up in an Irish community. His name means 'gift from God.' She savors it again.

*Michael.*

He is slightly thicker than Jack, not quite stocky, just athletic. Powerful. Instead of wispy windblown hair like her husband's, Michael's is reminiscent of the old Irish – wavy, curly overtop his ears, unmanageable with a comb. The men's eyes are dissimilar – Jack's are sensuous, soulful, a faraway blue like the unceasing sky that kisses the center gabled rooftop of their butter-yellow home. A flashing twinkle in Michael's eyes hints at a wild essence within. A gentle warm brown, almost faded in the hot burnt sun, they are open, playful.

"I'm a barnstormer," he tells them. "I bought the biplane after the war. It was surplus inventory of the U.S. Army. I travel here and there, take kids for rides..." He drifts off, unsure.

*You're running, hiding,* Stella Grace surmises, her eyes flitting up and down Michael's apt form, taking in the reckless way he tosses a big hand through unruly curls. *Wandering aimlessly, like so many other vets who are trying to outrun the horrors their women overhear in the deep of night when secret terrors emerge from breathless prisons.*

She has long been relieved because her husband does not relinquish such agony to her, ever, not even in his restless sleep. Jack is not running. She dismisses the plain-faced fact that her husband hardly speaks at all.

Now, something alights within her soul when Michael lets his gaze settle on her. She focuses on his large hands instead of losing herself in those sad - yet spirited - eyes.

Jack turns part way around when the stilted conversation with Michael sidles to a wistful halt.

*Stella Grace.* He lets his wife's name furrow itself deeply inside his mind. He likes the way it always hangs there, soaring above the regularity of his days toiling around their small acreage, as if she is a ghostly talisman worth fighting for. Stella Grace is a beacon of hope suspended above incessant sludge infused with a ceaseless ache.

The worth of Jack's wife is apparent in the mirror of the young pilot's eyes now. It is easy to see why Michael's affecting gaze has settled on Stella Grace. Despite the flour on her apron and spotted here and there in her honeyed hair, Jack's wife exudes a wholesome charm. The small print on her cotton dress does not hide what Jack knows are strawberry stains from her morning's quest to bottle enough tasty jam for next winter. The bottles, like dead soldiers, are all lined up on the kitchen counter now, neatly wiped and oozing promise, awaiting storage. She is dutiful. She takes good care of the two of them.

Stella Grace's lips are full and sensuous, and from them emerge only words of kindness, never complaints. Her spirit and her body are always willing when Jack needs her under the lush cry of a full moon. Now, his heart leaps as she anxiously twists a loose strand of hair and places it behind one ear, leaving a trail of white dust. His soul aches with the remembrance that he cannot give her a baby. He knows she yearns for one though she is too kind to say. He sees the lingering longing when she's watching her sister's children frolic in the white sand.

"Want to see her? Jenny?"

Michael forces the invitation between his lips, for no reason other than to end the unsteady stillness that seems to have silenced the men upon the hushed, hesitant arrival of Stella Grace.

The pilot leads the quiet couple towards his plane, which seems to have settled happily in Jack and Stella Grace's field. Sunlight bounces gaily off its wings so that it appears radiant, as if it is soaking up and storing energy for a long flight ahead. It is a faded Red Baron red with patchwork repairs here and there throughout the wings and body. On one lower wing lie Michael's discarded aged leather helmet and goggles, as if they are lazily in repose, sun tanning on this stifling midsummer afternoon.

“It’s a Curtiss JN-4 biplane. The design’s been adapted a bit from the original Jenny the U.S. used to train up the army during the war. It has new ailerons on all four wings, better rudder control, stuff like that. But she’s a beauty, ain’t she?”

Michael hums proudly and, with his sleeve, wipes a spot of red clay dust off the top wing, as Jack eases his way around the plane, cobalt eyes flitting here and there, his ruddy hands brushing a wing, the tail, the edge of the cockpit. He tiptoes around, his boots barely making land, his exhalations short, steady and sure.

Stella Grace watches him, her own breath held. Her husband is touching the plane intimately, igniting a delicate shiver that graces her skin, teasing pores that cry out for release. A tiny gasp escapes her lips as she watches the touch she craves tremble and caress a body that isn’t hers. The vignette engenders an eerie feeling in Stella Grace as she stands silently, obediently, watching her man revere this new thing, this strange airplane. She shakes the trepidation away and focuses on Michael, who is watching her with an air of forced, yet almost eager, detachment.

“I made biscuits,” she says simply, recovering her usual gentle poise and lighting an age-old yearning in his eyes with a shy lowering of her head so that the white-dusted strand of sun-kissed hair escapes and tickles an apple-blossom cheek.

Michael nods soundlessly when she says simply, “Stay.”

Then he turns to Jack and intones casually, “Trade you a night’s lodging and some of your pretty wife’s biscuits for a ride in old Jenny here.”

That night Jack makes love to his wife. There is something urgent about the way he handles her atop the quilt she pieced for them when she was fourteen, back in the buoyant days when she dreamed of a future husband, and marriage, and children to crawl in underneath for midnight snuggles.

A pale moon heeds their cries and washes their spirits with its translucent glow. Jack calls her name when he succumbs and lets his body go.

“Stella Grace!”

His voice is tender and raw, layers underneath it seething with pain, and in later years she finds herself remembering that night of lovemaking above all others. She questions why Jack’s cry the day the plane took over their land was the closest he ever came to revealing how he truly felt about her.

Now, she lies beneath him on the fraying quilt, above the vibrant fabric bars of the age-old log cabin pattern. She fingers the small squares, each centered with a tinier red square that Stella Grace knows represents the cozy central hearth fire of every home.

She takes Jack's muzzy tired face between her delicate work-worn palms and gazes longingly into anguished eyes. For once, he doesn't look away. She wonders whether this is the time children will start to come, because tonight feels different. Maybe by some magic they are both relaxed enough for conception to occur - because of Michael's visit and Jack's plane ride and, somehow, Stella Grace's homemade biscuits and jam. She does not know that her husband is memorizing her features; that he, too, has a plan. Michael will teach him to fly in return for lodging in Stella Grace and Jack's barn. She doesn't know that Michael's need to stop running is Jack's cue to start.

Stella Grace's biscuits are dreamy. Their tender lightness ease Michael's ache and remind him of a pre-war childhood when melted butter and honey soothed a lot of hurts. Jack's wife's presence alone is soft enough to ease Michael's yearnings. She has a way of filling a room with a quiet knowing that could settle any man's frayed nerves. She is a gentle peace rooted securely in home.

All that burnt summer Michael teaches Jack to fly. Stella Grace is soon able to discern nuances in the engine that seem to equal Jack's moods. He is a man of few words, but somehow that old army surplus plane speaks for him. On rainy days, when he can't fly, he is sour and spends his days hidden in the barn, if only to protect Stella Grace from his bitter disposition at being grounded. His lovemaking is affected, unsatisfying – impatient. Hurried. At the supper table his eyes are downcast, his meal consumed in seconds. He seems only too happy to sit back and let his wife and Michael carry on their careful dialogue, to gossip about the Irish in the village, about the expected yield for the fall harvest, about the new priest at the little white church.

Only on sunny days when the work is done – cows fed and milked, fences mended and crops cared for – is Jack animated. He sings when he works because he knows he can take Jenny out for an afternoon spin. Michael and Stella Grace fall into the habit of sipping iced lemonade on the verandah and teasing old Cletus who bays in warning at the purring of the aircraft's engine as Jack spins and swoops above, gaining confidence daily as he encourages the biplane into dramatic barrel rolls and dives.

The better he gets at handling the little plane, the further Jack withdraws from his wife. Stella Grace watches his retreat with courage but a trace of sadness seeps into her soul and then, just when despair seems about to overtake her, Michael steps in.

Dinner is bubbling on the wood stove – a hearty Irish stew steeped with vegetables from Stella Grace’s garden, which she weeds faithfully despite the record-breaking crackling heat of that tempestuous summer. The biscuits won’t be put inside the oven to bake until Jack lands Jenny in the far-off field. He likes his biscuits fresh and warm and she plans to ensure that despite the child she seemingly still cannot give him, she can at least compensate by caring for him in other ways.

This day is fresh and soft. Earlier, a thunderstorm crashed through their farm before easing off and veering east. The dried up August grass is still dripping, misty and steamy in the ongoing heat of the day when Jack hoists himself lightly into Jenny’s cockpit and tumbles down the grassy field before launching himself into a welcoming sky.

Aching for his touch, Stella Grace sighs when, her eyes closed and the purring of the far-off engine in her ears, she feels a new tremor on her bare skin. She can barely breathe but she doesn’t protest. Michael’s fingers are gentle, slow, reassuring. Jack’s lately are always rushed, desperate, almost pleading. Michael’s voice, to a lonely young woman longing for connection, is comfort, a simple untethered benediction. It is deep, throaty, sensual – not unlike that of the plane when Jack lets it head towards home, when he allows it to consider rest.

Michael urges Stella Grace into the barn and to the cot where he lays his head each moonlit night. He lets himself caress her before letting go of himself entirely, because he knows she is that sort of woman. She is special, a delicate flower, unlike the other married women whose skin he lit with his touch. He teases Stella Grace with his tongue and begs her to reach a threshold where she will desire him fully, where any logic or voice of dissent will not get in the way.

Jack has the young barnstormer’s airplane, for now, but Michael has Jack’s woman. And on both counts, for some unspoken reason Michael knows this is utterly and perfectly fine.

The affair continues because there is something Stella Grace wants. And when she is finally sure, she pushes Michael away. On her and Jack’s anniversary, after the harvest is



in and the night stars glitter and tremble with a threatening frost, she asks Michael to take their worn out truck and go off somewhere for the evening. He stares sadly at her before he lets his gaze waver and his shoulders stoop on his long walk towards the door. Stella Grace is so excited she pushes away any compassionate thoughts towards her lover's feelings. She rushes around the homey kitchen's geometric linoleum floors. She sets the table with her wedding china, The Old Mill, and then from a distant cupboard she digs out a chipped vase into which she inserts a small bouquet of the season's last remaining wildflowers. She tenderly places biscuits in the oven the moment she hears Michael trundle away down the laneway, the pickup protesting loudly at the same time Jenny, responding to Jack's caress, undulates happily on the breeze and steadies herself towards home.

She tells Jack during dinner.

"We're having a baby."

Stella Grace wraps her fingers around her husband's but she doesn't dare look up. She brushes his calluses and thinks about the frayed overalls and the cracked leather boots. Her heart swells with pride for this hard-working man and she envisions their future together, children and then grandchildren, Sunday dinners of roast chicken and fresh vegetables, Christmases and church and lazy days on the beach as waves crest again and again in their unrelenting pursuit of each other.

Jack smiles. She doesn't see his face but she warms to the peace that bathe his simple words with light. "Well, then."

She is used to his brief utterances. Stella Grace is composed. "We'll call the baby after your father if it's a boy. Or after my mother if it's a girl."

She refuses to let go of her husband's fingers and so he lets her hold him. He nods, waiting her out, and forks up a carrot with his left hand.

It seems assured then, their future. She is certain. She tidies up the dishes with a confidence she hasn't felt for most of the long, dry summer. Jack dozes quietly on the verandah, his dirty boots on the rail and his patched elbows resting on the arms of a worn Adirondack chair. When Michael comes rumbling back towards home he parks the pick-up a little crookedly, then joins his student for one last bourbon before bed.

With a newfound poise, Stella Grace settles herself on the arm of Jack's chair and gazes off into the perfect night sky.

"I'm glad you learned to fly, Jack. I wasn't sure at first, but now I'm glad of it."

This time he takes her hand, but only for a moment. He surprises her by letting go quickly, so that her fingers are left almost floating, oddly suspended and alone. He hoists himself out of the deep chair and starts towards the kitchen door. He moves slowly, his footsteps heavy, as if he is unsure about leaving Stella Grace alone with Michael.

Jack turns to his wife. For a moment her heart starts racing. For once he makes eye contact with her and she finds herself whispering, perhaps to herself, "See? It's okay. It's all going to be okay."

She barely hears Jack when he speaks, so lost is she in a fog of sudden worry.

"It's good you feel that way, Stella Grace. It's good."

Then he disappears inside. It is the most he's said to his wife in days. His voice is tired, crackly, but like the plane's engine there is an undertone that is steady and true.

It seems big to her, what he has spoken, and she analyzes his look and that simple statement for days, for years, afterwards. He'd met her gaze and held it, his blue eyes hurting, she thought. Or maybe the ache was placed there by her. She honestly never knows because time, as always, eventually got all murky, like the ocean on a windy day when you can't see bottom no matter how hard you grimace and make faces and beg to see.

When she goes to bed that night he has his back to her and is already snoring heavily.

Saddened, wistful, lonely, she needs to touch him but tomorrow will be another interminable day of getting the potato harvest in, and so she lets her husband's escape into sleep go unhindered.

The growl of the biplane making contact startles her roughly awake. The floor is cold despite the rag rug, and she barely misses the orange tabby languishing dangerously close to her toes when Stella Grace jumps and runs, not stopping to grab the wool socks she discarded at the foot of the bed the night before. She leaps down the stairs and sprints out into the farmyard. It is still night but the edge of the horizon is alight with a soft pink hue, and the glittering mysticism of the stars overhead is fading. Jack was not beside her when she awoke; still, he never takes the plane out for a jaunt until the day's work is done. She

breathes deeply, ever hopeful, but then Michael comes lunging out of the barn, his shirttails hanging beneath stumbling fingers as he yanks his droopy pants up and buttons the fly.

Together they stand, coiled and ready to strike out at – what? - as they watch the little biplane teeter down its bumpy runway, neither of them noticing that they are underdressed for the brisk morning. They are shivering as the night's remaining frost tickles their nostrils.

“Why?” Stella Grace whispers, her tiny nose crinkling, uncertain, as before her Jack steers the biplane toward a pristine dawn.

Michael is silent. This mystery is one the young wife must figure out on her own. But he knows about the lure of the skies, of an endless place to run. To hide.

“Where is he going? Michael?” She turns to him then, a frantic hopelessness and wonder overtaking her usual calm countenance. “We’re having a baby, you know.”

She says the last part defiantly, fists knuckled at her sides as if by saying it aloud this man will somehow believe the baby is Jack’s.

Above them, for a final view of the land that tried to define and bind him to its core, Jack circles Jenny around. He sees his ardent Stella Grace staring up at him, bare foot innocence planted into the frigid soil, fear creasing the sensual lips he used to love to tease. He panics for a moment – just a moment – then his gaze shifts left and he takes in Michael – stalwart, proud, kind, ready to stop running, no longer lost above shifting ground.

The young farmer knows Michael has found what he was seeking, and he knows that he himself cannot have a child. He is sorely grateful to Stella Grace for trying to give him one, but he *cannot* have a child. The farm is enough of an obligation tethering him to the earth. The deep-seeded post-war nightmares are, seemingly, another. A child? No. It is not what he wants, to be tied down and responsible to yet another soul seeking his surrender.

A heavenly observer, Jack watches as Michael steps in silence toward Stella Grace. Earthbound, Michael nods and Jack bows his head as Jenny’s former pilot gently places an arm around Stella Grace’s trembling shoulders.

Stella Grace cries out Jack's name when he turns the little plane into the eastern sunrise, but it doesn't matter. He can't hear her. Jack is aware only of the purr of the sacred engine and the power it has to take him where he needs to go. He can also hear his heartbeat, loud and sure and real and, for once, overflowing with excitement and promise. He dips the patched-up wings in salute and, with the new day's early sunlight marking the way, he whispers to Jenny.

"Take me home, old girl."

Below, Stella Grace and Michael witness the little plane's escape into obscurity. They are both shivering uncontrollably now, and there are cows to be fed and milked, and yet another load of potatoes begging for release from the island's interminable red soil.

Michael digs his toes into the earth and plants himself solidly before Stella Grace.

"Well," he says, his brown eyes gently cascading from dark to light as they settle on Stella Grace's pinched cheeks. "I'll get started on the cows."

He starts to wheel around but she stops him, one strong hand resting firmly on his elbow. The hems of his pants have finally frayed after a season of hard work. P.E.I.'s red mud has seeped into his boots. She knows that no amount of scrubbing will ever get it out. The pink promise of dawn backlights Michael's wild Irish curls as, yonder, the biplane's steady purr is picked up by the breeze and carried away.

"I will make biscuits," she says simply.

He watches her for a few seconds as she tiptoes across the slowly warming earth. An easy grin settles over the day-old beard sprinkling Michael's cheeks. He whistles while he milks the cows as, in the buttery-yellow farmhouse, Stella Grace stokes the fire in the woodstove.

She pauses, turns, raises her head proudly, and begins tossing new flour into the biscuit bowl.

\*\*\*