

Standing no more than four-feet-tall, Grace perches her hands on her hips and smirks with the confidence once possessed by her grandmother. She remembers her mama telling her that hips are no place for a young lady's hands. So, Grace looses them away from her sides, fidgets with her fingers at her mouth, then grazes her knuckles along on the green buttons of her white dress, and resigns to patting her itching head with one hand while placing the free hand specifically at the crevice in her back, in an effort not to disobey.

The tight coils of her thick, black hair lay braided close to her scalp. At the ends of the plaits, yellow and blue ribbons fight each other to be seen amidst the clouds of thick blackness. Her eyes are almond and knowing. Dimples frame her snagged smile. This tiny lady throws her head back, parts her lips, and bellows a throaty laugh when someone asks, "How can you be six?"

"Six-and-a-half," she corrects with a gummy grin.

Who is this child, Grace, that her mind tells her to make haste, while her soul and the rest of us ask her to linger here for a moment, begging her to just be?

The heart advises her to remain in this form, young and safe from the ridicules of life and to be shielded by loved ones who can soften the indelible bruises that time so unscrupulously unfurls, especially on those blackened by their brownness and womaned by Providence and biology.

Inside Grace there is a defiant knowing. Within her frame a soul is housed that will shield and protect her from the blows of society.

Who are we not to be heir to the same conversations with our spirits? Hers commands in the breathy whisper of Nana Grace, "Remember this time."

Her mind forgets, doing as time tells it.

The soul sifts slow and certain.

Her mind charges on and stops only to revel or wallow.

The soul seeps ahead, attempting to warn her and deflect harm.

Her mind, a thing of its own choosing, sits mystified at the newness of it all and trudges forth with no recollection.

The soul, no foreigner to this place, admonishes its new host to, “Remember.”

Hands on hips, the girl-woman sashays to her closet, opens the door, and steps inside. She studies her belongings, their shape and texture. The scrape of the hangers against the closet’s metal rod scream in objection to the tugs of the heavy, little hands.

She yanks each garment toward her and inspects the clothing with swift intent. With a snatch, the tulip pink, taffeta dress with the three-tiered tulle, goes from hanger to floor. There it remains. She scans the closet’s innards once more, but puts a dissatisfied finger on her chin.

She leaves, hands empty, fists balled, and thumps her way down the hall with pursed lips, determined. Opening this new door, she grins as she embarks upon the rite of passage that is entering her mother’s closet.

Walking in, Grace begins. She puts her toes in several shoes, some wedged, some flat, some sandals, as if testing their temperature. Staggering about, she goes from pelt-lined to patent leather, knocking over the mates of wooden platforms. The closet, now shoe-strewn, bares the mark of a little Grace.

The soul guides her with a hum of knowing. She slips both feet inside an untouched pair near the door. They aren’t as high as the others. Their color is drabber than the reds and golds now knocked across the floor. She takes a liking to their simplicity and their smooth, skin-like surface. Stride unsteady, she attempts at a saunter out of the closet.

She emerges, dawning the brown suede kitten heels that belonged to the first Grace, her Nana. They are as soft and tree-bark-tan as her skin. Grace has seen her mother wear them only once and a while, so young Grace considers them suitable for a quick traipse down the informal runway. Mounting the carpeted catwalk, Grace's soft clops in the sweaty soles make her stance shaky.

Hands on her hips, Grace shuffles; then slaps her hands down to her side and skis forward. Each long lunge in the suede shoes gets her closer to her destination at the hallway's opposite end, the mirror.

Confidence builds as the soul guides her. Her ankles teeter from the weight of the shoes. As she wobbles, her knees buckle, causing her to rush her hands forward to brace her for a grand plié to the floor. A sigh of defeat causes her eyes to shut and close.

She is still. Behind her lids she sees her face growing tough and more brown, her dimples wrinkle, the thick braids and ribbons melt into a graying, wooly crown, and her smile sags.

Her eyes open with a flash of fear. The over-turned smile hints that she is uncertain of what she's seen. Looking down at her feet, she blinks, recalling the face of Nana Grace. Opening her eyes, this careful ballerina pirouettes with a rush of knowing.

She steadies herself in front of the mirror at the hall's end.

The soul says, "Stand tall," and settles into its four-foot, mahogany-framed home.

As she looks at the familiar face in the reflective glass, Grace, six-and-a-half, almost seven, wags her tongue out from its hiding place. She smiles at the pudgy face outlined with a halo of ribbons.

Taking the hem of her dress into her hands, with a certain sweetness and composure that her name suggests, she places the fabric between her thumbs and middle fingers, slides

one shaking ankle behind the other, and pliés again, this time on purpose: her curtsy, a delicate gesture of gratitude to her reflection.

She's just what Nana Grace would have called an "old soul"—a child familiar with the matters of the spirit coupled with a voice that echoes the sayings born of a time now passed.

This is Grace, making a memory in Nana's shoes.