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Grace Williams Says It Loud

Written by Emma Henderson

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*Grace Williams
Says It Loud*

EMMA HENDERSON



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In memory of Clare Curling Henderson (1946–1997)
and
Philip Casterton Smelt (1956–2006)

I

1987

When Sarah told me Daniel had died, the cuckoo clock opened and out flew sound, a bird, two figures. The voice of the cuckoo echoed, louder than the aeroplanes overhead, and opposite the clock, evening shadows stirred.

II

1947-57

A shadow made me start as my mother's face loomed towards me where I lay, eight months old, tongue-tied, spastic and flailing on the coarse rug, on the warm lawn, in the summer of 1947 – in an English country garden. My father was playing French cricket with Miranda and John, and I could hear a tennis ball – in his hand, in the air, on the bat. Sometimes I saw the balling arc and even the dancing polka dots on Miranda's dress as she raced after the ball, or John's dusty brown sandals and grey socks when the ball rolled on to the rug and he came to retrieve it.

My mother's breath was toffee-warm. Her skin smelt of lemon soap, and her thick dark hair of the Sarson's malt vinegar she rinsed it with to make it shine. She kissed me on the cheek, put a palm to my forehead, then scooped me up. She hugged me tight, but she couldn't contain my flailing. She cooed and cuddled, I whimpered and writhed. We were both wet with sweat.

The next day – it could have been yesterday – my tongue was clipped. 'A lingual frenectomy'll do the trick,' they said. Lickety-split. Spilt milk. Not Mother's, no. The nurses gave it to me, clean and cold, in a chipped enamel mug with a hard blue lip. My loosened tongue lapped feebly, flopping against the smooth inside. The mug upturned.

When I came home, Miranda tied string around my tongue, my enormous, lolling tongue, with which I was learning fast to bellow, suck and yelp.

'Doctors and nurses,' she said, clucking like Mother.

I was in my cot, rolled rigid against the side. A wonky foot had wedged itself between the bars. My face was squashed to the mattress – mouth open, tongue dry and rubbing roughly on the sheet. Stench of starch, and particles of dust tickling my cheek, prickling the inside of my nose.

‘I’ll make it better,’ said Miranda, and wrapped the string around my tongue in loops and big wet knots. She worked away without a word, breathing heavily, her own pink tip of a tongue flickering in the corner of her mouth.

‘There.’

The ends of the piece of string were tied in a neat bow. Miranda stood back and surveyed her work, frowning. She must have been just six at the time, frilled eyes level with mine – two pairs of small set jellies.

‘I’ll tell you a story,’ she said, backing towards the door. She had one hand on the handle and the other on the door frame. I didn’t want her to go. I wanted to hear the story. I grunted and knocked the front of my head against the bars of the cot. Miranda swung backwards and forwards, holding both sides of the door frame now. At the end of a forward swing, she suddenly stopped, taking all the weight with her arms. Shoulders jutted, elbows locked, tendons strained.

‘Once upon a time, there was a girl called Grace—’

A ski-jumper, a snow-bird in mid-flight.

But somebody shouted, ‘Tea’s ready. Come on, Miranda.’ Then, ‘Where’s she got to, that child?’ And Miranda pulled herself upright, backed out of the room and shut the door quietly behind her.

The string soon slipped off as I tossed and dribbled. It fell into the dark gap between cot and nursing chair and wasn’t found until we moved house several years on.

Miranda was the silk-haired love child, so the story goes, pretty as a pixie, naughty as a postcard. Solemn John came

along less than a year later. John was the quiet one, the clever one. At the age of three, he added spectacles to his round flat face and began to read books. At mealtimes, he would gaze at me in those long periods while my parents finished eating and Miranda picked fussily at her food. John's eyes behind his specs were tiny, grey and unblinking.

The eyes of strangers blinked or looked away.

After we moved to London in 1951, only when my mother was feeling brave, would she take me with her to the parade of shops at the end of our street, for meat, fruit and veg, a loaf of bread and, on Fridays, fish. 'Two and six, Mrs Williams. Filleted?' The fishmonger slipped the fish from bucket to board, or sloshed them noisily from their trays of ice.

I had learnt to walk, after a fashion. Without the support of another person, I sometimes tumbled and often splayed, but with an arm, or palm, on one side, I tottered quite nifty-shifty along.

We must have been an odd sight, my mother and I. She done up and efficient in her lightweight macintosh, home-sewn skirt and sensible, low-heeled shoes. Me lop-sided and limp, but buttoned nevertheless into my bristly blue coat with its dark, soft collar. A matching beret on my head. Knitted, patterned Norwegian mittens hiding my buckled fingers.

After helping me down the steps to the pavement, Mother would stoop to hook an arm through mine. She'd draw me close, adjust the shopping basket on her other arm, and start to chant and march us.

'Left. Left. I left my wife with forty-five children and nothing but gingerbread left. Left. Come on, Gracie. You can do it. Definitely.'

I frequently slipped and broke the rhythm, but Mother gamely improvised, *'And it serves them jolly well right.'* Hop-skip. *'Right.'* Pause.

So began our walks – hop-skip gavottes along the street. Often we paused. I needed a rest, she guessed. People stared, but kept their distance. Mother stared at the houses as we passed, or paused. What lay behind those painted doors, she sometimes wondered aloud? Why paint them at all? There's nothing wrong with wood, Grace.

The reds and blues were pop-eyed, she said, popping her own dark eyes, making us both laugh. She was snooty about white – unimaginative, she said. The only colour she openly envied was a deep olive-green. There were just three of these in our street, but we often seemed to stop by them, and Mother would frequently tell me, on those days, about a journey she once made in Italy. Not all at once, of course, just snippets and fragments, but something warm and wistful would enter her voice as she talked, and gradually I was able to spread my own Mediterranean around me, heady and potent, whenever she began. Like this.

Once upon a time, before the war, there was a very clever girl, whose cleverness was marked, first by her ma, then by the school her ma managed to send her to aged four. Six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen years passed by. At the age of eighteen, instead of going on to higher education, as school and ma had hoped, the girl became engaged to a handsome Scandinavian named Joe. But the next we know, she's off to Italy, leaving poor Father – Joe – in Maida Vale, sharing flea-ridden digs with two penniless violinists.

Meanwhile, there was this giddy girl, gadding about in an open-top car, she and the Isadora Duncan of a girlfriend she went with, scarves trailing, leaning, waving, whooping at the bemused Italian boys. It was early spring 1939. Adventures with spaghetti, language and wine. Other tastes – other tongues in your mouth, Grace. Tattered Penguin paperbacks. And two hungry English girls, giggling

in the gondola on their way back from the Lido in Venice so loudly and lewdly that the gondolier poled back to the landing stage and ordered them to disembark for their own safety. Florence, Rome, right down to Naples and beyond to Pompeii, where one of them lost a shoe somewhere in the volcanic ruins. Further even, a tiny fishing village with a luscious long name – Santa Maria di Castellabate. They spent the night sitting on the quayside there, watching for dawn, chatting with a young man from Durham, of all places – an archaeologist, a field trip. A field day, Grace.

Mother returned to England and married our father, who'd finished his studies by then and worked as a music librarian. Wagner was his thing. But 'My tastes are eclectic' he'd reply if asked and, if pressed, 'I'm partial to Grieg, naturally. Sibelius, Söderman, especially the *lieder*. Holst, Handel, Schumann...' Sometimes he'd simply say, 'Anything that sings.'

Hitler invaded Poland. Miranda was conceived and born, then John, then me, all wrong. Not just not perfect, but damaged, deficient, mangled in body and mind. Mashed potato. Let's take her potato. What shall we do with the crumpled baby, early in the morning? Put her in the hospital with a nose drip on her, early in the morning. What shall we do?

Return to our own pale green front door. Shut it quick. Shut us up.

My London room adjoined my parents'. My cot was against a wall, and on the other side of the wall was their double bed, with its swishing, soft-slipping eiderdown and clackety old headboard. When I couldn't sleep at night, I thought about the head of their bed, framing, protecting them both. I often heard my father's voice, grave, entreating, explaining. The response from my mother either yawning and bored – a flick-a-tut page-turning – or biting quick,

which put an end to the talking, but led to heavings, sighs and the leaping sound of two grown-ups crying.

Bedtime, playtime, poo-time. You-time, me-time, teatime. Bread before cake. You before me. Bread and butter sprinkled with pink, sugary hundreds and thousands. Boiled egg and Marmite fingers. Soldiers, said John. Chicken and egg. There were millions of eggs in Mother's ovaries, he said. Why was Grace the rotten one?

For Christmas 1956, John, fourteen, was given the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, Miranda, fifteen, a red Baedeker guide to Europe. I, still tiny at ten, received a baby swing.

The swing hung in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, and I hung there in it, day after day, the soles of my stiff leather shoes tapping and scuffing as I swung and jerked. She loves it, they said. She can see what's going on. It makes her feel a part of things. But my feet were cold and my toes, in the inaccurately measured shoes, bunched and scrotched. I came to loathe that swing. The wooden bar at the back itched and irritated, and although I squirmed, my squirming merely slid me lower in the seat until the bar between my legs thudded and bumped, flinging me sideways or forwards. Eventually Mother would come to the rescue and readjust me. When we had guests, she placed my good hand on the rope, moulding my fingers into curls and making an empty triangle with my elbow. In my hair, which was blonder than Miranda's and wavier than John's – your crowning glory, darling – she sometimes tied a bow of winter velvet or satin summer ribbon.

Summer started early that year and built itself a burning climax towards the end of August. On the Sunday before Bank Holiday, Mother cooked roast beef, despite the heat. And this little piggy had none. Roast beef, roast potatoes, Yorkshire pud, runner beans and gravy. Mother's face was red as she flustered crossly around the kitchen. Our cousins

were coming to lunch. Father was in his study on the top floor, with *Rheingold* streaming out through the open door. John was in his bedroom, Miranda in the garden, but the smell of burning brought her running, barefoot, along the hall.

I had fitted.

While the roast beef crisped itself to a cinder, I fitted. Again and again, convulsions battered my unresisting body. When they finally stopped, the charred remains of lunch were rattled from the oven, a note hastily penned and pinned to the front door for our cousins, and I was laid across the back seat of the car while John and Miranda half crouched on the floor, half perched on the seat. My father sat in the passenger seat. My mother drove to the hospital.

It's a mild sort of epilepsy, they said. Very mild in origin, but with the complications of being so spastic, and a mental defective to boot, it seems much worse than it is. Try not to worry, Mrs Williams. Relax. Think about the new baby.

I roared and I roared, but it made no difference. Not even when I roared so much that there was the crashing of glass, or six big, strong hands holding me down and shit and piss in my knickers, on my legs and through the white cotton socks, running all over the seat of the swing, then drip-drip-drippings on the tiles below, where my shoes turned the mess into strange and changing swirls of liquid and semi-solid.

Unbearable. Hopeless. Think of the others.

A place was found for me at one of the better Welfare State mental institutions. The Briar. My home for nearly thirty years. Can you imagine? They must have thought I was contagious. Can you blame them?

Off we went, one September afternoon, two months before my eleventh birthday. Just me this time in the back of the car, propped upright with cushions and an old

tartan rug, thin and holey. Father and Mother in the front, him puffy in a greenish overcoat – white chicken-skin neck, sparse, straight, light-grey hair, badly cut, hanging like icicles on the collar of his coat. Her brittle now, and tweedy, pregnant, in a man's navy anorak, with an old headscarf knotted at the jaw. Through the gap between the front seats, I could see her left hand gripping the steering wheel. The ring on her wedding finger bit into the flesh, making a wealy red line. All of us were silent for most of the journey. Occasionally Mother would look over her shoulder and ask was I warm enough? Did I need weeing?

When we'd left London behind and were heading north through faded brown and orange countryside, my father produced a map and read out place names and road numbers from it. A411, A41. Barnet, Borehamwood, Bushey. Mother said there was no need for that, she knew the way, and pressed her lips so firmly together that they became a dark, dangerous slit. She tapped her ring finger on the steering wheel. Left, left.

I forced my eyes away from the rear-view mirror and towards the side window. Grey skies hurting my eyes. Grey smell of warm plastic and bananas. And nothing but gingerbread left, hop-skip.

'Wake up, darling. We're nearly there. Don't cry.'

Scarcely any traffic now. Scraggy, turfy fields on one side of the road, brick after brick of wall on the other, until we came to a pair of enormous black gates set into the wall a few yards back from the road. My mother turned the car and we stopped. A man – a dwarf – fairy-tale-like except for the telltale shabby grey jacket and bleached corduroy trousers, too big. Also, his over-large face held no fairy-tale sparkle. It was puckered and pocked, and whoever had shaved it had left hairy tufts and messy patches of brown bristle. This face appeared at the driver's window.

My mother wound down the glass. My father picked up his briefcase from the floor.

‘Williams,’ he said, removing a letter from the briefcase. Mother took it from him, snatchy-swiftly, and passed it out of the window. The little man nodded, passed the letter back, then glanced at me, before pottering to the gates, easing them open and, one by one, pushing them wide enough apart to allow our car to pass through. I wanted to turn round, as you used to see children do, kneel on the back seat and wave a smile at the man. I wanted to be one of those children. But it was far too late for that.

We drove in a slow hush for another minute, our breath misting the windows, before my mother stopped the car next to a long, low, still building with a corrugated-iron roof. There were eight windows, paintwork pale and cracked, a few steps, with a handrail, and a door at the end nearest to us.

‘Here we are,’ said my mother.

Here we are. Here we are.

She didn’t turn and try to smile.

My father was clearing his throat as if to say something when the door opened and two figures came out, one tall and male, dressed in a dark, shinny-shiny suit, the other tall, female and large, wearing a nurse’s uniform. Car doors opened and closed. My case was taken from the boot and carried by the tall, suited man. My mother and the nurse manoeuvred me out of the back seat. I stood, queasy, uneasy, unsteady. There were soft, chilly cheek-kisses from my father. A quick hug and neck-peck from my pushing-me-away-from-her mother.

It began to rain. My parents hurried back to the car, furry and distant in the damp September dusk. The nurse took my arm and I, unaccustomed to the stranger’s gesture, tripped. The nurse stooped to help me up and I caught a glimpse over her shoulder of the car and of my parents,

in the car. The sound of the key turning in the ignition. My mother turned her head and began to back the car down the drive. Reversing.

So vivid is my memory of those final moments that it is not hard to imagine myself reversing also, going back, towards – and, with the smallest of imaginative leaps, to – a very different life, belonging to blue-eyed baby Sarah, the bouncing bundle who arrived home in a taxi which had stopped on the way for Mother and Miranda to choose the biggest, proudest pram available, the loudest one.

Sarah was born in a large London teaching hospital. Not taking any chances this time. She was born at three a.m. Several hours later, as a blustery March morning dawned, Mother held Sarah in her arms for feeding. She looked at the healthy infant and disgust swept her body. She wondered, briefly, whether the baby felt the same. The baby's body seemed to shudder and recoil, but Mother soon forgot to wonder, and she thrust the baby from her breast, distressed. Sarah was quickly removed and taken to the nursery, where she screamed for four hours. Then, again, she was brought to Mother for feeding. This time, Mother, half expecting the instinctive, sickening revolt, forced herself to let the child feed. She couldn't bring herself to look. A nurse came by. Sarah did her best to suckle, but Mother's breast was old and loose, its nipple tough and rubbery. Gracie – me, I – had worn it out. Sarah pursed her lips and wrinkled her brow in concentration. Sourpuss, muttered the nurse. Sarah screamed more loudly than ever. She kicked her legs and beat her arms so wildly that the tight hospital swaddling came undone. Mother saw the screwed-up, angry face and the lively limbs, but she didn't respond.

The following evening, Miranda and John went with Father to inspect the new baby. Sarah screamed, which upset John, but pleased Miranda.

‘I know. I’ll make it better,’ she said. ‘I’ll take her for walks. Let’s get a new pram for her, Mother.’

So it was out of Mother’s indifference and Miranda’s enthusiasm that the plan for a brand new pram was hatched.

The pram features prominently in the few remaining photographs of Sarah’s early months. There she is, lying in it, under an apple tree in blossom. There it is again, in the distance this time, on the beach, with towels hanging on the handle. In the park, being used as a backrest by John as he reads – Miranda holds Sarah up to the camera. And here, in the London garden again, Sarah is sitting in the pram. She’s wearing a white dress embroidered with rosebuds, a white matinee jacket, reins. Fat hands grab the sides of the pram, almost as if she is rocking it with mirth, for yes, for once, Sarah is beaming, chortling, in fact, with laughter, and her eyes are wide and surprised, a light, pearly shade, the colour that in black and white photographs is actually the most colourless. They called her Baby Blue-Eyes, but her eyes were no bluer than mine, and I saw them sea-green sometimes. They called her Sarahkins, *elskling* and all sorts of other nicknames. Everybody marvelled at her oomph, this speedy little sister of mine. At three months Sarah rolled over, by five she was crawling, and at eight months, she walked.

Sarah says that the story of her walking so young is apocryphal, but I know otherwise. I saw Sarah’s first steps. It was 10 November 1958, my twelfth birthday. Mother and Father brought Sarah to visit me.

Miranda couldn’t come, they explained. Too busy studying. John ditto. So it was just baby Sarah. Too young to notice, Matron had said, ticking the ‘yes’ on the Visiting Relatives Request form.

They came by train, my parents said, because of the pram, and because of the forty per cent reduction on third-class tickets for visiting relatives. I was allowed to hold

Sarah, first in the day room, and later, because it had stopped raining, outside. Mother put Sarah in the large black pram. Sarah began to cry.

I was weaker than I used to be – muscle wastage, they said – so they attached me to Father’s arm on one side, and Mother clutched my other wrist with her hand, meanwhile pushing the pram with her free hand. Sarah screamed, the wind blew, the grass was muddy. By the time we’d hobbled across it to the old cricket pavilion on the far side, we were all bad-tempered and exhausted. Father sat me down on a damp wooden bench, then went round the corner to light his pipe out of the wind.

‘Do you want to take her again?’ Mother asked as she lifted the wailing baby from the pram. ‘Here.’ She put Sarah down on my lap and set about readjusting the hood of the pram for the return journey. Sarah squirmed easily out of my hold. She stopped screaming and stood, looking up at me, one arm balanced on my knee. Her skimpy hair was lifted so high by the wind, you could see the thin, blue-lined skin of her scalp underneath.

Sarah gestured towards the distance with her other arm, thrusting out her thumb and index finger in an L-shape, an invitation. And then she walked. She walked across the rotting wooden floorboards of the cricket pavilion. She tripped at the edge, down on to the muddy grass, but she hoisted herself up and continued to walk. Our mother, of course, saw her, shouted to Father, and they both ran after Sarah to make her stop.

What a performer my sister is.

Daniel was a performer too.

I met him the day after my arrival at the Briar.