

GRACE GOES TO PRISON

An Inspiring Story of Hope and Humanity

Melanie G. Snyder

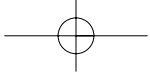


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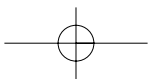
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A portion of the proceeds coming from the sale of this book will be donated to CentrePeace, the non-profit organization founded by Grace Marie Hamilton. CentrePeace, based out of Bellefonte, Pennsylvania, works to decrease victimization and crime in our communities by improving the attitudes and capabilities of prison inmates through productive work and training in job and interpersonal skills. For more information on their work today, visit www.centrepeace.org.



PROLOGUE

Marie Hamilton stared up at the man holding a knife to her throat. Crazy brown eyes glared back. In their brief struggle beside Marie's car, she had landed hard on her back. His intentions were clear: rape. If she struggled: murder.

He had turned into someone she didn't recognize—someone ugly, violent. He was no longer Tony,¹ the natural-born charmer who'd had a room full of Brethren church ladies blinking back tears an hour earlier as he told his story. He wasn't even Tony, the hustler and former prison inmate Marie had taken under her wing.

Her mind churned as Tony ranted. She'd seen rage like this before, but not from him. She tried to focus, to think. To recall something—anything—from the training she'd had in principles of nonviolence. During classes, they'd tossed ideas around like confetti. Now Marie couldn't remember any of them.

Afraid to look away, she searched Tony's face. His eyelids flickered, shifting something in Marie's mind. Suddenly she saw everything as though she was hovering above it. His body over hers. The slump of his shoulders. The tilt of his head. The quivering hand clutching the knife. Movements in slow motion. Unexplainably, she was him. Inside his head. Comprehending. Her own breathing slowed. Time stopped. One confetti idea floated down: disarming statements.

"Do you really want to hurt someone you want to love?" Marie asked softly.

Tony froze. Stared at her. His Adam's apple bobbed once.

Marie shifted slightly on the sharp gravel.

Tony recoiled like someone electrocuted. Leaped to his feet. Cursing, spewing rage, he threw his knife to the ground. He paced the length of the gravel parking lot. Back and forth. Back and forth.

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Cautiously, Marie sat up. Watched him. Smoothed her hair. Adjusted her blouse. When he reached the edge of the woods, she shuddered. *That's probably where they would have eventually found my body*, she thought. She got to her feet. Waited. Foul words spilled out of him.

She studied the lights of State College, winking yellow and white far below. She tried to pinpoint her quiet neighborhood, the comfortable house where her husband and sons were probably watching TV. A breeze rattled the few remaining autumn leaves across the top of Tussey Ridge. A thin sliver of moon dangled overhead.

How *stupid and naïve*, she thought, *to stop here at night with him to look at the view*. It was maybe even more stupid and naïve to stay there, instead of driving away and leaving him behind. But she believed so strongly that there was good in everyone, no matter what evil things they might have done. That belief was what had gotten her through all these years as a prison volunteer. Even when it had proven to be dangerous, Marie refused to give up on anybody.

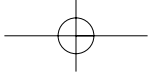
Since Tony had first walked into the Voluntary Action Center, soon after his release from jail, Marie had been determined to see his potential. Even as she'd interviewed him for a volunteer position, when he had admitted that his recent jail term hadn't been his first, Marie saw hope. After all, he wanted to be a volunteer and serve others, didn't he? That had to count for something.

"So, you're a hustler," she'd said to him back then.

He had nodded, grinned a little sheepishly.

"Well, then, why don't I help you learn how to hustle for good?"

And so, Tony had become one of her cherished volunteers. She'd taken him to banquets, civic groups, and churches to tell his story and garner support for her Volunteers in Prison programs. That's where they'd been tonight, before winding back north along the narrow mountain road that crossed Rothrock State Forest. Before stopping here.



Suddenly, Marie realized Tony was no longer pacing—or cursing. He stood a few feet away, staring glumly at the region that locals called Happy Valley. In the distance, beyond State College, a rectangle of lights outlined the complex of the Rockview State Correctional Institution, another of Tony’s former residences.

He finally turned toward Marie. He glanced at her, and then stared at the ground.

Night sounds traveled on the breeze. Crickets calling, nocturnal creatures scrambling in the undergrowth, an owl hooting. And from the streets far below, the hum of cars, trucks, and motorcycles. The sounds of people going about their lives.

“Let me take you home,” Marie said quietly.

Tony nodded.

