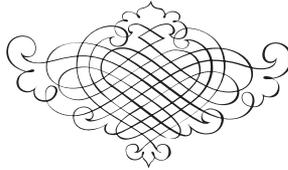


*The Man
in the
Dark*

A ROMANCE NOVEL BY
DOUGLAS WILSON

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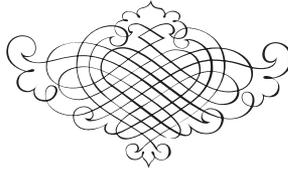
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SAVANNAH WESTMORELAND

*Thou art beautiful, O my love, as Tirzah,
comely as Jerusalem, terrible as an army with banners.*

SONG OF SONGS 6:4



One solitary mountain sat about five miles north-east of the small town of Paradise Valley. It was a short ridge with modest ambitions, covered with pine, and did not really tower over anything, but when you looked at it directly you saw that it *was* in fact a mountain. The town below it was situated on rolling hills, rich with grain, and the late summer breeze meant that the golden hills were swirling with a stationary yet

mildly agitated activity. It looked just like mischievous whirling spirits were running up and down the hills, and perhaps they were.

A young woman stood looking out at the distant grain—stalks moving in obedience to their invisible authorities. It was Sunday morning, and Savannah Westmoreland was walking to church a little early to avoid making that trek after the heat had become a bit more troublesome. She turned away from watching the grain, somewhat reluctantly, cast a few glances over her shoulder, and started off. The walk home after church would be hot, but at least it would all be downhill.

Savannah had first tried the Presbyterian church on the hill on the eastern edge of town when she had arrived in town five years before, had loved it, and had been making that same walk ever since. She had felt a little bad about her instant loyalty to just one church, because she had always intended to try the others, but she had never gotten around to it. She was very happy right where she was—happy with everything, that is, except for the loss of their dear pastor the previous winter. He had been a wise and good shepherd, but then, like a character right out of Genesis, he had been found to be full of years. One night at prayer meeting—Savannah had been there at that meeting—he told everyone that it was time to follow his Emma, and late that night he was gathered to his people, also as in Genesis. Emma, his wife of forty years, had died two years before.

And this was now the second Sunday since the arrival of their new pastor, the Rev. Thomas Goforth.

Savannah was looking forward to hearing him preach again, even though his first venture last Sunday had been more . . . *interesting* than edifying. He was a tall, good-looking man, with black hair parted in the middle, and he had quite a good pulpit presence. He had begun very well, and seemed quite assured of his text. But about five minutes into the message, Savannah had looked down for just a moment at her handbag, and it seemed that at just that second, he had somehow lost the center. The sermon began mysteriously to meander, and though many good things were still said, they all seemed like pearls rolling around on a table without any thread to make them into a necklace. Although it was not *terrible*, Savannah had still been a little bit embarrassed for him. And since she deeply hated being embarrassed for other people in that kind of way, she had departed for home that first Sunday through the side door. And this was why she had not yet met Pastor Thomas at the back of the sanctuary the way almost everyone else had done.

But she was looking forward to meeting him this Sunday. For some reason, she had come to assume that last week had simply been a case of the first sermon jitters and that everything this week would be quite naturally improved.

As, in fact, it was. This week was quite different. When he first ascended into the pulpit this time, Savannah noticed that his aquiline nose was slightly bent to the right, as if it had been broken in a football game or a boxing match. As she found out later, it had in

fact been both—the football game taking it to the left, and the boxing match moving it back to the right and a little farther over.

He began his message, this second message, in a very composed frame, and while he did warm to his subject, it was not without ministerial dignity, and he also finished composed. The pearls were still there, and the thread was now there. Now *that* was a necklace. Most important to Savannah was that he was coherent throughout. In her daily task of teaching school, she was fierce with her high school students about coherence. With her students, she could insist on it, and because she was a good teacher, she could usually make it happen. When her peers were incoherent, there was nothing she could do but feel embarrassed for them, which she hated.

But whatever had happened the previous week did not happen this time, and everyone in the congregation of about one hundred saints was quite content. She would have no trouble this week going out the main door, looking her new minister straight in the eye, shaking his hand, greeting him, and welcoming him into their warm little community. And after the final *amen*, and visiting with her friends for twenty minutes, that is exactly what she did.

However, as she did so, coming close enough to him to shake his hand, she felt like she was in the presence of someone . . . formidable somehow. She wasn't sure she liked that. And she was also just as sure she did like it. And he was taller than she had thought.

“Welcome to Paradise,” she said. She quickly introduced herself, made a few comments about the heat, school-teaching, and the sermon, in that order, and then moved out to the street with all appropriate decorum.

He had greeted her warmly, but no more warmly than the Widow Gooch right in front of her and Mr. Parsons the wheat farmer just behind. But as she turned left at the bottom of the stairs to return by her usual route to her boardinghouse, which was just down 3rd Street, she noticed that right behind Mr. Parsons was Mr. Lambeth, the banker.

Mr. Lambeth. He was the only suitor she had ever had in this town, and it had taken three painful visits, each one of them increasingly awkward, to persuade him to rejoin the ranks of all those who were not her suitors. He had been quite persistent, and quite displeased at his lack of success. He was not at all used to being told *no*. He had moved out to the Pacific Northwest several years before—from Delaware, she thought—and he had *not* moved out west in order to have his will crossed. He had big plans, extensive abilities, and an ambition to match. Things usually went his way at the bank, and the tellers were all terrified of him, but Savannah wasn’t there at the bank. She had been singularly uncooperative in his campaign for romantic conquest. If pressed for her reasons by a friend, she would have said nothing. She would have told herself that she didn’t like the shape of his head, but there was more to it than that.

Lambeth was a sturdy man, but by no means fat. His brown hair was longer on top, and cropped closely

at the sides. He had small ears, but not absurdly small. He was not unattractive, but he wasn't really attractive either. He was an inch or two taller than Savannah. She had nothing against his looks, but his looks didn't exactly present any strong counterarguments against the "not Lambeth" sentiment that had taken a deep root in Savannah.

So now Mr. Lambeth shook the hand of the new minister firmly, but from what Savannah could see in just a brief moment, both men looked wary. They were each circling the other without actually doing so. "Reverend," Lambeth said. The new minister grinned in return. "On my good days," he said. "Intermittently reverend on the others."

Savannah looked away, wondering what might come of all *that*, and headed back home to her room at Mrs. Fuller's. Mrs. Fuller ran a boardinghouse that was straight across the street from the mechanical shop that tended to the town's cars, all twenty of them.

Mrs. Fuller owned one of those cars, and from time to time she let Savannah take it out. But Savannah did not abuse the privilege—she would only ask to borrow it a couple times in a year. She had once found a place outside of town where she would drive the car, park it, walk up a small hill she had discovered that had a glorious prospect to the south. There she would look at the hills, and pray and cry.

The people at church thought her the most marriageable woman they knew—especially all the women thought it—and she knew what they could not

know, which was that her prospects for a real Christian marriage were as slim as they could possibly be. But her time on that hill was the only time she ever allowed herself to think at all about her time in Milwaukee, and apart from these occasional visits to the hill she was, for the most part, honestly and consistently cheerful.

She came to herself and found she was at the foot of her front steps, and not back on her hill at all. She shook herself out of her melancholy reverie, which was surprising for being a little out of place, and began to walk slowly up the steps. "Dinner is on, dearie!" Mrs. Fuller said out the window. "Just in time—everybody else is here."

As Savannah reached the front door, Mrs. Fuller met her there in order to whisper in her ear before they got to the table. "There's only one woman in town pretty enough for *that* minister," she said.

"Shush," Savannah said. "Quite impossible."

"Oh, I already have it all worked out for you," she laughed. Mrs. Fuller was a true boardinghouse cook—cheerful, plump, a feminine mechanic with the pans, and a mysterious force of nature among the sauces.

Savannah washed up quickly and made her way back out to the dining room. The other boarders were already gathered, and Savannah looked at them with her usual mixture of affection and annoyance. She was working on that annoyance—it was not nearly what it had been several years ago. Sometimes it wasn't even there at all. Savannah was quick-witted, but just

as quick with her tongue, and quick-tempered if she didn't watch it carefully. And it had been her misfortune to live in the same house with several boarders who were not nearly so quick, but who were unfortunately not aware of any notable discrepancies between themselves and others who were. But they were all dears, Savannah told herself again. She really was making headway.

Mrs. Fuller set the Sunday roast on the table, and sat down at the head of the table. Savannah sat to her right, and across from her was Bernie McDowell, an amateur theologian and fond critic of sermons. He was eager for Mrs. Fuller to say grace so that he could start in on Pastor Thomas's submission to the critics this very morning. To his left was a young man who worked at the feed store, Forrest Sampson, who was desperately in love with Miss Eleanor Simpson, straight across from him, who would only have to change one *letter* in her name, if only she would consent to be his wife, which was not going to happen any time soon if Forrest remained as tongue-tied as he had been up to the present.

To Miss Simpson's right was Jack Smith, who was as sturdy and predictable as his name might seem to indicate. He had lived in the boardinghouse for two years, ever since his wife had died; he owned and operated the hardware and dry goods store on Main Street. Mrs. Fuller was giving him an appropriate amount of time for grieving before she began making him aware of his clear and manifest need for a wife. Across from

Jack was Taylor Alfsson, a teller at the bank and a main source of information about Alan Lambeth's routine and characteristic rages there. Taylor would have known more about those rages first hand if Lambeth ever found out that his rollicking stories at the boardinghouse were the main but unspoken reason why Savannah had not even considered giving Lambeth the time of day.

Mrs. Warner, now in her nineties, no longer came to the table, but took her meals in her room. Mrs. Fuller was still able to care for her without too much trouble, but was beginning to wonder how long she would be able to do so. Savannah had gotten into the pattern of visiting Mrs. Warner several times a week in order to read to her for an hour or so.

At the opposite end of the table from Mrs. Fuller sat Elizabeth Sarandon, Savannah's rival for Alan Lambeth's affection. But of course there was no rivalry at all, for as far as Savannah was concerned Elizabeth could have him, and the sooner the better. However Elizabeth could not feel any depth of sincerity in this sentiment—and it was merely an unexpressed sentiment, for they had never talked about it—because she *thought* that Savannah was merely playing coy with Lambeth's affections, and she *knew* that Savannah was prettier than she was. That was enough to establish a settled enmity toward Savannah, although—with just a few exceptions—it had been consistently covered over with a sugar glaze, mingled strangely throughout with a grudging respect.

And Savannah *was* prettier, but it would have been much more of a contest if Elizabeth had been able to deal with a look of disdain that she perpetually had. Savannah, by contrast, was open and cheerful, and quick to laugh. Her hair, when she wasn't wearing it in her official schoolteacher bun, was a thick auburn waterfall down on her shoulders. She had a beautiful figure, and a slightly tip-tilted nose. Because she was quick to laugh, her teeth, which were straighter and whiter than Elizabeth thought they ought to have been, had been seen many times laughing around that very table. Elizabeth had been looking at Savannah again, and she made herself look down at her plate.

Mrs. Fuller finished saying her standard grace, and Bernie cleared his throat portentously. "Yes, Bernie," Mrs. Fuller said. "Was it something about the sermon?"

"Well, of course," Bernie replied. Bernie, an earnest little man in his late twenties, an odd mixture of toughness, insecurity, and conceit. He was slight of build, but he worked at the sawmill, and for the most part acquitted himself well there. He had come to believe, for various reasons, that he was destined for higher things, and his penchant for theology was one of the reasons why he considered himself an aspirant toward those higher things. He was scared of Savannah but, as he told himself, he was consistently careful in his speech around her, because his concern was to not lead her on. It wouldn't be fair, he told himself. Not gentlemanly.

"The sermon," Mrs. Fuller prompted.

“Yes,” Bernie responded. “The sermon. Pastor Goforth seemed generally well-prepared this week—not at all like his first sermon—but I heard one thing that was a slight concern to me.”

Savannah caught herself just in time. She found that she was about to defend last week’s sermon, and to do so in spite of completely agreeing with Bernie about it. *That* was not a good sign. She found herself coloring slightly, and then she noticed that Mrs. Fuller had noticed it. Mrs. Fuller knew her very well, and was shrewder than most all of her friends. To prevent anyone *else* from noticing, she asked a question she ordinarily would not ask, which was, “What was the slight concern?”

“Well, Pastor Goforth comes to us from Princeton, so this shouldn’t be a surprise, but there seemed to be more than a hint of infralapsarianism in his treatment of election. Didn’t it seem that way to you?”

Reactions around the table were mixed, but everyone was cautiously polite. Savannah was the only one who had ever even encountered that word before, and she still didn’t know what it meant. Forrest was busy thinking about Eleanor, Elizabeth was thinking about Savannah, and Jack, Eleanor, Taylor, Mrs. Fuller and Savannah were looking straight at Bernie, waiting for more.

Finally Jack said, “What difference does it make?”

This was the only invitation that Bernie needed, and so he began to talk, waving his fork languidly over his cooling potatoes. “It makes all the difference in the

world . . ." he began. Theology was going to be his ticket out of the sawmill.

Savannah listened intently, interested in spite of herself, and finally blurted out, "You mean that God created the world so that He could have somebody to damn?"

"No, no," Bernie said. "That's what people always say, but it is a canard . . ."

At that moment, the little bell in Mrs. Warner's room rang, and Savannah nodded at Mrs. Fuller. "I'll get it," Savannah said. She was gone for a small while, taking Mrs. Warner her tea, and when she returned, and offered tea to the whole table, the subject had moved on. Actually, it is not quite accurate to say the subject had moved on. Taylor had started to make fun of Bernie, and Mrs. Fuller had then decreed that the topic was not a subject fit for the Sabbath anyway, which it wasn't.

Savannah sat back down to her cup of tea, and Mrs. Fuller said, "Did anyone smell the pies baking yesterday?" They all had, which is why no one had left the table, especially not Jack. Mrs. Fuller had less work before her than she was actually imagining.

"What kind?" Jack said hopefully. Mrs. Fuller was disappearing into the kitchen, and said "Apple" over her shoulder.

"Aside from your *infrassp*, whatever that was, I do have some news about your new pastor." Taylor went to the Swedish Baptist church several blocks away from the Presbyterian church, and was not interested in the doctrinal issues that roiled the Presbyterians.

But he was interested in people, and how people responded to people.

"You should have heard Mr. Lambeth talking about your new Pastor Thomas this last Friday. Some people from your church were in his office—I think their name is Weston—and he left his door open—he does that on purpose, I think—and he was saying loudly that the sermon last Sunday was a disaster on wheels."

Savannah found herself reacting again, but this time she showed no sign of it. "Stay right where you are," she told herself sternly.

This time she was aware of her defensive reaction, and was able to restrain it more easily than when Bernie had brought up the tender subject. But she was still concerned. Mr. Lambeth was in more of a position to do harm to the church if he began agitating. Bernie was just a talker. Mr. Lambeth was not.

"I think that whatever happened last Sunday," Savannah said, "it is under control now. The sermon today was a fine specimen . . . of the sermonic arts."

"Sermonic arts?" Eleanor said.

"I couldn't think what to say. It was a fine sermon. I think Mr. Lambeth will have to look elsewhere if he wants to find fault."

Mrs. Fuller reappeared, and began placing pieces of pie before each of them.

"Oh, I think he fully intends to find fault," Taylor said. "If not the sermons, then something else. I was talking to Mr. Dooley once, the old-timer who lives down at the Hotel, and he told me about the time that

Wyatt Earp rode through, back in the day. The sheriff then was a retired gunfighter from down Utah way, and when those two met, you could hear the air just a crackling around them. It was a good thing they met at a church picnic, Dooley said. This reminds me of that. It seems that Mr. Lambeth knew right off that Pastor Thomas Goforth was not going to be his fishing companion for life."

Taylor had a shock of thick sandy red hair, and several constellations of freckles across the bridge of his nose. He had a quick and ready smile, and a bright wit. He didn't know it yet, but theology actually *was* going to be his ticket out of the bank. But for the present, he was happy with his work—Mr. Lambeth's tirades notwithstanding—and doing anything else had not yet occurred to him.

"Did Mr. Lambeth say anything else?" Savannah asked.

"No, no, just what a mess the sermon was. But he said that in twenty different ways. And there was a lot of cussing. Do all you Presbyterians talk like that?"

"No," said Mrs. Fuller, Bernie, and Savannah.

"I was just jibing," Taylor laughed. "Most of you are fine Christians. But I work for that man. He is a banker and a man of business, and so he has to join *some* church. How else can you meet people in such a way as to show them you are morally upright? But whatever church he wound up joining, the pastor of it would have his hands full—Mr. Lambeth is as fully heathen as the king of the Amalekites."

Savannah was poking at her pie with her fork. What was her duty to Pastor Thomas? She didn't want to pass on gossip. She didn't want him to not know if Lambeth was after him. But she didn't want to talk with Pastor Thomas about *anything* serious. And she didn't want to not talk with him either.

She tasted the pie, which was very good.

The old timers still called it Paradise City, or sometimes Paradise Valley. As the apostle Paul once noted on another subject, everyone was fully convinced in his own mind. But technically the unnamed person who registered the town with its first post office had just called it Paradise for short, and that was the name that had caught on. A few of the old timers objected, saying that it might be Paradise *now*, given that all the women were no longer back east, but the town was named earlier than that. But after the women began to arrive, the grumbling didn't exactly subside, although it did become a bit more good-natured. There had been one brief period when some people tried to call the town Hog Heaven—the camas root being plentiful, and a particular favorite with the pigs. But that name had failed to grip, and Paradise easily won out.

The farming was good in the surrounding fields, and off to the east the logging was just as good. But the thing that really put Paradise on the map was the decision of the state legislature to settle the masthead university of the state there in Paradise. This was an unusual move in that Paradise was way up north in the panhandle, but some thought that this was intended

to make amends for the way that the state capital had been stolen—quite literally stolen—from Lewiston.

Lewiston, not far from Paradise, had been the capital of the territory, but when Lincoln was shot it had created a *lot* of turmoil, and an opportunity created by the distraction. In the immediate tumult after the assassination, a few civic-minded brigands had taken it upon themselves to make sure that the capital city was relocated down south in Boise. So they showed up in Lewiston with their guns, and commandeered the state seal, along with all the other official paraphernalia, and carted it off with them. It was as naked a power grab as you could ever hope to find in a history book about Vikings, but to their credit the Southerners had been kind of sheepish about it after the fact. Their sense of wrongdoing was not pronounced enough to make them want to undo the wrong, but it was enough to induce them to put the state university in Paradise as a consolation prize. That had happened in the waning years of the 19th century, and so it was then that the small town had really begun to flourish.

A minor gold rush around the same time had helped the local economy some, but there had not been enough gold on the mountain to keep the mines open whenever the price of gold went down, which it did from time to time, and so nothing really ever came of that.

The main roads in town were decent, or as good as macadamized roads could be. Main Street ran north and south, turned into highway at the edge of town,

one which ran all the way up to Canada. This was a source of consternation to settlers from states like Nebraska, where Main Street was always supposed to run east-west, but they eventually got used to it. Many of the side streets were simply graveled, and some of them were still just dust and dirt. Most of the year they were passable, but when it began to rain in the late autumn, the mud was abundant and more than a little formidable. Third Street was the other main road, and it ran east and west. Going west you ran into Washington State within just a few miles, and going east you would run up a long sloping hill, pass East City Park on your left, and nothing past that but the edge of town, eight miles of prime farmland, and after that the wilderness, countless miles of pine trees.

There was an old decayed fort from the time of the last Indian wars that could still be made out, but most of the area north of the city park was just a very nice neighborhood now. As a token of respect for their past, they called it the Fort Russell area, but nobody really noticed the outlines of the abandoned fort. But despite the nice homes, touches of the rustic were still very much in evidence. The wealthier citizens of Paradise lived up there on that modest hill, but they still, many of them, kept a cow. A boy would come around every morning, gather up the various cows, and walk them all out to a pasture on the edge of town. In the evening, he would walk them all back in again, the residents would get their fresh milk in the morning, and the whole operation would be repeated again.

Cars were just starting to make a serious appearance, and it was expected by everyone that in just a few years there would be many more. But for now, there were still many on horseback, and not a few horse-drawn wagons. For those who traveled on foot, it was possible to walk from the east side of town, where the cows were pasturing, over to the west side, just beyond downtown, in about twenty minutes.

On the south end of Main Street, construction had begun on a new fire station for the volunteer fire department. That new building was to be of brick, and the old clapboard station was looking forward to its coming retirement.

The wealthier homes in town were decorated in the ways most homes back East were done in that day—a heavy emphasis on dark and heavy wallpaper, drapes with fringe, lampshades with fringe, and brass and mahogany in abundance. Some, trying to vie with the silver barons up north laid it on thick. Other more sensible people showed some restraint, but everyone was working with the same basic materials. Furnishings were mostly thick and substantial.

The weather was generally mild, although Paradise *was* capable of having a real winter. That would happen every five years or so. But most winters brought snow, and then rain, and then snow, and snow a bit more, and then melt again. Below-zero temperatures for a week or two were common, and in the summer the same thing in the opposite direction usually brought temperatures over a hundred. But for the most part,

once spring decided to arrive and remain settled, the weather was steadily glorious through October.

That Sunday evening, the day of Pastor Goforth's second sermon, having been just such a glorious day, Savannah stood on the porch of Mrs. Fuller's boardinghouse, arms crossed contentedly, watching the sun go down. She had not yet gotten used to how gaudy the sunsets could be here, showing no self-restraint at all. When she had had enough—although she would never really have enough—she sighed and turned to go inside the house.