

Braid

Outside the towering windows of the cafetorium white flakes thickened in the air before they reached the ground. A brisk chill bit at the morning and most of the students kept their scarves on even inside. Anticipation sprang from the contagious jitters. The fourth-grade talent show was about to open its curtains. The students jabbered endlessly while bouncing from the snow outside, to the comments of their friends, to the spotlights on the stage.

Parents situated themselves to the dimming lights in fold-up chairs rowed in back. Teachers lined the sides of the kids to maintain order. One teacher giggled to another in an intimate exchange. A whistle blew and they pantomimed for the children to be quiet.

“Let’s just practice one more time!” pleaded an eleven-year-old named Victoria in a white silk blouse and black floor-length cape.

“NO talking from *here on out*. Mentally prepare...” advised a backstage PTA chaperone, the overly-involved ‘homeroom mom,’ Jenna and Jagger’s mother.

“Let’s practice without speaking,” it came out as a mouthed whisper from the second eleven-year-old, Grace.

Grace and her friend Victoria sat cross-legged, wedged behind a bookcase in the performers’ green room, which was Mrs. Watson’s music room that had a door accessing backstage. Only the twinkly lights that lined the ceiling shed some light. They sat twelve inches from each other and silently mouthed

and moved through their entire act, five times. The act was ready—they flowed mindlessly in sync with each other.

“It’s starting!” squealed another fourth grader in painted overalls, sprawled atop a table.

“Shhh!” Jenna and Jagger’s mom, and a handful of know-it-alls reprimanded.

The girls wore white silk blouses; however, Victoria’s was fitted to her waist and chest while Grace’s, colored more of a cream, hung baggily from her frail structure. Matching: black slacks, black dress shoes, and black capes. Victoria’s mother bought her a black top hat and Grace slung a red velvet bag over her shoulder that captured all the trinkets and gadgets for their magic. Her grandma had made the bag as a surprise for the act. No matter how good of a distraction the show was, however, Grace could not keep her mind away from how long it would be until her dad was there to pick her up.

A chaperone interrupted the girls’ and beckoned them to wait by the stage entrance. “On deck!”

Austin Robinson walked through the spotlight in springy stilts while yo-yoing. Grace turned to stone while waiting and watching the stage. The entire fourth grade was sitting just outside, beyond the stage’s edge. As Austin’s springing stilts cranked slower and slower, his face morphed into a clown’s with menacing white makeup forging his eyes and lips into a smile. His jester hat flopped from one side to the other while his springs squeaked with each boing and the yo-yo went back and forth and back and forth...

A blink later, the clown bounced past Grace into darkness behind the scaling curtains. Grace fumbled her mom's red lipstick from her pocket and painted on a stage smile.

"Ready, Wizard Warner?"

"Of course, Alakazam Anderson!" Grace whispered, yanking the red velvet bag onto center stage.

The magic act went smoothly—no mistakes at all. It ended with a grand applause after the third bit. The trick baffled a volunteer that Alakazam Anderson called onstage. There was a series of numbers, and flipping pages, and a magical punch line when Wizard Grace Warner knew the volunteer's secret number. It's a math trick, but the magicians' kept their secret impeccably.

As the applause died down, the mystical white outside the window grabbed ahold of Grace. She sprinted out of the spotlight and offstage with her best friend.

Grace didn't change clothes like the other performers; in fact, she didn't even break stride on her way through the green room. She swept up her backpack by the rainbow duct-taped straps, hugged Victoria, and grabbed her coat in one motion.

None of Grace's family had come to watch her performance but Grace didn't let it get to her. They certainly had a good reason for not attending.

Headlights were the only sign of a car in the elementary front drive. They hung like streamers stretching far out into the distance. Little flurries danced

through the beams. Grace approached the station wagon and opened the passenger door—

“Where’s Dad?”

“Jump in, we have to get back. There was an accident on the highway and it took a long time for me to get through.” Grace’s grandmother impatiently clutched the steering wheel. A second before the car door swung shut, they were off.

“Is it really a good idea to be going this fast in the—“

“Pipe down!” Grace’s grandmother’s inflection spiked, but with no real aggression. “Actually, there were some unexpected issues this morning. Your mother is okay but I need to get back to her.”

Grace reached inside her backpack and dug for the orange slices her mom had packed that morning. Grandma woke Grace up for school to an otherwise empty house. It was definitely her mom who’d packed them though, because as far as helping out goes Grandma never packed lunches or snacks. She did laundry and the driving. A sea of red lights ahead raced down a long ribbon of slush while the stretch of white lights on the side stayed stuck in a stand still. The plan was supposed to be that Grace’s dad would pick her up. The morning grew darker as the day trudged along through the thickening snow.

~~~~~

The night before, Grace's mother told her it was supposed to snow. The words fell on top of her little head as softly as the first flurries had that night on the patio. But before they went out in slippers and sweatshirts to see them her mother had stroked a brush through her hair.

"Can you French braid it Momma? I want it to be wavy for the show tomorrow."

Her mother glided the comb from forehead to nape of the neck making the part. She roped off the left and handled the tiny top section of the right into three subsections.

"Baby-girl, you're going to be *so great*."

~~~~~

The headachy aroma of Grandma's leather interior knotted Grace's esophagus and jerked the citrus in her stomach. It tasted like oranges spiked with Tabasco, or something, because it singed her throat on the way up. But honestly, that Tabasco-thing happened every time Grace rode in her Grandma's station wagon. Grace swallowed it with a swig of Gatorade.

"Wasn't that a red light?"

Grandma jolted up in speed and barely cleared the next yellow. Grace laid the seat back, clinging to her stomach dramatically. She closed her eyes and escaped back to her mother's white chair in front of the vanity mirror, meditating on the gentle clarity in those quiet, still moments.

The station wagon slammed to a stop and Grace peered outside to see a gargantuan building with multi-levels, bright lights and wheelchairs. Every corner of the building was headed somewhere and the outline shined with fixtures. The silhouette glowed like a heavenly place in a churning storm.

Grandma crossed in front of Grace, scurrying through the snow, so Grace grabbed her backpack and locked the car door behind herself.

The snow flurries caught every kink and curl of Grandma's short bob. High-water pants exposed her red socks, and her shoes were shiny with slosh. Grace crossed half of the parking lot and when she looked back she saw the car already delicately covered in a thin blanket of white fluff. While glancing over the landscape a familiar shape stole her attention. The only car in the sea of parked shadows that shone its headlights came from a dark (possibly green) jeep wrangler four rows from the station wagon. A tall, sturdy man trailing a dark scarf behind him in the wind stood methodically scraping ice from its windshield.

"Dad!" Grace called out, but the man kept pushing the scraper up and down the driver's-side.

"Grace, hurry up! Your mother!" Grandma called from the entrance doors. Grace pulled her gaze away from that shadowy man with the scarf, and ran along.

The inside of the glowing place was less enchanting than its exterior. It smelled sterile and the tile floors echoed. The place reeked of rubbing alcohol or some other unidentifiable chemical, but it did at least maintain a cozy temperature.

Grace kept close to her Grandma. The morning bustled and all the nurses walked fast while looking over papers in their hands and not at where their feet were going. Her mother's room was on the fifth floor, apparently. The doctors had just begun operating when Grandma left to pick up Grace.

"So, is Dad here then?"

"They had a little...altercation." Grandma didn't say anything more. She seemed dazed about the subject and at the same time diligently driven to get back to Mom. The contradiction made Grace lightheaded.

~~~~~

The night prior Grace's mother pulled her hair with each wrap of the braid, moving fast and almost yanking. Grace's mother had fencepost posture and a caramel complexion. Her eyes were the color of sea foam from a quiet East Coast bay as it lines the waves breaking against rocks. Her pregnant belly kept hitting Grace's back when she would reach to grab a hair tie. Grace noticed that the mirror shone her mother's sea foam eyes a bit more watery than usual. Grace's mother kept a good record of never crying in front of her daughter.

Just at the end of the second braid Grace's father came in. His footsteps were measured. He'd swung open the bathroom door and his mouth simultaneously.

"This was all a mistake, Belinda. You must know that." Grace inhaled a muted gasp.

Her mother dropped the braid and Grace's hair whipped down unraveling. She wrapped her hands around her full stomach, covering the baby's ears and bracing herself. A few words fought to push through her lips but the door shut before they could. She said nothing. She could only fight to pull her thoughts to a time when she, he, and their first baby daughter sat together on one couch cuddled by the fire on a snowy night.

Grace sat up straight, like she always tried to. She watched her mother carefully. Her mother's belly had outgrown her nighty, but no matter how awkward it got, she maintained a maternal poise, like the belly was weightless and divine. Just as Grace made this distinction her mother leaned forward propping herself up on the belly, resting it against Grace's back. Exhaling, she started over.

Grace felt the need to fill the space. "I'm really nervous for tomorrow. I think we're ready but this will be the first time I'll have spoken in front of the whole fourth grade. It's so weird..." Like an adult friend, Grace desperately tried distracting her mother.

"Grace, you two are more than ready, you'll be fantastic Wizard Warner." Grace's mother knelt down to look her straight in the eyes. Her mother's eyes were infiltrated with thin, red, watery spider webs, but she smiled. Grace smiled and nodded in consent.

~~~~~


Grace planted her feet on the slick tile and pulled her change purse from the backpack. She checked its contents. “Can we go to the gift shop? We passed one on the way in back there. I want to buy something to have for the baby.”

“Why don’t we go see him first? There will be enough time to come back afterwards.”

Grace winced. “I had really wanted to have it when I met him.”

Grandma stopped mid-stride in front of the elevator. She turned to Grace with pained wrinkles in her forehead.

“Grace, you—” Her phone’s ringtone interrupted the thought. She cracked open her purse to read the tiny black letters on the front screen. “Oh mercy,” she grumbled.

“What?”

“It’s your father.”

“Let me talk to him!”

Grandma handed Grace the buzzing phone.

“H-hello, Dad?” Grace sputtered out.

“Grace? Hey, how was the show? I’m sorry I wasn’t there this morning as planned.”

“It’s okay. And the show was awesome.”

“That’s good. I’m glad.”

“Are you here at the hospital?” Grace searched for something solid to hold on to. A nurse carrying a notebook, bumped into Grace while rushing past. She

dropped a couple rubber tubes of thick, scarlet blood and quickly picked them up. Grace's eyes widened.

"No honey, I had to go get some things. I'll be back later—"

"—I'm sorry." The nurse whispered while picking up the tubes and slipping on by.

"Did Grandma tell you what happened?"

"No, what happened?" Looking up to verify in Grandma's reaction what Dad was about to reveal, Grace noticed that Grandma was gone. Turning a full circle, she didn't see her red socks and fringed scarf anywhere. Vanished.

"Don't worry, everything is going to be okay."

"Dad, Grandma's not here."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I was just with her and now she's gone."

"Okay, well just get to your mom's room. She's on the third floor."

"I thought she was on the fifth floor???"

"Don't panic. Go to the front desk and tell them you're lost. Ask for someone to show you to your mom's room. Can you do that?"

"Okay."

"Keep your grandma's phone and call me if you need me."

"Okay."

"Okay. I love you sweetie."

"I love you too."

Grace put the phone in her pocket and moved back toward where she had come from. Front desk, front desk.

She milled through the nurses and families scattering the walkway. The food court appeared to the right before a three-story window. In its center an indoor fountain shot water up in spurts two stories high in a Morse code-ish pattern. Somehow, she'd not seen it the first time. Mesmerized, she found herself at the base of the fountain staring up. Little droplets fell onto her face. Outside the window it looked like it should have been twelve at night but the oversized food court clock read twelve-noon. The wind howled and twisted like a hurricane. Snow packed up making piles all around.

~~~~~

When Grace was younger, she would un-tuck herself from bed and tiptoe to her parents' door. They always left it perched open just a sliver for the cats to slide out without whining and scratching. Her mother would sit on the bed next to the lamp that offered the only dim illumination. Her father would sit beside her and brush her hair to "Love Me Tender." Through the open sliver Grace counted brushstrokes and would calmly drift toward sleep while watching. The song would change on the CD, and her father sometimes sang along in a whisper to her mother.

"Don't brush from the top, brush from the bottom," her mother snapped. "That hurt." Her dad put the brush down and stopped singing. Luckily Grace

lingered on the sweet moments which helped erase the sharp ones. Neither of her parents could forget words like that, though, or the suffering behind them that sliced through softness. And so, words slashed wounds here and there and suffering packed up more and more on top of itself like rising snow.

~~~~~

Grace walked around the fountain examining the water pattern from all angles. The pattern went on continuously—one, two-two-two, three-three, one, two-two-two, three-three.

She froze. Grace scanned the food court, turning in a circle, and through the hundreds of people and their bustling noise she saw that four walkways had emptied into the fountain. From which direction had she come? She asked herself. She felt pretty sure about turning around and walking straight but when she started she saw that behind her on the other side of the water stood another three-story window, landscaped with dark suburbia under a blanket of white. Both sides were exactly the same. She ran to the other side of the fountain. She looked at the people around and tried to recognize... a Middle Eastern nurse eating a quick lunch with her book, a young dad with a toddler holding a teddy bear. Where were these people before? She tried to recall... which side?

She ran back to the other side of the fountain and broke away from the court. She made strides down the aisle between the tables of faces. They all looked up when she darted past them so she ran faster. Their faces smudged

into blank slates and blurs of skin tone. *Turn left at the end of the aisle? Sure.*

Then she ran down a walkway that had water fountains and restrooms, and kept running. The walkway bent left and she ran straight into the food court again, like a dog into a glass sliding door.

She turned around and started in the opposite direction. *Front desk. Front desk. Or just the elevator! Whichever came first.*

After what seemed like miles of people along intoxicatingly clean halls, the walkway led to a staircase and to the left of the staircase gleamed an elevator, shiny and steel. Grace didn't miss a beat as she darted for the gleaming double doors.

Grace soon found herself alone inside the hollow cube staring at the round buttons. B for basement no doubt, and 1 through 5. Her blue sweatshirt, wavy brown hair and rainbow duct-tape back pack straps shone in the reflective walls of the interior. They stood frozen before the floor selection. There was something about Grandma that day. Persevering and focused as an arrow. Grace pushed 5.

At the fifth floor Grace got off and breathed a little easier. Now it couldn't be that hard. She began scanning the halls the way she had downstairs. She wheedled through looking for a sign. She simply had to find her way. The fifth floor seemed just as huge as the first. Obviously.

The hallway snaked to the left and Grace stopped dead in her tracks. Like magic, Grandma stood at the end of the hallway turning the doorknob into a room.

"Grandma!"

“Grace! Where have you been?!” Her red socks turned and glided toward Grace. “I just spent 30 minutes looking for you!”

“Me too!”

“I turned around and you were gone, Dear!”

Grace took the phone from her back pocket and handed it to her grandma.

“I know, I don’t understand how it happened.”

“That’s okay. What did your father say?”

“Not much, honestly.”

They began calmly walking back toward the room. Grace’s grandma grabbed her hand and squeezed it. “You know Grace, I don’t know how to explain to you what happened this morning. I know you don’t understand everything that goes on between your parents but no matter what happens, the important thing is that they made you. Without the two of them, you wouldn’t be *you* after all.” Her hand reached out for the doorknob. “And neither would this little angel in here!” Grace laughed at the thought while passing through the door.

Inside, Grace’s mother sat up in her bed holding the baby swaddled in blue against her chest. She looked up slowly with a smile that sat on her lips like books on a shelf. Her damp hairline made frizzy, little curls. Her sea foam eyes glimmered through the fatigue.

“Honey, how are you feeling?” Grandma asked.

“Exhausted.” She let out a full exhale, “My stomach is really very tender around the incision, but I’m just happy to be holding this little one.” The baby’s hand laid flat against her collarbone.

Grace gravitated toward the doll-sized figure. His tiny hands were the size of a silver dollar. Grace couldn’t pull her eyes away from his perfect little fingers.

“So, Grace, how did your act go?”

“Okay...” Grace pulled off her backpack and dug through the contents of the magic red bag she had inside. “Really well, I mean.” Grace placed the white stuffed rabbit from her magic act next to the flowers on the side table. It was the same size as the baby. She hoped it could stay in his bed and watch over him until he grows up.

Grace pulled a chair up to her mom’s bed and watched him and her mom for a moment. “Can I hold him?” Grandma helped her prop the baby’s head against her arm, supporting his fragile, quiet body. He had a single blond ringlet curling above his forehead.

Cradling him back and forth Grace felt a new special purpose.

“Everything’s just fine now, Baby. You and me, we’re going to have so much fun.”