# *The Immigrant Story*

by

Grace Paley

Jack asked me, Isn't it a terrible thing to grow up in the shadow of another person's sorrow?

I suppose so, I answered. As you know, I grew up in the summer sunlight of upward mobility. This leached out a lot of that dark ancestral grief.

He went on with his life. It's not your fault if that's the case. Your bad disposition is not your fault. Yet you're always angry. No way out but continuous rage or the nuthouse.

What if this sorrow is all due to history? I asked.

The cruel history of Europe, he said. In this way he showed ironic respect to one of my known themes.

The whole world ought to be opposed to Europe for its cruel history, Jack, and yet in favor of it because after about a thousand years it may have learned some sense.

Nonsense, he said objectively, a thousand years of outgoing persistent imperial cruelty tends to make enemies and if all you have to deal with these enemies is good sense, what then?

My dear, no one knows the power of good sense. It hasn't been built up or experimented with sufficiently.

I'm trying to tell you something, he said. Listen. One day I woke up and my father was asleep in the crib.

I wonder why, I said.

My mother made him sleep in the crib.

All the time?

That time anyway. That time I saw him.

I wonder why, I said.

Because she didn't want him to fuck her, he said.

No, I don't believe that. Who told you that?

I know it! He pointed his finger at me.

I don't believe it, I said. Unless she's had five babies all in a row or they have to get up at 6 a.m. or they both hate each other, most people like their husbands to do that.

Bullshit! She was trying to make him feel guilty. Where were his balls?

I will never respond to that question. Asked in a worried way again and again, it may become responsible for the destruction of the entire world. I gave it two minutes of silence.

He said, Misery misery misery. Grayness. I see it all very very gray. My mother approaches the crib. Shmul, she says, get up. Run down to the corner and get me half a pound of pot cheese. Then run over the drugstore and get a few ounces cod-liver oil. My father, scrunched like an old gray fetus, looks up and smiles smiles smiles at the bitch.

How do *you* know what was going on? I asked. You were five years old.

What do you think was going on?

I'll tell you. It's not so hard. Any dope who's had a normal life could tell you. Anyone whose head hasn't been fermenting with the compost of ten years of gluttonous analysis. Anyone could tell you.

Tell me what? he screamed.

The reason your father was sleeping in the crib was that you and your sister who usually slept in the crib had scarlet fever and needed the decent beds and more room to sweat, come to a fever crisis, and either get well or die.

Who told you that? He lunged at me as though I was an enemy.

You fucking enemy, he said. You always see things in a rosy light. You have a rotten rosy temperament. You were like that



in sixth grade. One day you brought three American flags to school.

That was true. I made an announcement to the sixth-grade assembly thirty years ago. I said: I thank God every day that I'm not in Europe. I thank God I'm American-born and live on East 172nd Street where there is a grocery store, a candy store, and a drugstore on one corner and on the same block a shul and two doctors' offices.

One Hundred and Seventy-second Street was a pile of shit, he said. Everyone was on relief except you. Thirty people had t.b. Citizens and noncitizens alike starving until the war. Thank God capitalism has a war it can pull out of the old feed bag every now and then or we'd all be dead. Ha ha.

I'm glad that you're not totally brainwashed by stocks, bonds, and cash. I'm glad to hear you still mention capitalism from time to time.

Because of poverty, brilliance, and the early appearance of lots of soft hair on face and crotch, my friend Jack was a noticeable Marxist and Freudian by the morning of his twelfth birthday.

In fact, his mind thickened with ideas. I continued to put out more flags. There were twenty-eight flags aflutter in different rooms and windows. I had one tattooed onto my arm. It has gotten dimmer but a lot wider because of middle age.

I am probably more radical than you are nowadays, I said. Since I was not wiped out of my profession during the McCarthy inquisitions, I therefore did not have to go into business for myself and make a fortune.

You damn fool. Plenty are wiped out to this day. I mean brilliant guys—engineers, teachers, just broken—broken.

I believe I see the world as clearly as you do, I said. Rosiness is not a worse windowpane than gloomy gray when viewing the world.

Yes yes yes yes yes yes yes, he said. Do you mind? Just listen:

My mother and father came from a small town in Poland. They had three sons. My father decided to go to America, to

(1) stay out of the army, (2) stay out of jail, (3) save his children from everyday wars and ordinary pogroms. He was helped by the savings of parents, uncles, grandmothers and set off like hundreds of thousands of others in that year. In America, New York City, he lived a hard but hopeful life. Sometimes he walked on Delancey Street. Sometimes like a bachelor he went to the theater on Second Avenue. Mostly he put his money away for the day he could bring his wife and sons to this place. Meanwhile, in Poland famine struck. Not hunger, which all Americans suffer six, seven times a day, but Famine, which tells the body to consume itself. First the fat, then the meat, the muscle, then the blood. Famine ate up the bodies of the little boys pretty quickly. My father met my mother at the boat. He looked at her face, her hands. There was no baby in her arms, no children dragging at her skirt. She was not wearing her hair in two long black braids. There was a kerchief over a dark wiry wig. She had shaved her head, like a backward Orthodox bride, though they had been serious advanced socialists like most of the youth of their town. He took her by the hand and brought her home. They never went anywhere alone, except to work or the grocer's. They held each other's hand when they sat down at the table, even at breakfast. Sometimes he patted her hand, sometimes she patted his. He read the paper to her every night.

They are sitting at the edge of their chairs. He's leaning forward reading to her in that old bulb light. Sometimes she smiles just a little. Then he puts the paper down and takes both her hands in his as though they needed warmth. He continues to read. Just beyond the table and their heads, there is the darkness of the kitchen, the bedroom, the dining room, the shadowy darkness where as a child I ate my supper, did my homework, and went to bed.