



## How Grace Hastens Hell: Reflections on Lars von Trier's *Dogville*

by Dale Fincher

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From the sole of the foot even to the head,  
there is no soundness in it,  
but **bruises and sores**  
**and raw wounds;**  
they are not pressed out or bound up  
or softened with oil.

Isaiah 1:6-7

Your country lies desolate;  
**your cities are burned with fire;**  
in your very presence  
foreigners devour your land;  
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.

"I'm Grace. What can I do for you?"

Our show opens with a woman, Grace, running from nobody-knows-where. She shares no story and asks only for a refuge. The gangsters are hunting her; as are the police. Nobody knows

*Behind the goodness is the pending doom. A desired yet sober offering. The best of news, the worst of news. What will we do with Grace?*

why. They don't ask but give her two weeks to prove herself.

Our show is an experience. Get into the shoes and walk around Dogville a bit. You know these people. They are your community, your neighbors, you.

Grace believes everyone is a good person when they hold to hope and pursue their dreams. This is the light she shines through the windows of the town as Tom tours her from house to house, narrating the occupations and debaucheries of the folks inside. Tom is our philosopher, the one whose ideas rarely make it into his fingers and toes. His book never leaves the first chapter.

The town has no "needs" for others. "Try so-and-so," comes each reply to Grace's offers of service. But as little "wants" are fulfilled by her, like cleaning up the gooseberry bushes, everyone's "wants" grow into "needs."

Freedom begins to show itself to the small town of Dogville. They like its taste. They feel permission to smile. They expand. They love the warmth and sunshine Grace brings to their lives.

July 4. Appreciation for Grace is shared around the community table. Their Freedom Day. Until the Law arrives.

The Law throws fear into their hearts, though they know Grace is not guilty of the Law's accusation.

"Robbed a bank two weeks ago," the officer said.  
"Well, that's after Grace came to stay with us," said the town to itself.

Yet, despite having Grace among them, the town fears the Law. They fear being caught violating what is not truthfully unlawful.

Then come threats. Guilt often brings uncertain anger, shortened vision, and anguished selfishness.  
"If you work harder for us to make up for the risk we're taking, that'd keep us from turning you in."

Grace becomes a victim. Her offering of sunshine and service turns into slavery. Her compassion returns to her as lust.

Isaiah spoke of such after the vision of the Lord.

Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;  
lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed. Isaiah 6:10

Does God arbitrarily create victims for destruction? Have they no hope or choice? Or does his Grace roll in a fire of compassion to reveal even darker darkness? Does God intend his Grace to be abused? It seems Grace, when deliberately shared, capably reveals the hardness of the heart as much as it may soften it. It secures the knowledge of evil in the minds of the evil. Judgment is not received ignorantly.

But Grace hopes the people are good—good to the bone. When they realize they are manipulating her, she thinks, when they realize they have dragged slime into her soul, they will turn to goodness. She can forgive it for sake of their change. They will change. People aren't all bad.

Chained to an iron wheel, locked inside her room, Grace awaits. The gangsters will soon relieve the town of their sunshine.

Here all things turn.

Her father is the Gangster-Head. He disagrees with Grace and picks up the argument she fled before finding Dogville. Compassion will not cure a rabid dog. Dogs are dogs, he says. It's their nature. They will always abuse Grace.

Grace makes her final steps through town, navigating the still, small army of mafia pointing their guns at the townspeople. She again sees the mountain spires and feels the goodness of the earth by the blooming gooseberries. The moon shines its coldness across the faces. Grace understands now in the pale hollow light. She sees who is to blame.

With the slightest of words, she orders the killing.

Dogville drowns in a massacre of bullets. **The city is burned with fire, overthrown by foreigners.** Only the dog of Dogville is spared, the least of the animals.

Whose is guilty? Cast your eyes upon the population and find the innocent. The church lady? The maid? The apple farmer? The pupils? The blind man?

Walk those streets and feel the nature of the people pulsing with soul-sickness: envy, greed, lust, **bruises and sores and raw wounds.**

Is God good to create judgment? Can God be good without it?

"I'm Grace. What can I do for you?" Behind the goodness is the pending doom. A desired yet sober offering. The best of news, the worst of news. What will we do with Grace?

Grace gives evil a longer leash. Wretched creatures, we. Hiding our evil in pleasantries. Yet when Grace comes close enough, kind enough, forgiving enough, we show our quality. We abuse her. That's our nature. And judgment is our remedy. Our judgment is a mercy to others. It is a mercy to ourselves.

Will Grace only give us space to seal what we are? Or will she soften us, enmesh our hope, and dawn an endless Freedom Day?

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