

**Everything That
Came Before
Grace**

A Father-Daughter Story

BILL SEE

A single-father comes of age as he discovers whether it's love or fatherhood that could save him. Haunted by his mother's death and a series of serendipitous events from his past, Benjamin Bradford desperately tries to keep his mental illness under control while raising his daughter Sophia. Set against the iconic streets of Los Angeles, there's music always playing, heavy therapy sessions and private emails to discern, shattered friendships and betrayal, and the specter of a true love that got away. Think: *Silver Linings Playbook* meets *High Fidelity* with a dash of *Eighth Grade*. Can Benjamin find redemption? Can he escape his demons and find love again? Come along for the ride and find out.

See carefully and skillfully balances the present and past in his narrative...as tensions mount between father and daughter, readers are treated to dramatic scenes with powerful exchanges. An emotionally powerful...novel about a troubled man's quest for redemption.

- *Kirkus Reviews*

"Bill See opens his heart and soul. And he can write. This is a good book to buy now before it is snapped up by a major. You'll have the real first edition of the best indie book I perhaps have ever read."

- **Hubert O'Hearn, By The Book Reviews**

With a simple poignancy, See tells quite the story, and leaves readers with a certain bit of wisdom. A fun read that will prove hard to put down.

- **Midwest Book Review, MBR Bookwatch**

This is a book that I cannot recommend enough.

- **Scott Varnham, Seattle Post Intelligence**

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Kindle Direct Publishing

Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN: 9798697945605

TO MAEVE, TO MUSIC & TO MOM.

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MY PROFOUND THANKS TO THESE GOOD
FOLKS WHO IN ONE WAY OR ANOTHER
IMPACTED THE TELLING OF THIS STORY:

Willie Aron, Denise Bonfilio, Priscilla DeLeon, Gianni Damaia,
Dawn Dumpert, Mary Herczog, Ron & Tania Jolly, Joy Knapp,
Maureen McElroy, Rajesh Makwana, Anita Maya, Cindy Maya,
Rachel Maya, Maeve Mayfield, Nancy Yates Mekelburg, Anthony Mora,
Colleen Morrissey, Jennifer Mortimer, Melody Muraca, Doug Nyland,
Catherine Ryan, Mark Sanderson, Evie Sands, Laura Smith, Dave Soyars,
Pat Thomas, Chris Torres, Kimberlie Traceski, Kenneth Wagner,
Neal Weiss & Susan Yates.

EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE GRACE

PROLOGUE

1
THE LIFEBOAT
DECEMBER 21, 2007

I'm staring out the waiting room window. An elderly couple is sitting on a bench out front holding hands. The portrait of contentment. Even from this distance, I can see their rheumy eyes still sparkle at each other. They probably finish each other's sentences. Bundled up in overcoats and fedoras, they look like holdovers from those bygone days when everyone wore hats. As I watch them speak to each other, out of earshot, I get an eerie sense I'm watching a long-ago vision I had come to life about me and a girl I loved. I take out my journal and start jotting down a backstory:

It was their first day of college. She was beautiful and out of his league, but he just had to know her. He told her he liked the cool way she walked, and she rolled her eyes. But inside, she felt a spark go off. She came to love the way he talked about music and writing, and whether God exists, especially on those long drives they took up the coast. Plus, she never met anyone else who loved old movies as much as she did. She'd scoff when he told her theirs was a love for the ages, but he never stopped believing it. People asked what their secret was, and they'd smile at each other, and say, "Love is magic and a mystery."

"Benjamin," a familiar female voice calls out from behind the counter. "Cassandra will see you now."

Ah hell. That old couple probably just met on eHarmony.

They buzz me in, and as I walk the long drab hallway indiscernible from any other Kaiser clinic, I'm singing the chorus to the foreboding "Sour Times" by Portishead, still fresh from the car ride over.

EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE GRACE

Nobody loves me. It's true...nobody loves me...

I enter Cassandra's office and give her a wave.

"Hello Benjamin," she says barely glancing up, her amber eyes hidden by her brown unruly hair. "I'll be right with you."

As I wait for my long-time therapist to bring up my chart for about the millionth time, I take my usual seat next to the window overlooking the teeming traffic on Washington Boulevard. I look up at the Christmas cards draped from one side of the office to the other. It's that time of year. The dread and anxiety brought on by the holiday season, and judging by how crowded the waiting room is, business must be booming around here.

Nine years ago, I was a wreck. Just trying to keep it together after everything that happened. Someone told me to get some therapy, and I've been coming here ever since.

Cassandra has a kind of serene and celestial otherness to her. My mom used to say, "There are parts of some people that don't photograph." Cassandra's like that. It's her warm and forgiving eyes that probably convinced her she's made for this line of work.

Equal parts Spanish and Greek, she comes from one of those big close-knit families. Total opposite of mine.

She projects such a reserved and stately persona. It's funny how she tugs at the end of her sleeve to hide the tattoo of the bird on the back of her wrist.

After our first session, I went to hug her portly frame, and she said she doesn't let her patients do that. So, when we wrap up, we just shake hands like we've closed a deal at a power lunch.

"So, Benjamin," Cassandra says turning to face me. "Last time, we were talking about trying not to be so severe with yourself."

"Oh, nothing's changed," I say letting out a sigh. "I still feel like I have to keep the storm windows up so nothing crazy comes out."

"We've talked about this. There's your perception, and there's reality," she reminds me. A mantra of hers.

I lean forward and start rubbing my thighs like I'm sanding down a 2x4.

She watches that for a minute then says, "You seem agitated."

"To be honest, I'm pissed off."

"How so?" she asks.

"It happened again," I say. "I mean, I thought I had this."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, yesterday," I begin, "I took off work to get to Sophia's parent-teacher conference. We get home. I make dinner and help her with her homework. Watch a movie together. Read to her. You know, like, *everything*. And I get just a tooth brushing away from this perfect night, so I can breathe again, you know? But I see the end in sight, and then when she doesn't get right in bed, I yelled at her..." I pause to catch myself. "And I look down at

her sweet heart-shaped face, and she's...she's staring up at me...so confused that her dad just seconds before was happy and joking and...and then boom, something snaps. I mean, I've been just beating the shit out of myself ever since."

"Benjamin, kids don't hold on to these moments like we think they do," she says in her comforting voice. "A little slip at the end of an otherwise great day? That's O.K."

"You *think* I don't remember watching my mom rocking back and forth, her mouth pressed up against her knees, talking about killing herself? You *think* I don't remember her telling me she'd be right back then disappearing for weeks? Believe me. I *wish* I could forget."

She looks startled, and she pauses to regroup.

"Well, remember this," she says regaining her footing. "Your upbringing was very different. You're *breaking* the cycle."

"Sophia doesn't know that. She just wants her dad to be normal. That's all any kid wants. Just fucking be there and don't be a crazy person. If I can't do that, what good am I?"

"But why give yourself so little margin for error?"

"Because I'm all Sophie has. I've got no backup. No one to play good cop, bad cop with. No one who can tell me I stuck the landing."

"It's O.K. to admit you're struggling sometimes. Give yourself a break."

"What am I supposed to say? 'Sorry, Soph. Losing my shit here. Taking a mental health day today.'"

"No, not those *exact* words," she says trying to lighten things, "but you can tell her you need a minute, can't you?"

I stare at her not intending to answer because I've already moved on to the next thing I want to tell her. I stall-nod while I try to find the words.

"It's like, I live this double life," I go on. "This world I live outside with Sophia where it feels like I'm holding my breath all the time. Then there's this place inside where I hear the voices and do battle with all my selves..."

I trail off and start tapping the arm of my chair and counting 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8. Always in sets of eight.

"What if all this insanity I grew up around gets me too? I'm scared it's going to get passed through me to Sophia."

"Mental illness is not a virus, Benjamin. Sophia can't catch it. *We've talked about this.*"

"It got my mom," I say pausing. "And I keep thinking, what if Sophia would be better off without me?"

"*Come on*, Benjamin," she says sounding exasperated. "You don't really believe that."

We stop to stare at each other. Something we do a lot of until someone can't take the silence anymore. I cave first.

"You know what the great irony is?" I ask. "All that insanity I grew up

around? That's what gives me the drive to do this. I've gotta prove those fuckers didn't destroy me."

"Then use it," she urges. "It's yours, isn't it?"

"The thing is," I say pausing to find the right words. "I've crafted this persona of having overcome and sacrificed so much. You know, this poor guy who weathered tragedy and came out the other side? And I'm, like, 'Don't worry about me. That's all behind me now. I've got this.' To admit I'm still deep down in it and barely holding on? That'd ruin the narrative."

"Well, even here," she says, "whenever we wrap up, you give me a smile, and we do our handshake, and you tell me you're good."

"Classic people pleaser, right? Leave it to the crazy person to make sure the therapist doesn't have to worry."

She lets out a little chuckle, then turns silent again.

"I just can't shake this feeling I've always had," I go on, starting to sand down my thighs again. "This feeling of dread. This feeling like the other shoe is about to drop. I just, I can't let what happen to me happen to Sophia."

"But that's *your* journey. Don't project that onto her," she says - another of her mantras. "Benjamin, we've talked about needing to stay in the moment."

"You have kids," I shoot back. "You know when you become a parent, you can't live in the moment anymore. You've gotta live in the future so *they* can live in the moment."

"Well, let's just focus on what's right here," she says trying to shift directions. "Have you given any thought about dating yet?"

"No. I just...no," I answer. "I gotta get Sophia into the lifeboat first."

She squints at me. "What do you mean, the lifeboat?"

"My whole life, I had this image of a lifeboat that was just floating there within reach, but I could never get in until everyone else got in first."

"But don't you get to be saved?"

"Growing up, everyone's problems always seemed so much worse, so I was, like, 'Here. You get in. I'll just swim.'"

I look out the window again. I can feel her studying me.

"Benjamin?"

"I just, I couldn't save her," I finally say.

"Couldn't save who?"

"My mom. I couldn't get her in the lifeboat in time. I've just gotta hold on long enough so I can get Sophia in one. I just have to."

Cassandra glances at her watch and grimaces. "I'm sorry, but I'm afraid we're out of time. Can we pick this up next time?"

"It's O.K. I gotta go pick up Sophia. I can't be late again."

* * *

2

SOMETHING IN THE MAIL LATER - DECEMBER 21, 2007

I'm racing up Fairfax weaving in and out of traffic, yelling at all the idiot drivers on their phones, and slowing me down. I'm almost at Sophia's school when the high lonesome sound of the pedal steel on "Color of the Blues" comes wafting through the speakers, and it sends me. By the time George Jones gets through the first verse, tears are streaming down my face. Always happens on my way back from Cassandra's. I like crying. Gets the toxins out.

I hang a right on Colgate and pull into the school parking lot. I shut off the engine, close my eyes, and give myself a talking to.

Come on. Get your head back in the game. You can't let Sophia see you crack.

I pull the armor back on, look up and spot Sophia all alone on the playground sitting on a swing dangling her legs down, lost in thought. Damn. Late again.

I call out to her and give a wave. She glances up, tossing back her long straight blonde hair. She spots me and looks relieved. She starts to gather all her things, then motions she needs help.

I duck into the front office. It's decked out in the same Christmas and Hanukkah decorations they've probably used the past 50 years. I apologize to Ms. Mary for being late again and head out to the playground.

"Hey, Soph," I say giving her a sideways hug. "Sorry, I'm late again."

"It's O.K.," she says handing me her Power Puff Girls backpack. "Can you carry this?"

I throw her backpack over my shoulder so she can carry her Styrofoam

solar system.

“How’d you do today?” I ask as we make our way to the parking lot.

“Ms. Lolli told me I sing the Spanish part of ‘Feliz Navidad’ better than anyone in the *whole* class. Are you coming to the Holiday show tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I say putting my arm around her. “I’ll be upfront cheering embarrassingly loud just like always.”

After we load everything in the car, I notice I got a voicemail.

“O.K., all buckled in,” Sophia calls out from the backseat.

“Just a sec, Soph,” I tell her and give a listen.

The sound of the voice sends me hurtling back almost a decade.

“Ben, it’s me, Keith again. Look, I’ve been trying to reach you because you’re gonna get something in the mail soon, and I just wanted to give you a head’s up so you weren’t blindsided. I know you don’t want to talk to me, but it’s important. Call me, O.K.? Please. I need to ask you something.”

He’s right. He *has* been trying to reach me. I’d heard the news a few weeks ago. I just haven’t been able to get into the right headspace. You know, so I could sound like I was over it and say all the right things.

“Come on, Dad! Let’s roll!” Sophia chirps from the backseat.

As I drive us home along Wilshire through the Miracle Mile District, Sophia is singing “Feliz Navidad” in perfect Spanish. I’m trying to stay present, and tell her how great it is, but I keep picturing Anna’s devastating smile as we danced at that Cornershop show a decade ago. A thousand people all around, but it feels like it’s only the two of us. Just like it always did.

I take a left on Ridgley and find a spot right across the street from our French Normandy style apartment. I gather up Sophia’s stuff until my arms are full and walk as fast as possible trying to get to the front door before everything drops. I turn the key, and it’s instant chaos. Our two dogs Coco and Cooper start squealing and jumping on us.

I unload everything on the kitchen table and take a deep breath.

“Soph, what’s the homework tonight, and what do you want for dinner?”

This is my life as a single father. Every night, a crash course in how to be a short-order cook and hopelessly trying to keep up with math I never thought I had to do again, let alone help teach a 9-year-old.

“Dad, I want mac and cheese and chicken nuggets,” Sophia says kicking off her blue Chuck Taylor All-Stars. She takes my hands and hops onto my brand-new Nikes and starts walking us around the kitchen like I’m a pair of stilts. Coco and Cooper start barking and jumping up on us.

I feel it start. That crazy feeling. That thing that stops most people from losing it? I don’t have that.

“Sophie, come on, *stop it!*” I scold. “You’re getting the dogs overexcited. Coco, Cooper, *down!*” I pull at Cooper’s collar and his long snout knocks a glass off the counter, and it shatters on the kitchen floor.

“Damn it, Cooper!”

“Whoopsie daisy,” Sophia says still standing on my shoes.

“*Sophia!*” I shout. This time way too loud. “*Get off my new shoes!*”

Her ocean-blue eyes fill with tears, and she bows her head. I immediately feel like shit. She slowly steps off my shoes, and her barefoot comes down on a shard of glass. She lets out a shriek. I drop down on the floor and cradle her applying pressure to the wound as Cooper and Coco crowd in too close.

“*Get away!*” I yell at the dogs.

“*Dad!*” Sophia scolds, “don’t yell at them. They’re family too.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I just can’t stand to see you hurt.”

A hundred things go right all day, but if I lose my temper with Sophia? I punish myself for a week.

We sit in a little pile in the middle of the kitchen floor, me clutching Sophie’s foot with one hand, my other arm enveloping her slight frame as I rock her back and forth.

“I’m sorry. I’m...so sorry,” I say into her ear over and over. “I shouldn’t have yelled at you.”

“Or at the dogs,” she says sniffing.

I take my sleeve and dry the tears off her cheek. “Hey, can we pretend like we just walked in again? You know, like, ‘Presto! Do over please.’”

“Yeah,” she says, her doe-eyes lighting up. “Presto!”

After I bandage up her foot, I tell her to start on her math homework while I fix dinner. I pour the macaroni in some boiling water, spread the chicken nuggets on a tray, and place it in the oven. I’m in a trance. Still scolding myself for yelling at her about my stupid ass shoes. I can’t stand to look at them anymore. I go outside to take out the garbage and slip off my Nikes and toss them in the trash bin. Before I go back inside, I wait for a minute and try and compose myself:

Come on. Get it together. Calm. The fuck. Down. Now breathe.

I don’t care what Cassandra says. I *know* all that mental illness in my family is going to get me too. I’ve gotta keep fighting it. I’m all Sophia has.

While we eat, we go over her math homework.

“I need help with this problem,” she says sliding her worksheet over. “How do you do equivalent fractions?”

“Are you being serious right now?” I ask. “You’re in fourth grade. What happened to adding and subtracting?”

“Dad, that was last year,” she says. “Remember?”

“Yeah, well, I’m your go-to guy when it comes to reading and writing, but for this stuff? I think we better turn to YouTube. Sure wish we had this when I was failing math.”

Thanks to some math geek who was good enough to post a tutorial on fractions for fourth graders, we muddle our way through the homework.

“Dinner O.K.?” I ask.

“The best,” she says dipping a nugget into the cheesy residue on her plate.

“Dad? Do we have a million dollars?”

“Soph? Look around? You see this little apartment?” I say stretching my arms out for emphasis. “Now think of those huge houses we pass on Sunset when we go to Hollywood for the movies. The people who live in *those* houses? *Those* are millionaires.”

“But you take care of animals,” she says. “That’s a *really* important job.”

“Well, the animal doctors make the big money,” I say. “I’m just a vet tech. My job is never going to pay me enough for us to live in one of those big houses. Do you want to live in one of those big houses?”

“No. It’s O.K.,” she says. “I like where we live.”

“Me too,” I say messing up her hair. “As long as you’re with me.”

“And the dogs,” she adds.

We do the dishes together. Sophia stands on a footstool so she can reach the sink. The oversized apron hangs down to her feet and the bright yellow dishwashing gloves go up past her elbows.

After Sophia’s bath, she sits in front of the bathroom mirror while I brush her long straight blonde hair, then make a ponytail with her favorite leopard print scrunchie. I stand behind her, watching her watch me in the mirror, and wonder if she wishes she had her mom for this.

Suddenly, Sophia cries out, “*Dad, look at Coco! Look at Coco! She has Mars!*”

“*What the?*” I say looking down at Coco who is prancing proudly with Mars from Sophie’s mini-solar system in her mouth. “Jeez Coco,” I say. “Gimme that. *Honestly.*”

“That’s so wacky,” Sophia says still laughing.

I start going over the mail, and Sophia asks, “Dad, will you make me a plane flying through the sky!”

“Oh Soph,” I say a little pained. “You’re getting so big for that.”

“Come on,” she pleads. “Make me a plane, and say what you always say.”

I can’t say no, so I get on the floor on my back. She leans over and takes my hands and rests her hips on my feet. I hoist her over my head so she can stretch herself out like a big soaring plane.

“Da plane! Da plane!” I say looking up at her. She looks so blissful. I could watch her soar through the air all night, but I lose my grip, and she collapses on top of me. We start laughing then I start nibbling on her cherub cheeks.

“Dad!” she protests. “Stop eating my cheeks!”

“But they’re so chewy,” I say helping her onto her feet.

“Let’s watch a movie,” she says. “I’ll get it all set up, and you get the strawberries and whipped cream, O.K.?”

I give her a thumbs up and send her off to pick something while I go through the stack of mail. Christmas cards, bills, bills...and this:

EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE GRACE

Ms. Audrey Robertson
Requests the pleasure of your company
At the marriage of her daughter
Anna Robertson to Keith Ramsey
Twenty-Ninth of March 2008 at 4 pm
St. Brendan Church, 310 S. Van Ness, Windsor Square
Reception to follow

Keith warned me it was coming, but to hold it in my hands? Yeah.

“Come on, Dad,” Sophia calls out. “I’ve got everything ready!”

“Be right there, Soph,” I say still trying to process everything. I top the strawberries with a big mound of whipped cream and join her on her blue mini-foldout sofa. Cooper wedges himself next to me; Coco next to Sophia.

She chose *The Aristocats*. We practically have the movie memorized. I try to stay present and laugh at the funny bits on cue, but I’m picturing Anna standing on the altar marrying my best friend. Well, he used to be my best friend.

It’s later now, and I’m tucking Sophia in.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” I say. “You know, for yelling at you about my stupid shoes? That was really dumb.”

“It’s O.K., Dad,” she says in her quiet sleepy voice.

“Goodnight, Soph. Love you,” I say turning off her light.

“Aren’t you going to say it?” she asks.

“Sorry. Just you and me...”

“...always and forever,” she answers.

I’m not sleepy so I take a seat out on the porch. Our apartment sits right across the courtyard that has a fountain and a statue of a peeing cherub. After I tuck in Sophia, I like to sit out here on this old frayed wicker chair, listen to music, and try to write. Cooper and Coco, as always, settle in right at my feet.

It’s just started to rain. Not too hard. Just those big thumping raindrops that give you a whiff of newly wet asphalt. I try to pick up what I was writing earlier about the old couple on the bench, but nothing’s coming. I reach for the envelope with the wedding invitation, open it and read it again. Fuck me. That should be my name on there, not Keith’s.

It’s starting to rain harder so I get up and lean against the front doorjamb and watch the rain come down. It sounds like bacon frying.

You might wonder how it came to this. How my best friend ended up with the only girl I ever loved. How it all changed in one night. How I ended up a single father. It all started our first day of college when I spotted Anna gliding confidently across that big grass field rocking Wayfarer Ray-Bans better than anyone. For in that moment and ever since, its felt like...destiny.

* * *

EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE GRACE

PART 1
BACK IN COLLEGE

3

FRESHMAN REGISTRATION DAY
SEPTEMBER 26, 1994

As I make my way down Janss Steps, Wilson Plaza is starting to fill up with bewildered incoming freshmen milling around the grassy expanse. Same place the truck driver dropped off John Cusack and Daphne Zuniga in *The Sure Thing*.

I take a seat three steps from the bottom and pull down the bill of my fisherman's hat to shield the late morning sun. I take my Discman out of the side pocket of the Levi's jacket I'm wearing over my black Sun Records shirt and put on "Gold Soundz" from the new Pavement record. I turn it up loud.

A bevy of all-blondes from Alpha Chi Omega who've volunteered to help run Freshman Registration Day is busy setting up card tables and pop-up canopies so we can get our I.D. photos and officially become part of the Class of 1998.

This is my home turf. I grew up here in L.A., and I've been going to shows and UCLA games on this campus my whole life. They say starting college is a chance to reinvent yourself. Let go of what you were and be whatever you decide. I'm tired of living inside my head and missing everything. No one here knows my baggage. What a music-obsessed loner I've been. Today it changes.

One of the all-blondes starts to helplessly try to control the feedback on a megaphone while announcing everyone should line up according to their last name. I scan the signs posted on six card tables spread out across the field reading: "A-D," "E-H," "I-L," "M-P," "Q-T" and "U-Z.

I start to saunter over when I spot a pretty brunette in shades gliding confidently across the field. I feel myself gravitate in her direction when out

of the corner of my eye I spot a tall good-looking guy picking up the same scent, so I double-time it.

With a strong final kick, I slide in line just behind the pretty girl.

“Sorry dude,” I tell him. “Too slow.”

“Whatever,” the guy says waving me off.

The pretty girl peers over her shoulder and dips her sunglasses down to take a look. Her big brown velvety eyes feel heavy on me, but I brace myself and try to act cool.

“Welcome to L.A.,” I say. “I’m Benjamin. Benjamin Bradford.”

“Anna,” she says like it rhymes with Ghana.

She looks like a young Ali MacGraw. Straight brown shoulder-length hair parted off to one side. Full eyebrows and perfect smooth olive skin.

“What makes you think I’m from out of town?” she asks.

“Clairvoyance. That and your shirt,” I add pointing at the City Lights Bookstore tee she’s wearing under an unbuttoned black and white polka dot blouse.

She looks down at the logo but doesn’t give any ground.

“Bradford, huh? Aren’t you supposed to be in *that* line?” she asks pointing to the “A-D” sign across the way.

A universe away, I think to myself.

“You heard her,” the pretty boy says like he’s the line narc.

“Dude, I’m not moving,” I say trying to ignore his imposing stature, his sandy brown hair, his dreamy light blue eyes. Looks a little like a young Steve McQueen. Wait. Weren’t Ali MacGraw and Steve McQueen married? Jesus.

* * *