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Opening Extract from...

Grace Grows

Written by Shelle Sumners

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Grace Grows

Shelle Sumners

with songs by Lee Morgan

ALLEN&UNWIN

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for my husband and daughter,
who take me to love school every day

HOW TYLER WILKIE WRECKED MY LIFE
and what I thought I'd do about it
an exploratory memoir

Because you're going about your life—you get up, brush your teeth, spill your coffee, go to work. Then one day everything changes. And how are you supposed to make sense of it all?

the first autumn

day zero: my unravelment begins *(unravelment:* is that a word?)

The first time I met Tyler Wilkie, I was dressed like a call girl.

By pure, titillating coincidence, my strategy for work that day was cleavage. The big guns. Or, in my case, the medium, B-verging-on-C ones. Because yesterday, having dressed like a Mennonite librarian for our meeting with the textbook lobbyists from Texas, I'd sat there mute and limp while imagination was besieged by the powers of ignorance.

Forbes and Delilah Webber loved my blouse with the Peter Pan collar. Delilah called me "the sweetest little thing" and "precious." They promised to recommend our middle school *Teen Health* textbook for statewide adoption if we agreed to:

a) Remove all information regarding condoms.

and

b) Change the word *imagine* to *suppose*. *Imagine* being "too like the word *magic*—it might upset some people."

They also asked us to get them orchestra seats to *The Lion King*.

After the meeting, I begged my boss to refuse the Webbers. My traitorous coeditor Edward, who happens to be from Texas, capitulated and offered to do the edits, reminding me that we "don't mess with Texas" and its four-hundred-million-dollar book-buying budget.

We were meeting with the Webbers again today, to show them the changes. I didn't know what I could do to stop the anti-imagine machine. I had tried to come up with a plan all the sleepless night, and I had nothing. This ship was going to sink, but I decided that I, their "sweetest little thing," could at least try to look taller going down. I could project confidence and strength. Defiance. Sex. A tall, cruel, European dominatrix vibe.

It was so not me.

I donned the black pin-striped suit my mother gave me for Christmas two years ago, which I have worn exactly once. To a funeral. Only I hiked the skirt up a couple inches and wore my push-up bra. Found an ancient pair of stockings in the back of my drawer. Then I squeezed into the black, four-inch-stiletto-heeled, pointy-toed shoes I bought on sale at Lord & Taylor to go with the suit. I pulled my hair into a low, severe knot, and put on mascara and lipstick. Red.

I pulled on my raincoat and grabbed an umbrella, my laptop, and the twenty-pound green leather shoulder bag that contained All I Might Conceivably Need, which might include (but was not limited to):

keys
wallet
cell

agenda
lip balm
hairbrush
hair band
big hair clip
tissues
book (*Lolita*, it happened)
iPod
bottle of water
bag of raw cashews
70% dark chocolate bar
apple
black pen
red pencil
black Sharpie
red cardigan sweater
tacky vinyl zipper bag with photo of fuzzy kitten on it,
stocked with:
various-sized Band-Aids
small tube of antibiotic ointment
antihistamine and antidiarrheal tablets
Tylenol
Tylenol with caffeine
Tylenol with codeine
Advil
nail file
tampons
water lily oil
hand lotion
travel-size Shower Fresh Secret

and:

tea light and matches
mini-flashlight

tiny fold-up scissors with needle and black thread
ginger tea bags
earplugs
pocket copy of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, for grammatical emergencies (memorized, but sometimes a tired mind becomes uncertain)

Oh, and one more thing: the silver pocket angel Edward gave me, wedged deep into a rip in the lining of the bag.

Thus aggressively attired and equipped for any eventuality, I headed down the three flights of stairs to the lobby.

Big dogs, barking.

I came around the last bend in the stairwell and saw them—our across-the-hall-neighbor Sylvia's prize-winning giant schnauzers—tugging at a guy who sat at the bottom of the steps with their sparkly leashes wrapped around his hand. He heard me coming and moved to one side, murmuring "sorry," as I stepped carefully around him.

When I reached the door, God help me, I looked back. Might as well have gone ahead and turned to salt.

He was rubbing his face.

"Everything okay?" I chirped, willing him to say yes so I could go. The dogs shifted their Batman-like ears toward me.

"Uh, not really. She left me a note." He spoke with a slightly countryish kind of drawl that reminded me, unpleasantly, of the Webbers. "Blitzen and uh . . . Bismarck here have just been groomed for a show and I'm not supposed to get their feet wet."

Clearly Sylvia was even more insane than I had suspected. And the guy looked pathetically bleak.

"Hold on," I said, and went back upstairs. I grabbed a cheap umbrella from the pile of extras in our hall closet and a box of zipper bags from the kitchen, and rooted around in our junk drawer until I came up with an assortment of rubber bands and a roll of masking tape.

I tiptoed back downstairs (the shoes), sat next to the guy, and bagged one of Blitzen's meticulously pedicured paws while she tickled my neck with her beard.

Once I had just about successfully finished the first foot, I looked to see if the guy was watching and learning.

He lifted his eyes from my chest and said, "Oh hey, thanks!" He grabbed a bag and got busy on Bismarck.

It took the two of us about six minutes to double-bag all eight paws. Then I lurched back up en pointe, belted my raincoat firmly across my waist, and picked up my laptop bag. The guy stood too, handed me Big Green, and startled me with a smile that was blindingly sweet. I blinked and lost my grip on the strap, but he caught it and resettled the purse firmly on my shoulder.

"Thanks, you really saved me," he said.

I held out the umbrella. "Here, take this. I think the rain's just about stopped for now, but you might need it later."

He smiled *the smile* again and tucked the umbrella in the pocket of his army/navy outerwear.

"I'll bring it back to you," he said. "What's your apartment number?"

I waved a hand. "Don't worry about it."

He took up the dogs' leashes and pushed the door open for me. Blitzen and Bismarck pulled him toward the park and I tippy-toed double time in the other direction, toward the subway.

"Hey!" I heard him call out.

I turned around. He was at the other end of the block. He mouthed the words *thank you*.

I smiled and shrugged. No big deal.

day zero continues and I encounter my doom, again

Damn. The Webbers canceled the meeting so they could go on a Hudson River breakfast cruise. They promised their approval over the phone, and I had dressed like one of Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love" video girls for absolutely no reason.

Ed came out of his office and saw me limping down the hallway. The shoes were killing me. "Oh, the fashion fuck-you!" he said. "Too bad they canceled, it almost works."

"What's wrong with it?" I asked.

"You're about a foot too short. Not even a little intimidating."

"And?"

"Your blacks don't match. The suit is blue-black and the stockings are green-black."

"Hm."

"And I can see the lines of your granny panties."

"They're bikinis."

"And they shouldn't *be* there." He patted my shoulder. "Grace, stick to your strengths."

I was still mad several hours later when Edward and I went out for dinner at Herman's Piano Bar. It was our Tuesday thing. My friend Peg would join us when she wasn't working on a show, but now she was assistant stage manager of the new Broadway musical *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!,* with Antonio Banderas reprising his movie role. It was a big hit, so Peg wouldn't be with us at Herman's for a while.

I dragged a large fragment of greasy onion ring through the puddle of ranch dressing and ketchup on my plate. "So what is wrong with you Texas people, anyway?"

He looked at me darkly. "Are you associating me with those yahoos?"

"You're from Houston. So are they."

"And am I like them?"

No. He wasn't, at all. It gave me hope that there were other sane Texans. "Okay, I'll shut up," I said.

"Yes, I believe you will!" he pretty much shouted. The sour was kicking in.

I slid his glass away. "Eat more, drink less."

Edward barked his distinctive, walruslike bellow of a laugh, and the woman sitting on the other side of him turned around and shushed us. "We're trying to hear the singer!" she hissed.

Ed and I looked at each other. Who listens to the singer?

Apparently everyone. The room had actually gotten quiet; hardly anyone was talking.

The voice . . . how to describe it? *Piercingly soulful* might be a start. He was singing a ballad I'd never heard before, and the words—something about trying to find home—combined with the quality of his voice, put a knot in my stomach. But not necessarily in a bad way. More in a *Jesus Christ, who is that making me feel this way?* way.

I stood on the rungs of my barstool and balanced against Ed's shoulder so I could get a look at the singer. He was hunched over the keyboard, mouth on the microphone, eyes closed, moving his body the same sinuous way his voice was moving—all over the place, but never out of control.

He finished the song and people clapped. A lot. And said woo-hoo! And whistled. He looked out at us all, a little surprised, it seemed. People quieted down and he launched into another song.

Ed looked at me. "He's amazing."

"I know that guy!" I said, not quite believing it myself.

He wasn't wearing the knit cap, and he had a terrible haircut—too short and choppy—but it was definitely him.

The dog walker.

He finished his allotted second song and I watched him squeeze through the crowd. He stopped a few times to shake an offered hand or listen attentively to a comment, but finally made it to the end of the bar, several people down from me. The next performer was up and talking into the mic, so the bartender had to speak loudly while he was pulling the guy a beer.

Bartender: You wrote those songs, man?
Dog Walker: Yeah.
Bartender: Awesome. You have more?
Dog Walker: Lots more.

The bartender leaned in closer to say something else and I lost the thread. I waited till they finished talking and told Edward I'd be back in a minute.

On approach, I studied him more closely than I had this morning. He was pale, rather gawky, all Adam's apple and bad haircut. A kid, really.

I reached up and tapped him on the shoulder. He turned.

"Hi," I said.

"Hey!" he said. "It's you!"

He gave me that radiant smile and the gawk factor inexplicably transferred from him to me. Suddenly he was grace, and I wasn't.

"You're shorter than this morning," he said.

"Oh, yes." My face was getting warm. Annoying! "I had on those tall shoes."

"Yeah, they were pointy."

"Yes, I was trying to—well, I don't usually dress like that."

He nodded. "It looked hot, but painful."

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Tyler Wilkie." He definitely had a drawl. "What's yours?"

"Grace. Barnum."

He lit up. "Like the circus?"

"Exactly."

"Cool."

We looked at each other and it occurred to me that he was autumn-colored. Auburn hair. Hazel eyes. He tilted his head and the corner of his mouth turned up, and I became aware that it was time to go. Edward had a late date and would want to leave. And Steven, my boyfriend, was probably home from work by now.

"Nice to meet you again, Tyler. I liked your singing."

"Thank you, Grace," he said courteously.

I turned to leave, but he tugged on my sleeve. "Your eyes are this color."

I glanced down at my sweater. Yes, pretty close. Bluish gray.

"And your face is shaped like a heart," he added.

How charmingly random! "Oh, is it?"

"Yeah. I noticed it this morning." His finger traced the air, following the curve of my cheek.

"Well, I really have to go now."

He shoved his hands into his pockets. "Okay, Grace Barnum. See ya."

I huddled under Ed's arm as we headed down Columbus. The temperature must have dropped ten degrees since the morning.

"I don't feel good about the health book, Ed. What if we were teenagers in Texas?"

"I was."

"And how did you learn about condoms?"

Ed shrugged. "Word of mouth?"

"It just doesn't make any sense. They don't want people to have abortions, but they don't want them to learn how to prevent pregnancy!"

"Baby girl, it drives me right up the wall too."

"And *imagine*! I mean . . . *imagine*? How can we participate in this travesty?"

"I hear you."

"And Bill. What is it with him? He's so deadpan. Doesn't he *feel*?"

"He's just doing his job."

"It's disgusting."

"If you're not careful with Bill he'll transfer you to the New Jersey office. And I would miss you."

I sighed. "It doesn't feel good, Ed."

"Listen. It would be nice to try to save the children, but first we have to put the oxygen mask on ourselves."

"Huh?"

"You know, when you're on a plane and they give you those instructions—"

"Boy, you are really bugging me."

"It's just a fact, Grace. We can't fix everything."

His complacency was driving me crazy. But Edward grew up a gay black kid in Texas in the late seventies, and probably had a lifetime of sublimating injustices and sad things he couldn't change. You'd think I'd be that way, too, from some of the hard stuff in my

childhood. But I grew up watching my mother forge platinum out of rust. It was going to take me a while to accept this *imagine* thing.

We said good-bye at the corner of Seventy-ninth and Columbus.

"Grace!"

I turned around. It was Tyler Wilkie, half a block behind me. I waited till he caught up.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey." He was wearing his fatigue jacket and knit cap, and had a canvas guitar case strapped to his back. "Are you headed home?"

I nodded.

"You shouldn't go alone," he said. "I'll walk you."

"Thank you, but that's really not necessary," I said.

"I'm going this way anyway."

I shrugged and started walking.

He caught up. I looked at him sideways. "You play the guitar, too?"

"Yeah. Mostly guitar. I play piano if they have one."

I could see our breath. I wound my wool scarf around my neck an extra rotation and pulled it up over my ears. "Are you from Texas?"

He laughed. "No!"

"Then where?"

"The Poconos. Monroe County. Why?"

"You just sound kind of . . . Southern, or countryish, or something."

"Maybe you're mixing up small-town Pennsylvania with Southern."

"Yeah, I guess so. And now you live in the city?"

"Yes, ma'am, for six whole days." I looked up at him, probably kind of sharply, and he smiled. "You're by far the nicest person I've met."

I laughed. "Six days? Are you serious?"

"Dead serious."

"Why'd you come?"

"To see if I can get people to listen to my music. Maybe get some paying gigs." He looked at me. "How long do you think I should give it?"

"Gosh, I have no idea. . . ." How old could he be? Nineteen? "Maybe you should go to college first."

"I tried that already."

"Oh? Where'd you go?"

"Community college. For a year. I didn't like it."

"Well . . . maybe it just wasn't the right school?"

He shook his head. "School's not for me. Not now, anyway."

The light changed as we came to the corner of Amsterdam and we crossed the street. I couldn't imagine taking such a gamble, moving to Manhattan with no education.

"Well, I hope it all works out," I said. "You're certainly very talented."

"Thank you."

"You'll probably need to give it some time."

"I been thinking five years, and then I'll know."

"Oh, yes." I felt somewhat more cheerful for him. "And you'll still be young, you can go back to school."

"I won't be that young," he laughed. "I'm twenty-eight."

Twenty-eight? He couldn't be my age, with that boy face. "I'm the same age," I said. "For some reason, I thought you were a lot younger."

"Really?" he said. "I figured we were about the same, or maybe I was older. When's your birthday?"

Turned out he was older. By two months.

We came to Broadway and before the walk signal came on he took my hand and pulled me into the crosswalk. Halfway across we had to dash to the corner to miss being tagged by a homicidal taxi driver. It didn't bode well for Tyler Wilkie surviving five more days, let alone five years.

My building was just a couple of blocks up. "I'll be fine from here. Thank you."

"Okay," he said, blowing into his cupped hands and pulling his collar up around his ears.

"Where do you live?" I asked.

"Forty-seventh, between Ninth and Tenth."

"You can get the train right there." I pointed to the subway entrance across the street.

"Oh yeah, thanks. Well, 'bye, Grace." He leaned down. To my embarrassment I reflexively leaned away, and the kiss he must have been aiming at my cheek landed on the tip of my nose. We both laughed.

"'Bye. Thank you." I headed across Seventy-ninth.

Halfway up the block I peeked back over my shoulder. He had bypassed the subway and was walking briskly down Broadway, head down, hands tucked under his arms.

Steven was on the couch, watching *The Matrix*. He probably had a rough day. He rewatched *The Matrix* the way I rewatched *Chocolat*. And how about that Carrie Ann Moss!

"How long have you been home?" I asked, shedding my coat.

"A couple hours."

Steven is a big, bearlike guy, six-four. Solid. Gentle, with kind blue eyes. I sometimes jokingly called him Even Steven.

I kissed him lightly on the cheek and went to bed. I didn't want to disturb him in the middle of the "I know kung fu!" scene; it was probably recalibrating his entire outlook on life.

On Friday morning I stepped out the door directly onto something bulky lying on the doormat. My umbrella, it turned out, with a single pink gerbera daisy rubber-banded to it and a folded piece of notebook paper tucked underneath. The spelling was appalling, but the words were nice.

Grace!
Here is your umbrela. You rock for letting me use it! It is great to be treated like a human being by someone in this city. I got another job besides dogwalking. Come on over to the cafe Sofiya sometime and I'll slip you a cappechino!
Love,
Tyler Graham Wilkie
Cell #5702439134

I folded the letter back up, dug *Lolita* out of Big Green, and tucked it between the pages.