

NOWHERE
TO
RUN

A novel by

D. R. Evans

Inspired by a true story

WEDNESDAY

NOWHERE TO RUN

The Town of Replogle, Replogle County, Arkansas — 7:00 p.m.

The doorbell rang.

George Ellsworth — the Reverend Doctor George Matthew Ellsworth to give him his full dignity — lifted his bookmark from the arm of his chair and closed his book around it. He looked at his wife, Mary, who had raised her eyes from her own book at the sound of the bell, and gave her as much of a smile as he could muster.

Mary returned his smile, the encouragement on her face contrasting with the resignation on his. Neither of them spoke. Feeling much older than his thirty nine years, the pastor got out of his comfortable chair. She returned her attention to her book.

He paused in front of the front door, gathered himself, then opened the door. A man of about fifty stood on the porch, sheltering from the rain.

Ellsworth greeted him: “Good evening, Tom. Come on in while I get my coat.”

“Good evening, pastor. How are you?”

Tom Murdoch was heavily constructed, like one of the houses his company built, and he had a deep and powerful voice that matched his bulk. A small shower of drops fell from his coat as he crossed the threshold.

For a moment, the minister considered replying with the truth. Instead, the meaningless words “Fine, and how about you?” escaped his lips before the revolutionary thought had time to gel.

“Fine,” Tom replied. “But I sure hope the weather changes soon. We’ve just started a house over on Tenth Street; you know, on the vacant lot next to the Schultz’s” — Ellsworth nodded vaguely while he found his coat in the closet — “and there’s not a lot we can do while it’s raining like this.”

Tom glanced into the living room and greeted Mary cheerily. She smiled, said “Hi!” then continued reading.

A thought occurred to George as he donned his coat.

“Do they have Bibles?”

“No, but I brought some from Pastor Ives’ church. New Internationals. That OK?”

“Yes. Sure. Fine. Bye, honey.” This last was to Mary, who replied vaguely, “Bye, hon. See you sometime,” without looking up from her book.

“Any idea what time we’ll be back?” George asked the builder.

“Oh, not very late. Around nine, I should think.”

“We’ll be back around nine,” the pastor relayed the information to his wife.

“OK. See you later.” Mary was still reading. Ellsworth was not convinced she had heard him.

The two men went outside. Sheltering on the porch, the rain seemed heavier to George than it had been earlier, although perhaps that was merely a trick of the light. The bulb above their heads lit a hundred ephemeral glistening splinters of rain. Drops pattered on the grass, on the gravel of the driveway, on the wooden shakes of the roof, on the leaves of the encroaching trees.

George Ellsworth paused for a moment to breathe deeply of the cool air. It was rare to have a full day of rain at this time of year, and the moist coolness of the evening was something to be savored and appreciated.

Tom dashed toward his Dodge Caravan. He nimbly dodged a puddle and opened the door. More sedately, the pastor followed. His foot landed in an unseen puddle, and water entered through the small hole in the side of his shoe, soaking his foot.

George climbed in. Even though he had been exposed to the rain for no more than twenty seconds, water had somehow managed to dribble down his neck. As he pulled the door closed, his shirt stuck to his skin.

The vehicle started first time and Tom pulled cautiously forward, following the tight curve of the semicircular driveway. As he moved out on to the street, the wipers thumped steadily.

George glanced back at the house as they drove away. He wished that, just once, he could spend an evening at home doing nothing more spiritual than reading or — perish the thought — watching television. He caught himself wondering, not for the first time, if he was really cut out for this job.

He forced himself to concentrate on the task ahead.

“So, Tom, what exactly have I let myself in for?”

He tried to say it lightheartedly, but only half succeeded.

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“Well, it’s nothing much really. The guards let us have a room to ourselves. I have a stack of Bibles and hymn books back there” — Tom gestured toward the rear of the vehicle — “and we’ll put them on the chairs before we start. Officially, we begin at half after.

“There won’t be much of a turnout, probably somewhere between six and twelve. I’m never sure how many are there because the service means something to them and how many come just to relieve the boredom. Anyway, we’ll start by singing a hymn or two, probably a few verses of *How Great Thou Art* and *Amazing Grace* — nearly everyone knows them — then I’ll introduce you and you can give your talk. If you talk for fifteen minutes or so, that’ll be perfect.

“Then we’ll have a brief time for prayer — I’ll lead that if you like. I always tell them they can pray out loud if they want, but nobody ever does. Then the benediction at the end. Oh, be careful about that. A few months ago one of the pastors started with ‘Go out into the world’ and then realized what he’d said. It was rather embarrassing. Afterwards, we usually hang around for a few minutes in case anyone wants to know more about the Lord. Then we pack up and come home. We should be finished easily inside of an hour.”

George nodded; it was more or less what he had expected. He mentally thanked Tom for warning him about the benediction; he didn’t want the inmates to think him a complete fool.

They turned on to Main Street after slowing perfunctorily at the stop sign. There was no other traffic in sight; the steady rain was keeping everyone at home.

“What’s your text going to be?” Tom asked as he accelerated away from the corner.

“I thought that the start of Ecclesiastes, maybe beginning at verse four, would be appropriate. I didn’t want something too obvious. I expect they get bored with hearing the same passages.”

Tom considered for a moment, then said: “That’s part of the ‘vanity of vanities’ litany, isn’t it? ‘A generation goes, and a generation comes, yet the earth stands firm for ever,’ something like that?”

George was impressed. He was not at all sure he could have quoted the text as accurately as Tom if he had not spent most of yesterday working on the evening’s homily.

Tom continued, “That’s certainly one they won’t have heard before.”

Tom slowed for a light and turned right. George felt the rear wheels skid a few inches as the vehicle turned the corner. The surface of the road was slick from the combination of rain and oil. Tom drove the rest of the way more carefully.

They arrived at 7:18 by the clock in the dash. There were plenty of spaces in the parking lot of the Replogle County Justice Center, which was a small complex of buildings that combined police department, fire station, courthouse and jail. Tom halted and killed the engine. Within moments, rain covered the windshield.

“Go on inside; I’ll get the books out the trunk and meet you in a minute,” Tom said.

He opened his door and got out.

George did likewise. Even though Tom had told him to go inside, some vague feeling of guilt kept him from doing so — it somehow seemed wrong that he should be dry inside while Tom was out here getting wet.

He looked up at the building and wondered how it must feel to have one’s freedom curtailed by society. He knew nothing about the people inside. He could not even begin to guess what made them tick.

The rear door slammed and Tom appeared carrying a box of books. George hurried to the building and held the door open. Tom passed through, the hymn books and Bibles mostly unscathed by their few seconds’ exposure to the rain.

Seated beside a table in the lobby was a police officer with a prominent holster. The officer put down the book he had been reading.

“Good evening,” Tom greeted the guard jovially. “We’re here for an evangelistic meeting at the jail.”

The guard consulted a clipboard. “Names?”

“Tom Murdoch and the Reverend George Ellsworth.”

The guard passed the clipboard across the table. “Sign in, please. The time is 7:22. You know the way?”

“Yes, thank you,” said the builder, and he confidently led the pastor into a concrete labyrinth of hallways.

The room that had been set aside for them was a vacant box with unadorned concrete walls. A single doorway opened at the rear, and five rows of canvas and metal chairs faced the front where two chairs looked back at the bleak, empty rows.

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A cheerless place to try to save men's souls, thought George as he helped Tom put a book on each chair, alternating Bibles with hymn books.

The first inmate entered just as they were finishing. George tried hard not to stare as he evaluated the man, trying to comprehend an entire alien species from a single specimen.

The inmate appeared to be in his mid fifties. He was dressed in gray workclothes that were a size too small for his lanky frame. Strands of gray hair fell forward over a long, thin, sallow, hollow-cheeked face. The man needed a shave: the gray beginnings of a beard were obvious in the harsh light from the overhead fluorescent tubes. The man stepped forward, an anxious look on his face. He nodded towards them, seemed to consider tugging a nonexistent forelock, then thought better of it. Tom moved to greet him.

“Good evening. Ken, isn't it? Glad you could make it.”

“I seen you here before. You going to be the preacher tonight?” the man asked, hanging back from shaking the hand that Tom had extended in greeting.

“No, I'm just helping. This is pastor George; he'll be giving the message tonight.”

George held out his own hand to be shaken, and the gray man promptly switched his attention to the pastor. His handshake was oddly insubstantial.

“I believe in God.”

Ken made the statement with a strange belligerence, as if he was accusing the pastor of unbelief. George felt embarrassed and wished himself far away.

“I believe in God,” the man repeated, sounding less sure of himself this time.

Then he withdrew his hand and turned away, scanning the chairs. He walked to the far end of the third row, moved the book on that chair to an adjacent seat, sat down, and stared blankly at the visitors.

Another inmate entered the room, followed within seconds by two more, and George realized that the gray clothing was a kind of uniform.

He greeted the three newcomers, making an effort to be friendly. He was surprised by something that seemed to be missing. He had expected that there would be something common to the faces of all these men: some hollowness, or a hunted look, or simply an admission

of defeat. All of these were easy to read in the face of the first inmate, but the same could not be said for the others who were entering the room. Certainly some of them appeared that way, but others looked lively and intelligent. A couple of men entered the room laughing gaily, but they smothered their laughter when they saw that the preacher was already present.

By 7:30 there were ten inmates present. Only Ken had taken any interest in the books on the chairs. Ken was now leaning forward in his seat, a Bible open on his knees, his fingers tracing the lines, lips moving slowly to form the words as he read. An unnatural calm had descended over the others as they stared expectantly toward the front of the room, waiting for something to happen.

George wondered what the inmates thought of these monthly meetings. Were they simply an entertaining break in the deadly monotony that must pervade life inside the walls of the jail, or was there something more? Were some of these men really interested in being saved? He tried hard not to judge, but it was impossible not to think that these men, with perhaps the exception of Ken, were here simply because it was something to do on a Wednesday evening.

Tom stood to begin the meeting.

He welcomed the men and introduced George. There was a studied informality to his manner, the builder referring both to himself and his pastor by their first names. He greeted a couple of the men by name. Then he led the group in a short prayer. George bowed his head and closed his eyes. As Tom was drawing to a close, he looked up. He was surprised to find that all the prisoners' heads were lowered. He felt a soupçon of guilt: perhaps he had misjudged them.

"Now let's sing a hymn before we hear from pastor George," continued Tom. "Hoiw about number 25, *How Great Thou Art*?"

The men rose noisily to their feet, scraping their chairs on the linoleum floor, and slowly they flicked pages until, one by one, they found the hymn. Tom began to sing with gusto, leading the men *a capella*. George joined in loudly. The prisoners sang with more or less interest. The result didn't sound much like a hymn of praise.

As they struggled to the end of the last verse, George's concentration was briefly broken by the arrival of another inmate. The newcomer looked as if he had wandered into the room by mistake. His gray clothing was crumpled; the expression on his face was vacant and

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unreadable. From his chin sprouted a wispy red beard. His thinning auburn hair was long and uncombed and hung down the side of his head in unwashed strands.

The man slowly scanned the room with wide, open eyes that fronted a brain that seemed not to be functioning very well. His eyes met George's. George smiled, but the man simply stared at him as if he had not seen the gesture of friendliness. The man took a step forward, then sat in the chair closest to the door, as if he wanted to be sure he could escape should the need arise. He continued to stare at George. The pastor looked away.

"Amen," the group sang in a long, weighty discord.

The prisoners seated themselves noisily, and Tom indicated to George that the floor was his.

Afterwards, George had no recollection of his homily, but at the time he spent the entire fifteen minutes listening to himself speak while watching the blank looks on the prisoners' faces and repeating to himself: *I'm not reaching these men. I'm speaking my language, not theirs. What can I do to make them hear me?* Somehow, he reached the final point of his sermon; but by then his heart was no longer in it, and he knew that his homily was a failure.

Tom stood and introduced the final hymn of the evening. George made a vow to himself that he would never do this again. He turned to hymn number 163. His eyes lighted on the title, and he returned the book to the chair. This was one hymn he knew by heart.

Tom began to lead the singing; this time several of the prisoners joined in enthusiastically.

"Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me," they began. As they gathered confidence, harmonies began to emerge.

George found his attention wandering as a stream of thoughts flashed through his head, brought to mind by the appropriateness of the words. These men understood that they were wretches. They knew how worthless they were because society had told them so. Not for them the illusion of basic goodness that plagued so many people and kept them from the Truth. These prisoners, in their very wretchedness, had one advantage over ordinary people: they could not be deluded into the common heresy that people were good and had no need of a Savior. George found himself thinking, *Yet God's grace is so boundless that it reaches down even to these people and can lift them up in glory.*

He stopped singing and let the words wash over him. Surprisingly, for he was not an emotional man, he felt his eyes beginning to water.

They sang, "I once was lost..." and the minister thought: *Yes, that's right. They really were lost. They had no one to turn to for help and their sins caught up with them. But now they've been found. God has come to them where they are and He offers them all an opportunity to leave their mistakes behind them, for ever. If only they'll listen and accept Him.*

He looked at the men. Several of them, like him, had lowered their hymnals. Singing the words from memory, their faces echoed a joy and radiance that made it impossible not to believe that there was hope for them: even here in jail they might still be saved.

Every man in the room was singing, save only two. One was the pastor himself, too emotional to trust his voice; the other was the man who had entered late, who was standing at the rear of the room, staring vacantly towards the front. The man had not opened the hymnal on the chair beside him. He was separated by several empty chairs from the other prisoners.

In the world but not of the world— the unlikely phrase came unbidden to the pastor's mind, and he felt a sudden yearning to help the man who could not bring himself even to sit with the other inmates.

Reluctantly, George dragged his eyes from the man and prepared to sing the last verse. He closed his eyes and raised his hands, losing himself in his praise of the One who offers hope, not just to these men, but to all mankind.

The hymn drew to its climactic close; then there was a long silence. George lowered his hands and found himself delivering a prayer that God's grace should descend on each and every man in the room, for every one of them, himself and Tom included, desperately needed it. All were wretches in God's sight, and only the blood of Jesus could lift them from a state of wretchedness to one of glory.

He paused to take a breath and, in the momentary hiatus, his prayer was taken up by another.

The voice came from near the doorway. George opened his eyes and looked at the strange man with the vacant look, but it was not he who was praying. Another man had silently entered the room. He must have come in while George was praying. George could not see the newcomer clearly; the lighting in that corner seemed suddenly

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wanting: perhaps one of the lights had fused. The newcomer was standing directly behind the man with the vacant face; one hand was lifted to God, the other was on the head of the man before him.

The man's prayer drew to a close. George lifted his hands and said, "And now, receive a benediction." He paused for a moment, remembering Tom's admonition and realizing anew how inappropriate were the usual words that he would normally have used. As he paused, trying to think of the right words to say, the room suddenly seemed to darken.

A beam of light, warm and yellow, quite unlike the harsh glare of the fluorescent lights, illuminated a single corner of the room, resting on one man — a man who now stood alone: the latecomer who had so recently prayed over him was nowhere to be seen.

George began his benediction, but his mind was not on the words. He was aware only of a command that echoed around and around inside his head: *Pray for him, pray for him, pray for him.*

And then, suddenly, it was all over: the lighting returned to normal; men lifted their heads; the man in the corner looked up and glanced vacantly at George. Before George could make a move towards him, the man turned and left the room.

"Thank you; thank you, pastor," someone was saying.

George pulled his eyes from the doorway to see Ken making his way to the front, calling out his thanks. The others were drifting away. No one else spoke to him or Tom. There was just Ken, repeatedly thanking him for his message.

George asked Ken, "Did you see that man in the back, sitting by himself?"

"Williamson? The one with the red beard?"

"Yes, that's the one."

"Oh, don't waste your time on him. He's vicious, he is. He's only here for a few days; they ran short of room at the Pen. He held up a clerk at gunpoint. He just came tonight for the fun of it, like most of them. They don't believe in God like I do."

"Williamson, you say?"

"Yeah. David Williamson. But don't bother about him. He don't believe in God. I believe in God."

"Yes, no, right.... Well, thank you for coming."

Ken turned to Tom, "The regular pastor; will he be back next time?"

"Yes. He's away on vacation this month."

"Good. I like him. He believes in God too."

And with that Ken, who was the last remaining inmate in the room, strode quickly out the doorway.

"Good job, pastor," Tom said to George as he began to gather the books.

"You..., er..., you didn't happen to know the person who gave that prayer, did you?" George asked.

"Prayer? What prayer?"

"That one just before the benediction."

Tom stopped picking up the books and looked curiously at his pastor.

"Before the benediction? Sorry. I don't remember anyone praying except you." He paused for a moment. "But your prayer was a good one. Very appropriate I thought."

But George was no longer listening; his thoughts were elsewhere.

The McGuire House, Southwestern Replegle County — 8:30 p.m.

Alan McGuire looked at the other members of the church small group and said, "It's our daughter Pam. I think we need some advice. And certainly prayer."

Bob Hunter, who was leading the group this week, said, "Pam? I'm sure it's nothing serious. She's a wonderful girl. But what's the matter? Of course we'd all be glad to help in any way we can."

Alan looked at his wife Louise for support. She nodded. "Go ahead, honey."

"I'm not sure where to start," said Alan. He thought for a moment. "Last Saturday, I guess."

Pam McGuire was just past her eighteenth birthday. A senior in the local high school, she had accepted a place at university to start that fall. Not many blacks from Replegle County aspired to university, and her parents were quietly proud of their daughter.

But now they were worried.

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“You know she’s been seeing Craig Lang for some time now?” Alan said.

Bob Hunter nodded. “Yes; it’s pretty obvious from the way they look at each other in church when Craig’s home from college. How long’s it been now? Six months?”

“A year. It started last summer.”

“I didn’t realize it was that long. But Craig’s a good boy. Isn’t he?”

Louise McGuire said, “Yes. At least, we’ve never been given reason to think otherwise.”

“So what’s the problem? He’s a good boy from a good family.”

Everyone in the room knew that the Langs were white. And if Craig and Pam were now what was known locally as “an item”, that could cause trouble. Not everyone was as open-minded about such things as they should be.

“It’s not Craig that’s the problem,” Alan said. “But let me just tell you the situation. Maybe we’re worrying about nothing important.

“Pam has a midnight curfew. She’s very good about honoring that. As far as I know, she’s broken it only once, a couple of months ago. She seemed very upset one night when she came home around one o’clock. I think they’d had an argument or something, but they seemed to recover, and since then she’s been careful to be home on time.

“On Saturday, though, she came home very early.”

Alan looked at Louise.

“About ten thirty, it was,” said Louise.

“Normally she doesn’t get home from a date until about eleven thirty,” continued Alan. “We heard her come in. She shouted ‘Good night’ and then went straight up to her room.

“On Sunday she seemed OK. She and Craig sat together as usual in church, but there was definitely something different. They seemed a bit distant with each other — or, at least, Pam seemed a bit distant with Craig. But when we asked her about it, she said it was nothing important.”

Louise said, “She spent most of the day in her room, which is very unlike her. I went up to talk to her, but she insisted that nothing was wrong. But I’m almost sure she’d been crying.

“It was the same on Monday. She spent the day in her room. She said she wasn’t feeling well, but I think that was just so’s I wouldn’t worry.

“But she seemed better yesterday. She went shopping over at Greenminster Mall. I wanted to go with her, to kind of make an outing of it. But she said she wanted to be by herself. I didn’t want to start an argument so I let her go alone. At least she looked happier than she had for the past couple of days, so I figured that whatever was the matter must have sorted itself out.”

She stopped talking. When she continued, it was with an obvious effort.

“Nothing prepared me for today....” She looked like she was going to cry, but she blinked back the tears and said, “She’s never treated me that way before. Never.”

“What happened?” asked Rachel Horner.

“I was doing the laundry like I usually do on Wednesday. It was about nine thirty this morning. Pam came downstairs and it was obvious she’d been crying. I asked her what was the matter and she just walked past me like I hadn’t said a word.

“My purse was on the counter in the kitchen, and she just went right up to it and opened it. I couldn’t believe my eyes. She opened my purse and took out my car keys.

“She said she was going out, and I said, ‘Oh no you’re not, young lady. You don’t just take my keys and go out without explaining yourself.’

“But she just ignored me. She went out to the car. By the time I’d recovered and run to the back door, she’d already started the engine. I shouted at her to stop, but she just spun the car around, kicking up gravel, and then she was gone. I can’t imagine what’s gotten into her.”

Alan took up the story.

“Louise called me at the office and I came straight home. We spent most of the day trying to find her, but no one had seen her. Then, just before you all arrived for small group, I got a call from Craig to say that she’d shown up at his place and told him they needed to go out someplace they could talk.

“I asked him if he knew what was going on, but he said he didn’t have time to talk because she was waiting for him in the car.

“So that’s the situation. He’s with her now, somewhere. Goodness only knows what she wanted to talk to him about. Or what time she’ll be home tonight.”

“If she comes home tonight,” interjected Louise.

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“Anyway, we need your prayers and advice, if you have any,” concluded Alan.

A heavy silence hung in the air, broken only by the rhythmic, deep ticking of the long case clock in one corner of the room and the random heavy plops as water dripped from the trees on to the roof of the sun room that abutted the McGuires’ living room.

Eventually, Bob Hunter cleared his throat and began to offer his opinion.

Near Replogle — 5:04 p.m.

Pam was amazed to discover that she had put nearly two hundred miles on her mother’s car. She looked at her watch. It was just after five. How long had she been driving? Nearly eight hours? Something like that. She vaguely remembered stopping three times: once for gas, and twice at small parklike rest areas that offered the peace and seclusion she needed. Vacant because of the unceasing rain, the rest areas gave her a chance to think constructively about the monstrous problem that lay before her.

But the problem was too big, and each time she drove on after only a few minutes. She drove aimlessly, keeping to the narrow roads that wound around the hills.

Somewhere around three o’clock, some part of her mind told her that eventually she was going to have to go home. She turned the car around and began to follow a twisting path back towards Replogle.

She stopped one last time, at a small park about six miles from home. For some time she contented herself with looking out through the rain-covered windshield at the virid grass. Then, ignoring the fact that she had no coat, she got out of the car and began to walk desultorily along the footpath that led away from the parking lot. She came to a trash can and stopped for a moment, her eyes resting unseeingly on a Coke can that had missed the receptacle and lodged in a rhododendron bush. She walked on.

She had no idea how long she walked; by the time she returned to the car, she was soaked. She got back into the car and looked blankly out through the windshield. Then she sighed heavily and started the car.

She arrived at Craig's house just before five thirty. She stopped the car in the driveway and looked at the house, considering Craig, his circumstances, his family. How would he react when he heard her devastating news? She was, she admitted, terrified of what his reaction might be. Would he be willing to marry her? But then, that question assumed that she wanted to marry him, and that was something of which she was no longer sure....

She took one final deep breath, then opened the car door and dashed through the rain to the front door. Craig himself answered the doorbell. Behind him, hovering in the hallway, Pam could see Craig's mother.

"Please; I have to talk to you," Pam said.

"Where've you been? Everyone's been worried about you. And you're soaking wet. Come on in and get dry."

"No. We need to talk. It's important."

Craig opened his mouth to argue, but Pam interrupted. "Really. We have to talk."

"OK. Let me get my coat. Wait for me in the car. I'll just be a minute."

She returned to the car; a minute later he appeared, running through the rain, an anxious look on his face as he dropped into the seat beside her. She started the car.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Who cares? Anywhere we can be alone."

She pressed the accelerator, and the car shot out into the road and disappeared around the corner.