

A State of Grace

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Where to begin? Election day 2113 could be a good starting point or maybe my thirty-fifth birthday on 3rd March 2114, when I moved back to the North East from London. But, no, the opening scene of this story takes place on a Monday in June 2118.

That morning I stood in front of the mirror in my bedroom, checking my clothes with almost obsessive care. It wasn't worth taking a chance. My black skirt was three centimetres below the knee, comfortably within the guidelines. It contrasted well with the loose, white jumper I'd bought the previous week. The high neck and long sleeves were as recommended in the most recent edition of the *Feminine Dress Code*.

I ran a brush through my hair, thinking of the words of the *FDC*: 'Hair must be long. God wants a woman to look like a woman'. I resisted the urge to liven up my make-up free face with scarlet lipstick, while wondering if God, should he actually exist, really had time for such trivia.

Going to the window, I looked across the road towards the first prayer group assembling on the far bank of the Loven. As they shuffled along in a ponderous line, their white robes fluttered in the light breeze. As the sun burnt down, they took up their positions at the edge of the river, a mere trickle since the drought started.

'Good morning, Henry,' I called to the heron standing motionless on the gravel in the middle of the river.

The *MiM* contingent pulled up in their camper van and began to unload their banners.

‘Good morning, wankers,’ I said, relieved that I would be gone before they started their chanting.

When I saw the yellow helicopter with the purple G.O.D. logo on its side circling the skies, I knew it was nearly time to go. Then my phone rang.

‘Is that Julia Marston?’ said a man’s voice.

‘Yes,’ I replied, trying to place his accent.

‘Hi, this is Hugh Franklin. I’m a journalist from Montreal. I’d like to do an interview if that’s OK.’

‘An interview?’

Questions ran through my mind. Did I have time? Would it mean more trouble? Whose side was he on?

‘About SPOMM,’ he added.

As if it would be about anything else.

I always walked the three miles to SPOMM’s North East Regional HQ, following the valley, stopping occasionally to admire the Lovendale hills that surrounded me. The pleasure of the country walk disappeared once I arrived in Loventon High Street. The posters for the next public execution, red letters on a white background, screamed at me from walls and lampposts, offering 25% off if I booked in advance.

A crowd of *MiM* campaigners, placards held aloft, had gathered outside the *God’s Own Finance* building on the corner of Sinless Street and Blessed Grove. When they saw me, the fanatics’ voices got louder. The first cat call came from a middle-aged man, suited and booted, red hair with the regulation side parting. A chant from his companions followed each insult.

‘Shameless Harlot!’

‘MiM’

‘Brazen Hussy!’

‘MiM’

‘Murdering Slag!’

‘MiM’

Hussy, Harlot, Slag: such sweet, old-fashioned words. A woman of pensionable age lobbed half a brick in my direction. I ducked, hurrying past them to a cry of *The Sanctified One will be avenged*. Nobody knew who *The Sanctified One* was. Cynics suggested he

was just a bogey man, invented to frighten us into behaving ourselves. Others thought he was the power behind the throne of the government, who made sure they kept on the right track. Or the wrong one.

As I walked on, I wondered what Ralph would say. *I told you so* perhaps. Had I done the right thing? I would have been safe with Ralph, but it wasn't about safety. The words of our last, pointless argument came back to me. Oh, Ralph, I said almost out loud. I hoped he was OK and wished he were with me. Too late now.

At the office two hours later I sat opposite a tall, slim man with untidy fair hair, wondering if I would ever practice sexual freedom again instead of just talking about it.

'So, Hugh, how come you've travelled all this way to talk to me?' I almost simpered.

From the moment he'd walked in the office, it was as though somebody had stuck a needle in my arm, injecting a large dose of adolescence.

'Well, your name's kind of interesting,' he smiled.

'What, Julia?'

Did that sound witty and self-deprecating or would he think I was an idiot? And why was I so keen to impress him?

'Yeah, but SPOMM is an interesting name too.'

I took a folder from my desk and handed it to him.

'Have an information pack,' I said.

'Thanks.'

He glanced at the words on the front cover for a moment before speaking again.

'Safe, legal, fun,' he read out. 'Neat slogan.'

'And true,' I said. 'Anyway, let's start the interview.'

'Sure. I guess I need some sort of background first. When I was coming through customs a big sign greeted me: *Welcome to the Holy United Kingdom. A State of Grace*. What's that about?'

'It's a play on words: The UK is a state, a state of grace is a condition of being free from sin.'

His frown suggested complete bafflement.

'So the UK is free from sin?'

'Who knows? Have you heard what's happening over here?'

‘Yeah, but it’s hard to figure for a Canadian, you know?’

‘It’s not easy to understand for a Brit,’ I said. ‘What do you want to know?’

He thought for a moment.

‘Is it right that SPOMM was founded to, you know, get round the laws passed by your government?’

‘That’s pretty well it,’ I agreed. ‘In an ideal world SPOMM wouldn’t be necessary.’

An ideal world, I thought. Not one run by God’s Own Democracy.

‘It certainly isn’t necessary in Canada,’ he said.

‘Lucky old Canada.’

Trying not to stare at him – he really was gorgeous – I outlined the legislation the G.O.D. coalition had enacted.

‘Wow,’ he said, ‘these restrictions must make life kind of difficult.’

‘For most of us. The rich and powerful will go on as before.’

He looked pensive for a moment.

‘Did people really vote for these guys?’

‘Afraid so.’

His eyes opened wide.

‘Well... why?’

I’d thought about it, discussed it and read books about it. Could it be explained?

‘I can give you a few thoughts, that’s all.’

Again that winning smile.

‘I’m in your hands.’

I wish you were, I wanted to say.

‘For years floods, power failures, water shortages, have all been getting worse. For most people each year was harder than the last. Nobody seemed able to make it any better.’

‘Global warming, right?’

‘Yes, but the people who are now in power put it all down to a punishment from God.’

‘Punishment?’

‘According to them, we have to get back on the true path. They said if we do the right things, God will solve our problems.’

‘Right.’

‘At the time of the last election I reckon the voters were getting desperate.’

‘So they put religious fundamentalists in power?’

I nodded.

‘If the G.O.D. guys were right,’ said Hugh, ‘there should be no more floods and stuff?’

I almost laughed, but it wasn’t funny.

‘That was the idea. There was only one thing wrong with this plan: it didn’t work.’

He pursed his lips, screwing up his eyes in concentration.

‘Did the government change its policies?’

I shook my head.

‘No way. G.O.D.’s answer is to pray harder, place even more restrictions on people’s behaviour and hope for the best.’

After the interview I decided to take the rest of the day off. I offered to show him round the local countryside, starting with Bentley in Lovendale, the village where I lived. Of course we ended up in bed together.

‘Sorry about the bite marks on your chest,’ I said, snuggling closer to him. ‘I must have got carried away.’

He chuckled and ran his hands over my buttocks.

‘I got a little carried away myself,’ he said.

For the next two months, we got carried away whenever we could. My bedroom became a kind of cocoon, a defence from the real world outside. I almost forgot about the article Hugh had written about SPOMM. A Canadian magazine had accepted it but it would be months before it would be published.

One Sunday I walked to St Edmund’s as usual. Regular church attendance had been essential since the decree defining atheists as terrorists. It also helped me keep up with the latest thinking. By then God’s Own Democracy didn’t know which way to jump. The opposition accused it of extremism; from its own ranks came demands for more oppression.

‘My dear brethren, some people say we have gone too far,’ said the Reverend Philip Kingston from the pulpit. ‘But God says we haven’t gone far enough.’

Philip, a plump balding Scotsman, hid the harshness of his message behind a thin layer of charm. This, coupled with a strong voice, made him an effective preacher.

‘God willing – and I’m sure he is willing – there will be a law passed next week.’

He looked round the packed church – attendances had shot up since G.O.D. had come to power. His eyes rested at random on members of the congregation. The *MiM* group were out in force. Today they looked pleased with themselves. Not a good sign.

‘Yes, my dear brethren, soon all forms of sexual activity except those specifically focused on procreation and practised within the confines of holy matrimony will be against the law.’

Practised within the confines of holy matrimony, eh? And they say romance is dead. On my way out of the service I shook Philip’s hand as he bade farewell to his parishioners.

‘Ah, Julia,’ he said with an avuncular beam, ‘how lovely to see you. How are you?’

‘Never better. And you?’

‘Optimistic, Julia. Yes, I would say I’m optimistic.’

As I walked home, I pondered his words. The Rev Kingston was an influential man. He had to be taken seriously. If Philip were to be believed, it was no wonder *MiM* members had smiles on their faces. God’s Own Democracy was about to finish the job.

The following Saturday morning I went to answer the door of my riverside cottage.

‘Ralph,’ I said, staring in amazement. ‘I thought you were in Belgium or somewhere.’

‘Holland.’

He hadn’t changed, but then what was I expecting? In his pin-striped suit, Ralph would always look like a lawyer. Rather belatedly, I invited him in. A few minutes later, we sat with cups of tea at my kitchen table.

‘Are you back for good?’ I asked.

He sipped his tea as though afraid it was too hot.

‘Possibly. Early days yet.’

He seemed reluctant to say much. Maybe if I kept asking questions he might tell me something significant.

'Are you working?'

Another sip of tea.

'I'm, er... looking round, you know.'

For what, I wondered? He shrugged, taking the handle of his mug and twisting it round before speaking again.

'Are you, er, seeing anyone?'

Was that why he was here?

'Yes,' I replied. 'He's a journalist. Canadian.'

I told him a bit about Hugh, but stopped when I began to sound as though I were gloating. Then Ralph picked up a copy of the Lovendale Chronicle from the coffee table and glanced at the front page article.

'Looks like things are getting worse,' he said. 'This Kingston guy is getting a lot of coverage.'

'He has a lot of supporters.'

'The new legislation they rushed through. It could mean...'

Suddenly impatient, I cut in.

'I know what it *could* mean, but they'll never be able to enforce it.'

We sat in silence, not making eye contact.

'I'd better go,' he said eventually.

On his way to the door, he stopped, taking my hand.

'Just remember, I'll always do what I can to help you.'

'It must be great living here, Julia,' said Hugh.

It was a couple of days later and we were strolling hand in hand on the river bank opposite my house. Already a hint of North East England had crept into his Canadian accent.

'Yeah, it's been the same for years.'

As we walked on, I tried to see my surroundings through Hugh's eyes. I was determined to appreciate the beauty all around me instead of taking it for granted as I often did.

'It's so peaceful,' he said.

Just then, as though to prove him wrong, the noise started. We looked up. One of the G.O.D. helicopters was descending rapidly, the whirl of the rotor blades deafening. As it dropped on the grass, I looked at Hugh. Unable to stand the din any longer I put my hands over my ears until the engine cut out. Now we heard only bird calls,

distant traffic and the rippling of the river. I gripped Hugh's hand tighter.

Two tall, athletic looking figures got out of the chopper. The woman's long, dyed blonde hair, her tight-fitting yellow jumpsuit with its G.O.D. badge and perfect make-up didn't quite match up to the Feminine Dress Code. How did she get away with it?

The man's suit was similar to the one his female companion was wearing. He adopted a pose like an actor playing a conquering hero, his hair plastered down so that the wind had no impact on his side parting. They strode towards us.

'Julia Marston,' said the man.

'Yes.'

'I am Colonel Matthew Jones,' he said. 'This is Major Charlotte Flint.'

Hugh let go of my hand.

'What do you want?' I said.

'We have come to purge you of sin. Go with Major Flint.'

I weighed up the odds. She towered above me, exuding physical fitness. Not for the first time I wished I were a few inches taller and took more exercise. I wondered how to play it.

'Come on, Hugh, let's go home,' I said.

I looked to my right. About a metre away Hugh was standing up straight as though on a parade ground. A black Jaguar with tinted windows pulled up almost noiselessly by the side of the road. Hugh jogged over to it and got in the back. The car pulled away.

Grabbing my wrists, Charlotte took only seconds to drag me to the helicopter. I struggled but to no avail. As she flung me in and fastened my seat belt, I tried to work out what hurt the most: my wrists, the fear of what would happen to me or the overwhelming pain of betrayal.

Two days later Major Flint led me into a brightly lit, palatial room. At least it got me out of the gloomy, cell-like bedroom with bare whitewashed walls where I'd been a prisoner since that encounter on the river bank. During that time I'd had nobody to talk to. One bowl of watery soup a day was delivered by a young boy who never spoke. I knew from discussions with other God's Own Democracy

victims that this was just the first stage, wearing you down through hunger, isolation and boredom. The heavy stuff came next.

'Ah, Julia,' said a voice from the far end of the room. 'Come in.'

As my eyes adjusted to the light, I focused on a portly middle-aged man in a navy blue suit. He sat on a kind of throne. I walked towards him, Charlotte holding onto my arm.

'Do sit down.'

I plonked myself on the chair opposite him.

'That will be all, Charlotte.'

'Sanctified One.'

The major began to leave. The Sanctified One addressed her again.

'Oh, Charlotte, you'll be sanctified tonight.'

She looked at him in surprise.

'But it's not my turn.'

He smiled.

'I think you should have a reward for the good work you have done.'

Now it was her turn to smile.

'Oh, thank you, Sanctified One.'

She left.

'So you're the sanctified one?' I asked.

'I have that honour. How are you, Julia?'

Confused? Distraught? Terrified?

'OK,' I said.

He smiled.

'Good, good. I just wanted to explain one or two things, give you some idea of your options.'

I put my hands on my lap, twisting them together. Biting my bottom lip, I could hear the rumble of my stomach, brought on by hunger and fear.

'Luke will be along in a moment with some tea,' he went on.

'Right.'

'You are the first person to be arrested under a law passed just last week.'

'The one that outlaws wanking.'

A flicker of anger crossed his face, then disappeared.

‘God’s Own Democracy has done some good work, some wonderful work.’

Oh, no, could I face a party political broadcast? Did I have a choice?

‘Abortion was banned; sexual intercourse outside marriage was made illegal. So was homosexuality. Contraception too.’

‘I know all this,’ I said.

‘Of course you do, Julia. This is just context. We thought we had all the bases covered, then you came along with your SPOMM.’

He almost spat the last word.

‘The Society for the Promotion of Mutual Masturbation,’ I said.

Again the flicker of anger.

‘There is no need to spell it out.’

‘Oh, but there is, we need to spell things out, be honest and open.’

‘Not now, Julia,’ he said.

‘Yes, now,’ I shouted. ‘We promote the one way for people to achieve sexual fulfilment within the law, without risking unwanted pregnancy or disease. And we make it clear what we are talking about.’

I could have said more: no performance anxiety; no penetration means no thought of conquest; both partners get satisfaction.

‘What you’re advocating is against God’s law.’

I shrugged. There was no point in saying any more.

‘I need to make sure you understand the charges against you.’

‘You’ll have a job,’ I said. ‘This law is called The Seed Preservation Act...’

‘True...’

‘Correct me if I’m wrong, but the point of it is to prevent sperm being wasted, to make sure it is used only to make babies.’

‘So that means,’ he said, ‘that masturbation denies a life. Masturbation is murder.’

‘Hence MiM. However, I have no sperm.’

He waited a while before speaking. I thought I had him there.

‘You will be charged with aiding and abetting.’

Always read the small print, I said to myself.

‘And what will Hugh be charged with?’ I asked. ‘It was his seed that was wasted.’

He stared hard at me.

‘Mr Franklin sacrificed himself for the greater good,’ he said.

‘What?’

‘It was essential to build up evidence against you,’ he went on, ‘in order to destroy your organisation. Mr Franklin will not be charged with any offence. He was doing God’s work.’

I heard a door open.

‘Ah, here’s Luke with the tea.’

I looked behind me at a man in a jumpsuit carrying a tray. At first glance he looked like an identikit G.O.D. henchman, his hair newly cut. He placed the tea things carefully on a table.

‘Thank you, Luke. Just leave it there.’

‘Sanctified One,’ said the man referred to as Luke with a respectful intonation and a little bow.

As he walked past me on his way out, our eyes met for a second and he winked at me. I looked down at the teapot, hardly able to believe my eyes. Hoping Sanctified wouldn’t see the shock on my face, I spent the next half minute pouring tea and handing him a cup.

‘Now for your options,’ he said. ‘The first one is to stand trial, probably next week.’

I knew what that would mean. My stomach muscles tightened involuntarily, as the fear really kicked in. Sweat prickled the back of my neck and my hands shook. I had to think of something fast. The only problem was I couldn’t think of a damn thing.

‘You will undoubtedly be found guilty and sentenced to death.’

I’m too young to die, I said to myself, wishing I could have come up with something more profound.

‘Option number two,’ Hugh continued as if going through a menu, ‘is for you to recant and become a nun.’

He allowed a little smirk to pass over his face.

‘I’m not sure it’s quite you, Julia.’

He was enjoying this, the bastard.

‘Your final option is to do what Charlotte did.’

‘What Charlotte did?’

This was getting beyond me. I looked out of the window to my left. I could see the tops of the trees and open countryside in the distance. Was this to be my last glance at the beauty of Lovendale?

‘She was charged with... well, the details aren’t important. She saved herself by joining the vanguard of God’s Own Democracy.’

I shook my head to clear the fog in my brain as he explained further.

‘If you followed Charlotte’s example you would be responsible for the duties you’ve seen her carry out.’

I swallowed hard, trying to get some moisture in my mouth. What did he mean? Was I to become a turncoat? Do the dirty on my principles? A great punishment, I had to admit.

‘It would also involve regular sanctification sessions.’

‘Sanctification se...?’

Oh, I get it, I said under my breath, you fucking hypocrite. Would I be strong enough to say no?

‘What is it with you guys?’ I asked. ‘You organize things so you can do what you want. Why does freedom for others bother you so much?’

‘We offer the people true freedom, freedom from sin.’

I sighed as he went through the options again.

‘Before you make up your mind, I’ll let you talk in private with Charlotte.’

With that he left. For a couple of minutes I waited, walking aimlessly round the room, wondering if this were some elaborate trap.

‘Hi, Julia,’ said Charlotte as she came in.

‘Hello.’

She sat down.

‘The sanctified one says you want to know about joining the vanguard.’

‘Er...’

She pulled a phone from the top pocket of her uniform.

‘Luke,’ she said, ‘Julia says yes.’

‘Just a minute...’ I said.

Putting the phone away, she put her finger to her lips.

‘Shh.’

The door opened.

‘Here’s Luke now,’ said Charlotte.

‘Ralph,’ I said, ‘what’s happening?’

I knew as soon as I saw him that ‘Luke’ was Ralph but hadn’t dared say anything. Two men I’d loved had betrayed me. The wink

was the final insult. 'I've joined the enemy and I don't care', it seemed to say. Charlotte replied to my question.

'We'll explain later. For now, you have to do exactly as I say.'

'Like hell, I will...'

'We gotta get out of here,' Charlotte snapped back, 'unless you want us all to get killed.'

I followed them out of the room. What else could I do? We went into a large windswept field. Ralph pointed to a square, brick building on the far side of the field with a G.O.D. helicopter parked outside, its rotors spinning.

'We're heading for the VWQ, Vanguard Women's Quarters.'

Before I knew it we had reached the Vanguard building. Three women who looked like clones of Charlotte ran towards us. Then a voice spoke from behind us.

'What's going on here?'

We turned to see the colonel who was with Charlotte at the time of my arrest. Still looking spick and span in his uniform, he trained a gun on us. Shit.

'Oh, Colonel Jones,' said Charlotte. 'I am transporting the prisoner to the re-education chamber. The Sanctified One's orders.'

Amid the combined noise of the wind and the helicopter the tension that surrounded us created its own silence. Jones looked at each of us in turn. He unzipped the top pocket of his jumpsuit and took out a phone.

'I'll just check,' he said, pressing a button.

In the fraction of a second his eyes weren't on us Charlotte's boot swung out and landed between his legs. As he slumped gasping to his knees, she stepped forward. Grabbing his weapon and his phone she kneed him in the face.

'That's for all of us who had to suck your dick, asshole,' she said as he toppled over.

The others clambered into the helicopter. I stood motionless, frozen with fear. Charlotte told me to get into the helicopter and followed me, sitting in the pilot's seat. I joined Ralph and the other three women in the seat behind her. Moments later, we were in the air.

'Could somebody please tell me what the hell's going on?' I asked.

‘There’s an organisation dedicated to opposing G.O.D.’ said Charlotte. ‘We’ve been working on its behalf for a year or so. Ralph’s been helping us while he’s been abroad.’

Guiltily I regretted the nasty thoughts I’d had about him.

‘With our help he managed to infiltrate the Sanctified One’s HQ,’ Charlotte went on. ‘We’ve been planning our escape. Ralph has arranged somewhere for us all to stay.’

I turned towards Ralph and we exchanged a smile, as Charlotte went on.

‘We’re all willing to speak openly about what’s been done to us once we’ve left the country.’

I thought of the awkward conversation I’d had with Ralph a few weeks ago. I should have trusted him.

‘We were going to leave next week, but then you were taken,’ said Charlotte. ‘We brought things forward.’

‘Really?’

‘Ralph knew we didn’t have much time to save you. That guy really loves you.’

That did it. I bust into tears. Everything I’d been holding back came flooding out.

‘I’m sorry, Ralph,’ I managed to say between sobs. ‘About everything.’

‘So am I.’

Charlotte explained further.

‘We’re heading for Amsterdam. Friends and supporters will take us to their homes. The vanguard women will speak at a press conference today about their sexual enslavement by the Leaders of God’s Own Democracy.’

‘Will it do any good?’

‘The UK is still a parliamentary democracy. G.O.D. won’t be in power forever. We have to believe that. What comes out in the press conference will count against them at the next election.’

She raised a clenched fist.

‘In the meantime, we carry on the fight.’