The Weight of Mercy

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A novice pastor on the city streets

Deb Richardson-Moore

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Dedication

To my mom and dad,

Doris Richardson and the late Hewer Richardson

And to Vince, Dustin, Taylor, and Madison,

whose love and steadfastness allow me to

minister elsewhere

Author's Note

This is a personal memoir, and as such, is told from my perspective. Other people coming in and out of Triune during these years may have told a different story or many different stories. While all of the stories I tell are true, I have no way of knowing if the stories told to me were true. That, in fact, was my challenge.

Because of privacy issues, I have frequently changed names and identifying characteristics. Where I have used a single name, it may have been changed to protect privacy. However, where I have used a first and last name, it is correct.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith."

Matthew 23:23, NRSV

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And finally, to Vince, Dustin, Taylor, and Madison. You know why.

Prologue

I HAD THE DREAM AGAIN, *the one where I'm in the back seat of a speeding car and it dawns on me there's no one driving. Somehow the car remains on the road but I don't know how, and the scenery whizzing by paralyzes me.*

I see a red light, and look around frantically for oncoming cars. There are none and my car whooshes through the intersection. My heart is hammering and I wonder if I should climb over the seat to take the steering wheel, but I'm confused and heavy-limbed. I see a curve ahead and I panic, but the car hugs the white line and races on. Apparently the hairpin has triggered a ringing, and I turn to look behind me for a police car, maybe, or an ambulance. But those vehicles don't ring, exactly, do they? My mind isn't working properly, and I can't figure out where that ringing is coming from.

I rolled to Vince's side of the bed, and clawed my way to consciousness, the ringing rising to the surface with me. Vince was already in the dining room, eating cereal and reading the newspaper, but our bedroom remained coolly shadowed. I could have slept another three hours on this Thursday off, if not for that ringing.

"Hello," I answered, my voice sleep-clogged.

"This is the alarm company. The alarm at 222 Rutherford Street has been activated. A police unit is on the way."

I groaned. I'd been on the job just eight weeks and this was at least the eighth alarm. Squirrels, it seemed, could set it off. Mice. Spiders. Not to mention, men.

The facilities manager typically got the first call, but he was on vacation. I tugged on a pair of jeans and a lightweight sweater.

The morning looked foggy and gray, though it was late September, a summer month in this part of the South. I brushed my teeth and ran my fingers through my hair, not bothering with make-up. *That'll serve the intruder right,* I thought irritably.

As I drove the seven miles from my house in the suburbs to the church just blocks from Main Street, the scenery changed from trimmed lawns and shaded houses to industrial buildings, windowless bars, a nursing home, abandoned gas stations. The closer I got, the deeper the dread settled in my stomach. I hated this job. I hated the creaky old church building. I hated what I'd gotten into, and I was close to hating God for getting me into it.

I repeated a mantra I used to soothe myself. Eight weeks down, and what, maybe thirty to go? Forty-four at the outside. I doubted I could last a year.

The early morning traffic was brisk on four-lane Rutherford Street, pronounced Rul-therford, a denizen of Old Greenville corrected me recently, rolling the absent "l" in his throat. I'm sure he summers on Pawley's – make that Pahhwl-ee's – Island, which prints bumper stickers declaring itself "arrogantly shabby," if that tells you anything.

Old Greenville passed this church every day. But it didn't stop.

The red brick sanctuary was handsome, especially compared to the nearby three-story education building with its broken windows and rusted air-conditioners discoloring the façade in green streams. It was a brave little church, too, hanging on in this outpost of a dying mill village; I'd give it that.

Rutherford Street was separated from the sanctuary stoop by a sidewalk and a strip of dead grass. No one was stirring at the Salvation Army Thrift Store across the street, but Tommy's Country Ham House next door was filled with a breakfast crowd of businessmen, blue-collar workers, and retirees getting their day started with bacon and eggs, toast and grits, coffee and

conversation.

I parked in the pitted lot behind the church and trotted up the sidewalk and around the corner to the sanctuary's side door. This morning's alarm was not the work of critters. Someone had kicked in the heavy wooden door, splintering the doorjamb. Someone, no doubt, who had eaten in the church's soup kitchen, taken clothes from its closet, received groceries from its pantry.

A police officer met me at the broken door, and together we entered the chapel, hushed and lovely even with its leaky roof, streaks of mildew and blistered plaster. Despite the dimness, I could see that the brass cross and offering plates were undisturbed. The stained glass windows picturing the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Jesus in Gethsemane, and pinwheel designs in blues, golds and reds, were untouched. The honey-colored pews were as they'd been the previous Sunday, only empty now of sleeping bodies reclined against bedrolls.

The young policeman and I walked in silence down the maroon carpeting past the raised stage where the wooden pulpit stood, flanked by the thrones that pass for chairs in the world of religious furnishings. A paneled door leading to a rear hallway was flung open. There we found what the burglar was after – a plain, waist-high cabinet of cleaning supplies. Bottles of floor cleaner and cans of Pledge tumbled over the wood floor. The policeman raised an eyebrow.

"He was looking for something to huff," I said.

He nodded, and asked what I wanted to do about the busted door. He then waited outside while I ran down to the basement and found a board, hammer, and nails. He and I pulled the listing door into its shattered doorjamb, and he pounded the board snugly across.

He stepped back, and smiled sympathetically. "Are you gonna be all right?" he asked. I swallowed the lump in my throat, and made a mental note to call the police chief and tell him how

kind this young man had been.

I leaned against the brick wall of the breezeway, where the smell of urine wafted through the morning mist. I stared at the ugly patch job, and wondered: *What kind of church nails its doors shut?*

That would be the Triune Mercy Center.

And I am its pastor.

“Once you’ve seen things, you can’t un-see them.”

Elaine Nocks, Triune member

Chapter 1

I thought I'd be wise by now.

I thought my experience with drug addicts and alcoholics and the mentally ill and people suddenly, brutally, surprised by homelessness would gel into wisdom. I thought I'd have something to teach people about how to deal with those who live under bridges and in vacant houses and in the woods – how to love them, how to haul them out of the quicksand and onto the solid red clay that underlies our little piece of South Carolina.

I thought I'd graduate from the Triune Mercy Center with compassion and wisdom.

People in Greenville sure give me credit for it. I'm always speaking at prayer breakfasts and mission luncheons and book clubs about homelessness and, especially, our Christian response to it.

But I don't feel at all wise. I feel, by turns, cranky, humbled, incredulous, deflated, energized, furious, exhilarated, tired.

I suppose the lessons I was seeking are simply too complicated, too messy – not unlike our lives in this place. So I won't try to tell you what it all meant, my time at the Triune Mercy Center. I'll just tell you what happened.

* * * * * * *

I once interviewed the novelist Kaye Gibbons for a newspaper story. Kaye's first book was *Ellen Foster,* a semi-autobiographical novel about a young girl's painful and hardscrabble upbringing.

The adult Kaye told me *that* life was behind her, that now she and her husband and children lived in a "high-vanilla suburb" in a mid-size North Carolina city.

I knew instantly what she meant, for I, too, am the product of a high-vanilla suburb. My younger brother and sister and I walked to the elementary school on our leafy street in Greenville, South Carolina, a mid-size city with all the promise and problems of any city in the deep South. Our dog, King, a feisty mix of boxer and who-knows-what, sometimes set out in search of us, arriving at mid-morning outside my classroom in the sprawling, one-level school. The principal would call our house. If my mom was home, she'd drive to get King, all embarrassed and apologetic, but shooting me an amused glance. If she was at her job as a tax attorney's secretary, the housekeeper got the job of chauffeuring King.

I say "housekeeper" now. Back then, in the 1960s, she was our maid. And she wasn't a single "she" at all, but a string of women, always black, always poor, with exotic names: Lena, Odessa, Birdie.

And as long as I'm being honest, only one actually drove a car to our house and thus got the job of ferrying the recalcitrant King. The others my mother drove home to a neighborhood inside the city limits, where houses sat packed tightly on steep, narrow, pockmarked streets. When I was old enough, I'd sometimes drive the maid home. I was disturbed by those houses, many of them leaning precariously on cement blocks, their porches slumped under the weight of threadbare sofas and rusting refrigerators. One Christmas, I stuffed $40 of my babysitting money in an envelope, wrote "Birdie" across the front, and drove by at dusk to slip it in her mailbox.

So yes, my suburb, and my upbringing for that matter, was high-vanilla and bland. But also safe, cocooning. My mom and dad were married for 58 years. We kids walked on a path through

the woods to our community pool. I babysat for the younger children in the neighborhood, and played softball with the older ones. I was a Girl Scout.

My friends from elementary school remained friends through high school. We stay in touch, have the soup, salad, and breadsticks once in awhile at the Olive Garden. At our first lunch after I took the Triune job they never got a word in. They sat, eyes wide, mouths grimaced – the college dance teacher, the social worker, the stay-at-home moms – as I described my new job: How the facilities manager smelled of liquor and screamed at me, how clothes and food walked out the door and into crack houses, how the kitchen assistant bought prescription pills from congregants. Only the social worker laughed in recognition.

I never wanted to be a minister, but it wasn't a case of considering the notion and discarding it. It simply never crossed my mind. I was no more likely to become a minister than a bullfighter. A hog farmer. A submarine captain.

If it had crossed my mind, I would've dismissed it. Ministers were boring. No drinking. No dancing. No cussing. Good grief. Who would choose such a life?

No, for as long as I can remember, I wanted to be a journalist. I edited my high school newspaper, then went to Wake Forest University in North Carolina, and edited its student newspaper. The *Old Gold and Black*, it was called, and it covered the goings-on of the Demon Deacons running around that autumn-hued campus. I didn't appreciate until much later how funny and how self-mocking it was to have a top-hatted, maniacal deacon represent the Baptist school.

My experience as a college newspaper editor was enough to land me a job at my hometown *Greenville News,* where I stayed for 27 years.

I am nothing if not loyal.

Once, in my early 20s, I helped my dad cut down a tree in his

front yard. It was a chilly New Year's Day, and I had accompanied my parents to a party. I was wearing designer jeans and heels, a preposterous fashion get-up that unaccountably gained popularity in the late 1970s.

Dad wanted to get rid of a pesky sweetgum, which peppered the yard with its prickly fruit, and he'd asked me to help. After we returned to their house, he instructed my brother and me to hold tightly to a rope wrapped around the tree. His plan was to guide it straight down rather than have it spin and hit the house.

"Hold on," he said, revving up his chain saw. "This won't take a minute."

A moment later, I felt myself being jerked through the air as the tree crashed to the ground, well away from the house.

"Let go!" my father yelled.

But I was already on the ground, designer jeans muddy, heels hurled 20 feet away. My father's laughing face loomed above me. "Why didn't you let go?"

"You told me to hold on," I murmured, checking to make sure my arms and legs still worked.

"I meant until the tree was headed in the right direction," he said. "Not forever."

But that's me. I'll hold on forever. Sometimes that's long after I should have let go.

* * * * * * *

The first sermon I preached at the Triune Mercy Center was on August 7, 2005 – two weeks before my 51st birthday. My topic was the kindness of strangers – appropriate for a church that existed to welcome the stranger. Appropriate, too, since besides my husband, Vince, and our teenage daughter, Madison, the 40 people in church that day were strangers to me.

In the hallway behind the pulpit, I nervously shrugged into

the voluminous folds of an untested, creased black preaching robe. I carefully placed a crisp white stole over my shoulders, marveling at the colorful butterflies that draped all the way down to the hem, well past my knees. The radiant and playful stole was a gift from my home church, First Baptist Greenville, and I felt a momentary twinge that I wasn't among those friends.

Instead, I was preparing to preach to Greenville's homeless in a 300-seat chapel dotted with men carrying bedrolls and duffle bags. Several were stretched out full-length on the pews, sleeping off the crack and malt liquor from the night before. Others were staring at me, this middle-aged white woman from the suburbs coming to pastor the inner-city mission church where they ate hot meals and received groceries, got clean clothes and watched Sunday afternoon football on TV.

The former pastor laid down three rules: Never give money. Never give cigarettes. Never give rides.

No problem, I thought, running a hand through my tousled blond hair to give it, and me, some much-needed height. I was ready.

After the organ prelude and desultory hymns, a prayer of confession and collection of an offering, I delivered the sermon I had worked on so hard. It came from Matthew 25, a passage in which Jesus talks about Judgment Day. People will be judged, he said, on whether they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, visited the sick, clothed the naked, welcomed the stranger.

The kindness of strangers, I mused aloud. It was an image I had always liked, the stranger coming into our lives, the random kindnesses we children of God exhibit in the midst of our awfulness to one another.

As a former theater critic for *The Greenville News*, I mentioned Blanche Dubois from *A Streetcar Named Desire* and her dependence on the kindness of strangers. And as a former general assignment reporter, I included a story I'd covered about a

mother who murdered her two children, then told the authorities a stranger had abducted them. When her story unraveled nine days later, it was strangers across the nation who grieved and supported her bereft husband.

The sermon was an amalgam of all the experiences that had brought me to this time, to this place: Daughter of the South, newspaper reporter, wife, mother of three, seminary graduate. And so, as a lover of words, I suppose it wasn't so odd that I mused on the phrase *perfect stranger*. I pointed out that when we speak of a perfect stranger, it is not the stranger who is perfect, for how could we know? It is his strangeness to us, the unknown about him, that is absolute, complete, perfect.

I talked about liberation theology and its insistence that we find Jesus in the face of the poor and oppressed. I talked about how that translated in this downtown ministry in Greenville's so-called "homeless triangle," where strangers walked into our building every time it opened.

And then I ended with a play on words: "Some day – maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe on my retirement day – I expect to throw open Triune's door to a perfect stranger… and watch our perfect Lord walk in."

If I weren't the product of a big-steeple church, I'd have hired a drummer to play a *pa-pa-dum* on that note. Instead, I ended with a hushed amen, gathered up my robe and launched immediately into the Apostles' Creed, which I had to read from the hymnal because, as a Baptist, I'd never learned it.

Walking down the center aisle a few moments later, passing the well-dressed remnants of Triune's days as a Methodist church, passing sleepy-eyed homeless men rousing themselves from an hour-long nap, I took my place at the church's front door… and ran smack into a stranger. A perfect stranger.

He was a trim man, dressed neatly in dark slacks and a white T-shirt proclaiming *Gospel Fest*. He wore horn-rimmed glasses

and leaned on a black cane. “Hello, Pastor,” he said, standing on our front stoop, just steps from four-lane Rutherford Street. “I need your help.”

He explained that he was a pastor at a church in nearby Laurens, 40 miles down Interstate 385. He had brought his youth group to sing for a morning service in Simpsonville, one of Greenville’s commuter towns. But his van, with all his musical equipment, had broken down a mile or so up the street; he waved vaguely up Rutherford, past WYFF-TV, the Salvation Army, and an abandoned gas station. He’d left his wife with the teens, he said, and walked to our church for help.

“We’ve got to get to the service immediately,” he ended. I eyed his neat attire, heard his articulate speech, and determined to help this member of the clergy fraternity I had so recently joined. But I wasn’t sure how.

“I’m sorry but we don’t have a church van,” I said.

“I’ve called a taxi service,” he replied. “But they want $23.60 in cash. Can we get help from your collection plate?”

Something about that collection plate comment struck a false note, but I pushed it away. This was my first official day as a minister, and here was a colleague in need of help. I wanted badly to help him, to prove I belonged.

“I can give you the money,” I offered, “and my husband will take you to your van.”

“Is that all right?” I asked, turning to Vince and Madison.

“Sure,” my husband answered. I hurried to my office and retrieved $23.60 from my purse, handed it to my new colleague in the ministry, and waved as my family helped him into our 10-year-old Camry and drove away.

I was sitting in my office an hour later when I heard the voice of former Triune pastor Debora Bishop in my head: “Never give money. Never give rides.”

I ran over the morning’s incident. The stranger was heading

from Laurens to a church in Simpsonville? We were miles out of the way. He needed to get there immediately? Our service ended at noon. Surely he had already missed any morning service.

Suddenly, my stomach clenched and I felt a blast of cold wash over me that wasn't from Triune's creaky air-conditioner.

I dialed my home phone. To my relief, Vince answered.

"Are you guys OK?"

"Yeah," he answered. "Why?"

"That man you drove off with was a scam artist. I know it."

"No, he wasn't."

"Did you see his van and youth group?"

"Well, no," Vince answered. "He said he got a call from his wife, and she'd had the van towed to the Phillis Wheatley Center. I took him there."

I closed my eyes. Phillis Wheatley was a community center next door to Greenville's roughest housing project.

"Did you see the van when you got there?"

"No, come to think of it, I didn't. But Deb, no one would go to all that trouble for $23."

"Oh, yeah, that's exactly what he did," I said.

A perfect stranger had walked in our door all right. But despite my theology, he was not our perfect Lord.

* * * * * * *

The polished stranger and his lies shook me. The words of my first sermon were idealized, hopeful. I firmly believed they were scriptural. So how to explain a stranger who ripped me off?

After assuring myself that Vince and Madison were safe, I trudged downstairs to the first-floor kitchen and dining hall. The rambling education building, three stories of dirty white plaster, curling linoleum, and shredded rubber stairs, showed its eight decades.

The smell assailed me from both sides of the stairwell. To my right, a first-floor hallway offered two rare bathrooms open to Greenville's homeless. The smell of human waste battled the sickly scent of a citrus deodorizer. To my left sprawled the dining hall, a cavernous, wood-floored room with rows of scarred tables and bulky columns painted a garish teal. Without entering, I could smell the unwashed bodies of homeless men and women, their stale clothes stuffed in duffle bags, back packs, and plastic grocery sacks. The air-conditioner labored loudly to cool the dining room, which offered some respite from a Carolina August, the month when summer has worn out its welcome.

Upon seeing me, several people stood. "Pastor, can I speak to you?"

I had to stop myself from swiveling to see whom they were addressing. Three months out of seminary, I wasn't used to being called Pastor.

"Um, sure. Do you want to come upstairs?"

One by one, they came to sit on the floral navy couch that hugged one wall of the second-floor reception area. I took the navy wing chair, and automatically grabbed a legal pad to take notes. "Tell me about yourself," I invited, my journalism training surfacing more naturally than the theological.

Martin was a black man in his late 40s. He had a deep voice, most of his teeth were missing, and he was cocky. He lived illegally in an abandoned apartment complex with no running water or power. Occasionally, he said, he ran a cord across the parking lot to steal electricity from the one remaining block of apartments that had power.

He had spent time in prison but his attorneys botched the case, he said. He'd spent a lot of time in the prison library, learning law, and he was going to sue the authorities.

Martin had never divorced his wife, but lived with a girlfriend. I was surprised when I met her, for Loree was slim,

pretty, and well-spoken. I wondered why she put up with this dead-end lifestyle.

"But I love him, Pastor Deb," was a line I'd grow to memorize.

Martin insisted he wasn't like the other people in Triune's soup kitchen. He was independent, able to make his own way. But he did need some groceries to get him and Loree through the week.

More people followed. They told of divorces and drugs and imprisonment. They told of lost jobs and beatings and betrayals.

And each story, every single one, ended with a request. *And so I need a blanket. And so I need some groceries. And so I need a razor, a toiletry kit, some painkillers, a phone, a place to stay.*

I did my best to gather socks and soap and underwear from the clothes closet, cans of beans and Vienna sausage from the food pantry. I allowed phone calls. I personally called the Salvation Army and Greenville Rescue Mission and Shepherd's Gate, our local shelters, to ask about vacancies. I fetched and begged and scrambled until it was time to serve dinner at 5 p.m.

When I came downstairs to give a short devotional, Deloris met me outside the kitchen. A part-time staff member, Deloris was in her early 40s, with a chin-length brunette bob and a strident voice. She was the wife of Butch, the facilities manager, and between them, they knew where everything was located. I depended on her to show me how things ran.

"T.C. is high," she now whispered.

I glanced into the kitchen, where our operations assistant T.C. was making tea for the evening dinner. Slightly built and mild-mannered, he was busily scooping sugar into a white plastic dispenser.

"Surely not," I told her.

Deloris gave an exaggerated shrug. "Suit yourself."

The chaos of the dinner soon consumed me. Members of

suburban Prince of Peace Catholic Church served plates of ham and garlic potatoes through the kitchen window to a line of 187 men and women, who then carried their plates to the beat-up tables in the dining hall. The men wore tattered T-shirts, mud-spattered pants, and ripped tennis shoes. Some of the women wore shapeless sundresses and bedroom slippers, some sandals, shorts, and tight Ts.

Deloris found one woman's skin-tight leggings and tank top too revealing, though what they revealed were un-sexy, overlapping rolls of flesh. Deloris hustled her into the clothes closet and insisted she pick out something with more coverage.

"She's a prostitute," she hissed as she passed me.

Some in the crowd shuffled silently to pick up their food and refused to meet the servers' eyes. Others bounced and smiled and offered thanks.

Deloris announced loudly when it was time for seconds, but experience told the diners that seconds would not be available to everyone. Pushing and shoving ensued in the new line, cries that someone broke in or threw an elbow or stepped on a foot. I intervened a few times, and tried to calm things down, but it was a losing cause in the swirl of bodies.

Jerry Hill, the minister of missions at Buncombe Street United Methodist Church, came in to lead the evening worship at 6 p.m. After helping Prince of Peace workers clean up the dining hall, I made it into the sanctuary by 6:45, collapsing on a pew halfway back. At the end of the service, parishioners left through the breezeway, where Deloris and Butch handed out bags of pop-top food cans, crackers, and other items that could be eaten without a can opener.

Occasionally, people tried to step in line from the sidewalk, but Deloris put a quick stop to it. "The bags are for church-goers only," she called out as a warning to anyone else who might try.

I was vaguely bothered by the practice of connecting grocery

distribution to worship. But we'd learned in seminary not to make changes during the first six months of a pastorate, and I recognized the wisdom of that advice. I vowed to simply watch for awhile, to glean from Butch and Deloris and T.C.'s experience, to lean on them to prevent any further scams like the one that morning.

I drove home around 8 p.m., parked my white minivan in the garage, and walked into the spacious blue kitchen I loved. A wooden sign proclaimed BEACH, given to me by a beach weekend buddy. A framed faux front page featured outrageously made-up stories – *Deb goes undercover in a burka!* – about my retirement from *The Greenville News.* An antiqued blue table, rescued from my brother's basement, held fragrant candles.

It was a jolt. At the moment five of us lived in these 10-plus rooms, but our older daughter, Dustin, was finalizing plans for an apartment, and our son, Taylor, was heading back to college. It felt wonderfully cool and clean. It also felt disconcerting. The folks I'd spent the day with were going home to campsites in mosquito-infested woods, to "cat holes" in trash-filled buildings, to inches of concrete under the city's bridges.

I closed my eyes in silent gratitude for my house, my privacy, my intact family. Just last month, those things seemed mundane. In my new world, they were stark anomalies.

"How did it go?" asked Vince, making a turkey sandwich at the kitchen counter.

"They didn't need to hire a pastor," I told him wearily. "They needed a grocery stock boy."

He laughed. "That bad?"

"All I did was run up and down those stairs getting people stuff. Every time I would think someone wanted to talk, but it always ended with 'And so I need rent money.' 'And that's why I need groceries.' 'All I need is a hygiene kit.' "

"Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked.

"Well, I'm in it now."

When we went to bed a few hours later, I fell asleep instantly. But I awoke at 2 a.m. with the day replaying before my eyes. A stranger who lied. Deloris's braying voice. People who wanted, wanted, wanted.

I lay awake, staring into the darkness but seeing an endless line of ragged people, hands outstretched.