

Waiting in the Wings:
An elegy for Grace.

Grace. She always had such a measure of grace. That's the part that never made sense to me. She walked on bare ballerina feet through fields of ice and uneven ground, skipped over the cracks in the sidewalk. And she never lost her footing. Not once.

She simply glided through everything. Anything she tried, anything that might give us difficulty, natural as breath. Soared acrobatically over our hurdles and balanced, bird-like, on the handrails. She moved, learned, lived as if she had wings. And she never lost her footing.

She just had this kind of energy, a kind of spirit that radiated from her like light. You could feel it just by looking at her, just by seeing her from the other side of the room. An ease about her actions, an unconscious precision like she just knew, like she didn't ever have to try. Like she excelled at everything . . . excelled at life. Every day she'd pass me in the hallway with that smile on her face, that serenity. As if she could be surrounded by all the chaos in the world, and it would never touch her.

I saw her dance once. Feet flying in defiance of gravity, playing with air like water, never losing her footing, mocking the forces of physics with her movement. She was levity and buoyancy and happiness and light. She was grace.

The one time I ever heard her voice raised in anger, or distress, was on the day before. Couldn't have known I was in earshot, her voice echoing through the deserted hallways leading away from the dressing room. It was startling to hear her so loud, so un-composed, voice choked with emotion.

"What do you mean?!"

A response. Low and calm, the words didn't carry. I didn't know the speaker.

"How can you just run away?! When we're depending on you!"

She was so angry. Or maybe hysterical, the way her voice shook. I didn't know why. I couldn't hear the reply, if there was one.

"Please, don't do this."

Her voice was quieter now, but still carried, either from the intensity of her words or the intensity with which I hung on each one. I think she was crying.

"don't leave."

I almost missed it.

A moment of heavy silence, then footsteps going away from us. Not her light ones, but heavy and fast and angry. Silence again. Eventually, from far off, a car door slammed. I knew she was still standing on the other side of the wall, left behind. Abandoned. I knew she'd hate it to know she was overheard. I left.

It was the next night, at the performance. She was going to be starting the act. The seats were filled and the lights were dimming. From my position at the side door, I could just see her standing in the shadow, waiting in the left wing. Saw her subtly peek around the curtain to look at the audience, look at the front row. Silence in the house. The music swelled. Her cue. Nothing. She's frozen behind the curtain, invisible to most of the audience, her stage-smile faded to a momentary dismay. She goes to make her entrance, a complicated kind of leap, but something goes wrong, she falters. There's a moment in which her thin frame hangs in the space between balance and control and recovery, and the surrender to gravity. A moment in which the world seems to hold its breath, the very air freezes like ice.

She lost her footing.

The audience didn't see how fast she fell. Didn't watch her land ungracefully, unnaturally sprawled on the smooth black floor, or see her head collide with the painted wood. But they heard the yells from the ones backstage who did. Those who saw her lie there, broken, who saw the blood in her hair.

The following hour was chaos and cancellations and ambulance sirens and hurried exits and somebody yelling to get ahold of her father.

I never saw her again.

I haven't been back to the theatre since. It's not right, it's not the same. It's missing her energy, her light. It's as if the place is frozen in time, in that very moment; her cue. It's waiting for her to finish her last performance. The show just can't go on without her.

I've heard that she'll never dance again, that her spirit's gone. But that's not right, it can't be. I know.

She's simply waiting in the wings.