

# **Blame It On My Youth**

*Stories by students  
on the art of being young*

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# **Act 1: Childhood**

*The Innocence of  
New Beginnings*

## Arbitrary Grace

*by H.J. Gerald*

My career as a babysitter started when I was fourteen, and ended two years later. It started the way it usually does, with the neighbors asking if I could watch their two-year-old on a night out, which quickly became a regular deal. Then, when the neighbors moved, I was asked by a friend of my mom to babysit her daughter; this lasted for about a year. The last time I was a babysitter was the first time I took the initiative myself, following an ad in the paper. It lasted for six months, and it would be the last time I did it. After Grace Mandelbrot, I could handle no more children.

I met Grace for the first time at her parents' house, which turned out to be not far away from our place. When I rang the door, I was ushered into the house by Mr Mandelbrot, a diminutive man who looked grubby even though there was no actual dirt on his face. He invited me into the living room, where I took place in a wobbly rocking chair, from where I could see Mrs Mandelbrot, sitting very straight, and looking very tiny, on the generous davenport.

The Mandelbrots, I learned during the next half hour, were perfectly courteous, perfectly decent, and perfectly unremarkable. Morris Mandelbrot worked at an insurance company, and his wife, Meredith, worked in retail. They did long hours, and both Morris and Meredith worked until seven, which made for three hours during which they couldn't attend to their eight-year-old. On Monday, Meredith's shop was closed, on Wednesdays Morris' mother came over to watch Grace, and Friday afternoons appeared to be family time (a Jewish thing, I gathered). But on Tuesdays and Thursdays, they needed a babysitter. They told me that they'd wanted to see me because they liked my resume, and it was nice to have a babysitter living nearby. The way they talked, they made it sound like they'd picked my name after a careful selection of at least fifty other applicants. Of course, this flattered my vanity, and made me eager to get to work. Afterwards, I discovered that the Mandelbrots had put an ad in the paper because they couldn't get any of their friends' children to babysit Grace anymore, and they would probably have taken anyone.

But that was not until much later.

After the Mandelbrots had introduced themselves, I returned the favor, and spent five minutes watching the parents nod and smile encouragingly in a manner that made me profoundly uncomfortable. I was relieved when Mr Mandelbrot walked into the hallway and shouted up the stairs for Grace to come down.

'She keeps herself busy, so she shouldn't give you any trouble,' Mr Mandelbrot said, smiling pleasantly as he sat back down on the davenport.

I heard footsteps hobble down the stairs, and a few seconds later came eye to eye with my job assignment. Grace was a small girl, even for her age, and carried her hair in two long braids. Two seconds later, I noticed that she was followed by a sleek tabby cat. I smiled as she walked up to me and held out her hand.

'Hi, Grace,' I said, shaking the hand.

'Hello, Ms Mayers,' she said, smiling prettily.

'Please, just say Nikki.'

She smiled again, then looked down at the cat, who sat on the parquet a few paces away. ‘Say hi, Bruno,’ she said.

On cue, the cat mewed.

Grace nodded as if she had expected nothing else, then turned back to me. ‘Now you’ve met everyone.’

Apparently satisfied with this course of proceedings, all three Mandelbrots smiled. The parents on the davenport rose—they had a social event this evening, but had wanted to meet me first.

Mr Mandelbrot pressed my hand before leaving, saying ‘We’re glad to have you, Ms Mayers.’

Mrs Mandelbrot patted my upper arm. ‘Take good care of Gracy while we’re away.’

‘That should be no problem.’ Turning back to the living room, I felt confident. Grace seemed like a perfectly normal girl, and there was no brain cell in my head which considered that I might not be able to handle her. But of course, there was no ‘handling’ Grace. She handled herself perfectly, and tolerated no one to do it for her.

When I reentered the living room, Grace was pulling a box out of an antique-looking dresser. She put it down on the dining table and sat down behind it. She was taking the lid off when I approached.

‘I thought we could do a puzzle,’ she said.

‘Okay, sure.’ I sat down opposite her and watched Grace’s nimble hands take out and arrange the pieces.

‘I always do puzzles with my Bubbe. But she only wants to do the Jewish ones.’

I looked up, smiling. ‘The Jewish ones?’

‘They’re pictures of Biblical stories. We have one of Noah and the ark which has a very big giraffe on it. And one of Eliyahu in his chair; that’s my Bubbe’s favorite.’

I nodded as if I understood all this. ‘Right,’ I said, taking a piece from the box. I saw on the lid that it was a horse-puzzle. ‘You aren’t religious, then?’

‘Not as much as my Bubbe. And not as much as Bruno, either.’

‘Bruno?’ I grabbed in the box and took out another couple of pieces, sorting them out. ‘You mean your cat is Jewish?’

‘My parents didn’t want him to have a cat mitzvah, but he’s very dedicated. He never hunts mice, for one, even though there’s a big nest in the shed. And he never goes outside of the eruv on Shabbos. I don’t know how he knows, but he’s a smart cat. Aren’t you, Bruno?’ she said, looking down.

Leaning past the table, I saw Bruno sitting next to Grace’s seat, tending to his fur. ‘He seems very loyal,’ I said.

‘Absolutely. He only waits outside when I’m in the bathroom, and he doesn’t follow me to school, of course.’ She leaned over the table, whispering behind her hand. ‘I sometimes wish he wouldn’t follow me around so much, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings.’

‘Right.’ I looked past the table again. Bruno had auburn-and-black stripes covering his mid-section, but his back paws and his tail were white. His face was partly white, and partly striped. He looked entirely average, but I would soon learn how extraordinary he was in his dedication to his owner.

I leaned forward, putting down some pieces that fit together. ‘So how is school? Do you like it—wait...’ I gave Grace a piece. ‘I think that one goes there.’

Grace fitted my piece on top of the little constellation she had made of a bottom corner. I would have to puzzle upside down.

Grace cocked her head, then nodded. ‘Yes! You’re right. Good.’ She smiled at me now,

not politely, but widely. For the first time, I noticed her dimples.

Feeling embarrassed, I cleared my throat. 'So, school?'

'Oh yes, I like it,' she said. 'Lots to learn.'

'Of course! Yes,' I said. 'Lots to learn indeed.' I fumbled for my next words; her answer hadn't been what I expected. 'So, do you have many friends?'

'Oh, no.'

I looked up. 'No? Don't you like having friends?'

'Not the people in my year,' she said, laying a long trail of pieces near the edge of the table—the bottom of the picture. 'They're not nice.'

I frowned, leaning forward to click an assemblage of four pieces into the frame. 'You mean they're not nice to *you*?'

'They don't talk to me much, mostly. There are a couple of really mean ones, though.'

'Oh?'

'Yeah,' Grace said, sighing. 'Tom Polino and his gang are always picking on me. But don't tell my parents, please'—still looking at the puzzle—'I don't like them to worry.'

'Don't you think your parents should know, though?'

Grace frowned, holding one piece between her fingers. 'It's nothing I can't handle,' she said, putting the piece down and grabbing another one. After a few seconds' search, she sighed and put the new piece down as well. 'I'd like to go watch TV now,' she said, hopping off her chair.

'But we didn't finish the puzzle...' I felt oddly mournful as Grace stationed the box at the edge of the table and pulled all the pieces back inside with a single sweep of her arm. Stooping, she opened the dresser and put the box back inside.

She didn't reply, but walked back to the seating area, where she picked up the remote control. Bruno pattered after her and jumped up the davenport, curling up next to her.

'Bruno likes to watch Sesame Street,' Grace said, pointing the remote. The TV jumped to life like a soldier springing at attention. 'I don't like it so much myself, but he likes Big Bird.'

I sauntered over to the davenport, looking with bemusement at the technicolor puppets on the screen. 'I bet he does.'

And so, we watched Sesame Street. Much in the same way, we ended up playing with her barbie dolls (who, she emphasized, weren't Jewish), reading *Alice In Wonderland* together, and playing two rounds of jeopardy before she went to bed. When the Mandelbrots came home, I was exhausted. It was true, I thought: Grace did know how to entertain herself. In fact, there had been no point during the evening when I'd needed to jump in because she felt bored. Grace knew very well what she wanted. The only problem was that what she wanted was so wholly unpredictable, and I seemed to have no choice but to follow her every whim. There were many times, later, when I'd tried to put my foot down and told her no, we'd finish the puzzle first. But she'd always get the final word.

'I'd like to visit the park today,' she'd say when I went to pick her up at school.

'Don't you have homework?'

'Not today,' she'd say, taking my hand as we walked away from the gates.

'Are you sure?'

'Yes!' She'd pull my hand and look up at me. 'I'd like to go to the park.'

It was never a question. She was always polite, and never sounded demanding, but there was a decisiveness in her voice and countenance which was difficult to ignore. So we went to the park. And to the ice cream parlor the week after, and the library the week after. She'd always come up with something.

Which was not to say that she ever gave me trouble. She always left me a choice as to whether or not I'd join in her next activity. There were plenty of times when I read a book while she was puzzling, or that I played games on my mobile while she made her homework. On rare occasions, she asked my help with homework, but even when she did ask, she hardly needed my help. She was a lot smarter than I was at her age, and school, I thought, would never be a problem for her. Because homework didn't cost her much time, though, that always left much room for other activities. And even though she never made me (apart from the times she asked me to go somewhere), I found it curiously irresistible to join Grace in whatever her wishy-washy brain came up with.

Then, one day, it was raining when I went to pick her up, and when we arrived at her front door, I noticed that her parents hadn't left the key where they usually left it.

'Do you know any other way we can get in?' I asked, speaking loudly over the clatter of raindrops. I held up my hood so it wouldn't fall over my eyes. Grace was dressed in a yellow mackintosh.

'No,' she said, 'There is no other way to get in.'

I cursed internally, struggling not to do it out loud.

She pulled my hand. 'But we could go over to your house. You live nearby, right?'

I looked down, pondering the option. I didn't much like it, but with this weather there was nowhere else we could go. I smiled. 'Okay. We'll do that.'

'Good,' she said. 'Then I can see where you live, too.'

A tiny ball of tenderness swelled in my stomach. As much as Grace was still a mystery to me, I felt that she liked me. And having spent a few weeks with the girl, I could admit to liking her too. I could imagine that her other babysitters hadn't liked being ordered around (though to me it never felt like that), and conjectured that that was maybe why they had resigned. Grace *was* a handful, after all. But a perfectly polite, intelligent, and precious handful, I thought to myself.

Squeezing her hand, I turned away from the Mandelbrots' front door. 'Won't Bruno be lonely, though?' I asked.

Grace shrugged. 'He'll be okay. And he hates rain, so he'll be glad to be inside.'

I took her to my house. I breathed a sigh of relief as we came in from the rain, both of us dripping all over the welcome mat. A few seconds later, we were met by my mother.

'Nikki?' she asked, looking confused. 'What's going on?'

I knocked off my hood and shook out my hair. 'Grace's parents forgot to leave the key under the doormat. We decided to come here instead.'

'Oh... That's not so clever of them,' my mother said, her gaze dripping down to the girl next to me. Grace was fumbling with her mackintosh, which, on noticing it, I quickly lifted off her head. Able to see her fully now, my mother beamed.

'Hello, Grace,' she said. 'It's so nice to meet you! Nikki has told me all about you.'

Grace walked up to my mom and shook her hand. 'Hello Mrs Mayers,' she said. 'It's nice to meet you too.'

'Such a polite young lady you are,' my mom said, clasping her hands together. She sounded enraptured. 'Would you ladies like something warm?'

'That would be great, actually,' I said, hopping on one leg to tug off a shoe.

'And you, Grace?'

'Yes, please, Mrs Mayers.'

And off she scuttled to the kitchen. She made us two steaming mugs of hot chocolate, with whipped cream and marshmallows on top (something which hardly happened anymore). I got the impression that she wanted to ask Grace a thousand questions, but I discreetly waved

her off. Grace and I settled down to watch TV while we drank our hot chocolate.

But soon, of course, Grace had enough of TV, and I got out some of our board games. We played half games of Clue, Chutes and Ladders, and Monopoly, but Grace quickly tired of each of them. And so I delved into the basement to get out my brother's old Legos. Grace, who had never seen Lego Mechs before, was enchanted by so many little pieces and so many new figures to build. It would've been perfect, if it hadn't been for my brother himself showing up.

I heard him rambling down the stairs. On his way to the kitchen—which held the door to the garden—he stopped. He was snapping his lighter with one hand, and a cigarette rested behind his ear.

'Well hello,' he said, looking around the dining room table to where we were playing on the ground.

I looked up, and he cocked his head. 'Are those my Legos?'

Hearing his voice, Grace stood up. She smoothed her dress, then walked up to Miles. Foreseeing trouble, I got up as well and followed her, a few paces behind. I didn't interfere, but cast my brother a withering glare while Grace talked to him.

'Hi, my name is Grace,' she said, holding out her hand.

Miles looked down at her as if she was a cute new curio. 'Well, hello, little girl,' he said, taking her hand. 'Name's Miles.'

'Thank you for letting me play with your Legos,' she said. 'My parents only buy me girly toys. I've never seen boy toys before.'

A delighted smirk spread over his face, and my arms tensed. 'Well, it's my pleasure!' he said. Squatting on his haunches, until they were at eye-level, he patted Grace's head. 'Little girl, you can come play with my toys *whenever* you like.'

'*Miles!*' I barked. 'Cut it out.'

Miles got back up, shrugging. 'I'm heading out for a smoke.'

Grace's brow crinkled. 'My Dad used to smoke,' she said. 'He said it was bad for him.'

'Oh yes, it's very bad for you.' Miles nodded importantly. 'Don't ever get started, okay?'

Confusion crowded Grace's face. 'Okay,' she said feebly.

Miles smirked. He turned around and sauntered to the kitchen. 'See ya, little girl!'

'Goodbye, Mr Miles.'

In the doorway of the kitchen, Miles turned around. '*Mr Miles?*' he mouthed, with obvious relish. Throwing his head back, he pressed his hand against his heart and howled noiselessly. Grace, thankfully, had her attention back on the Lego mat, so I was the only one who saw.

Frequently and viciously, I stabbed him with my eyes.

'Don't pay attention to my brother,' I said when I turned back to Grace. 'He's in his first year in college, so he thinks he needs to prove how cool he is.'

Grace frowned. 'Your brother isn't cool,' she said, as if it were the plainest fact in the world.

I felt a tickle in my throat. 'He really isn't.' Trying to contain my laughter, I looked at our construction site. 'Now, where were we?'

A little before seven, Grace and I took off again, so we would arrive at her place when her mother (who arrived about ten minutes before her husband) came back. My mother wouldn't have minded Grace staying for dinner, but with my brother in mind, I thought that would be a bad idea. Besides, I argued, Grace's parents would be worried if they arrived home to neither of us there.

We arrived just when Mrs Mandelbrot was fumbling a key into the lock, so I could drop Grace off immediately. I waved Grace goodbye, then took off. Dinner had been served by the time I arrived, and the conversation had, without my prompting, arrived at the girl I had just dropped off.

‘I think she’s a wonderful girl,’ my mother said, ladling rice onto her plate.

‘She’s so random, though,’ Miles said. He turned to me, smirking. ‘Nik, didn’t you say she was totally random?’

‘I said no such thing.’ That was a lie, of course. I had, in the beginning, talked a lot about my job assignment’s oddities—the way you do before you get to know someone and discover why all your first impressions were false. Annoyed, both with myself and with my brother, I shoved rice onto my plate with a little more force than necessary.

‘Nikki, please be careful with the wok,’ my mom said.

‘She just has a lot of interests,’ I said, putting the wok back on the coaster.

‘Psh, that’s just a euphemism for “random”,’ Miles said. ‘I mean, seriously. She goes from TV to boardgames to Legos in like, less than twenty minutes! Nik, you *told* me. She only spends five minutes on something before she gets bored.’

‘That’s longer than most kid’s attention spans these days,’ my mother muttered, her eyes on her plate.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘Grace is like, *super* focused. So okay, she doesn’t stay with one thing for a very long time, but as long as she’s doing something, it’s really the only thing on her mind.’

‘Psh,’ Miles said. ‘That’s a lame defense.’

‘You think that’s a lame defense?’ I said, turning to him. ‘Well, too bad for you, *Miles*, because you know *nothing*.’

‘Hey, it’s not my fault the kid has ADD,’ Miles said, holding up his hands.

‘Oh my *God*, she *so* does not have ADD!’ I said, dropping my fork onto my plate. It clattered loudly. ‘Seriously, Miles, *every* eight-year-old is random. It’s just a sign of her age.’

‘Stop arguing, you two,’ my mother said. ‘Grace is a wonderful girl.’

‘That’s what *I* said.’ I picked up my fork, a pout on my face.

‘I don’t know, Nik,’ Miles said. ‘She struck me as a little...’ He squinted his eyes and rubbed his fingers together.

‘A little *what*?’ I said, stabbing at my rice.

‘—arbitrary.’ Miles’ eyes went wide. ‘Actually, that sounds really good. “Arbitrary Grace”,’ he said with a dreamy voice. He chuckled. ‘Could be a song.’

‘Miles, eat your risotto,’ my mom said.

‘No, really. It’s like, poetry. “Arbitrary Grace”,’ he said, lifting his hands, “with her funny-looking face”.’

‘Oh my God, Miles, don’t be such a fucktard.’

‘*Language, young lady*,’ my mother said, widening her eyes at me.

My mouth dropped open. ‘But *he*’s—’

“‘Arbitrary Grace, she is such a hopeless case”,’ my brother continued, his voice rapturous.

‘Miles, please stop that,’ my mother said, tiredly.

“‘Arbitrary Grace, she will never win the race”.’

‘Miles, I swear to God, if you don’t cut it out *right now*—’

“‘Because Arbitrary Grace, she is all over the place!’”

‘MILES!’ me and my mom shouted.

‘All right, *all right*! I repent,’ Miles said, chuckling.

‘Yeah?’ I said. ‘You don’t sound very remorseful.’

‘Oh come on, Nik, that was brilliant.’

‘All right, poetaster,’ my mom said, ‘eat your risotto.’

Miles pressed his palms together and put his forehead against his joined thumbs. ‘I submit to your every wish, oh mother.’

‘If only that were true,’ my mother sighed.

For a few minutes, nothing was said, and the only sound was the clinking of cutlery against crockery.

‘In all seriousness, though, Nikki,’ my mom said, wiping her mouth. ‘There *is* something—*unusual* about her. She seems a lot more grown up than most girls her age. And so *polite*.’

‘She is *very* polite,’ I said.

Miles harrumphed.

I turned to him. ‘What’s with you now?’

‘Nothing! Just, that, you know, it’s not always as good as people make it sound, about children being so “grown up” for their age.’

I frowned. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘I mean, she’s weird, right? Didn’t you say she doesn’t have a lot of friends?’

‘That’s just because the kids in her class are all little dipshits.’

‘*Language, young lady*,’ my mom said.

I rolled my eyes.

‘Well, all I’m saying is, it must be lonely for her sometimes, right? I mean, if *I* had the choice, I’d rather not be so “mature for my age” and get along with people than, you know... Be miles ahead of everyone and be alone.’ His face jumped into a smile. ‘*Miles* ahead of everyone!’ he crowed. ‘Man, I’m brilliant.’

I shot him a look, but didn’t say anything. I twirled my fork in my plate, a troubled look on my face.

‘I know girls like her,’ my mom said. ‘They’re wise beyond their years. My experience, with girls like that: either they’re leaders, or loners.’

I looked up at my mom, my brow quizzical.

She shrugged. ‘It’s true, Nikki.’

I looked back down at my plate, scooping two rice grains onto my fork. After so many weeks of Grace taking the initiative for pretty much all our activities, I couldn’t deny her leadership qualities. But I knew that in everyday reality, Grace was no leader. I knew this. I just hated to think of her as a loner.

She never told me much about the kids who picked on her at school. Being such a remarkably together person, Grace seemed to bear her tragedies with—there was no other word for it—graceful acceptance. Now and then, she dropped that Tom Polino had been calling her names again; that Bram Cramer (one of Tom’s cronies) had put gum in her hair where nobody could see it; or that Marybeth Reynolds (the third member of Polino’s gang) had, unseen by the teacher, crumpled up Grace’s homework while she was on a bathroom break. But Grace talked about these things with the same casualness with which she’d recount what she’d learned today, and I felt uncomfortable to even comment on it. On top her casualness, Grace always asked so emphatically not to tell her parents, that I wondered for a while if she wasn’t just making it all up. Two weeks before I saw her the last time, I discovered that she wasn’t.

It happened one afternoon, six months since after I started babysitting Grace. Winter had passed, and a milestone seemed to have been reached for me and the Mandelbrots; I learned from Grace that her previous babysitters usually skedaddled after New Year. It was

Thursday, and as usual I went to pick her up at school. I was waiting outside, and had just spotted Grace approaching over the playground, when I heard a voice addressing her.

‘Hey, *Mandelturd*,’ the voice said. It was a boy’s voice, and I saw it came from one of three people walking up to her from the left.

Grace halted for a moment, then pushed on. ‘Leave me alone.’

I saw she had spotted me. I wanted to wave, but my arms felt oddly heavy. As I glanced at the three figures closing in on Grace, horror stirred in my stomach. Having believed for such a long time that Grace was lying, I felt guilt seeping through my limbs like ice-water, freezing them into immobility. I did nothing as the other three joined her in her walk towards the gate, two on one side, one on the other. One of the boys seemed to be on the look-out for parents or teachers; he kept casting his eyes around, while the attention of the other two was riveted on their target.

‘What’re you gonna do, *Mandelturd*, play with your dreidel?’ the girl said.

‘None of your business.’

‘Heeey,’ the one boy said, moving in front of her. ‘We’re all friends, aren’t we, weirdo?’

‘I’m not a weirdo.’

I let out a measured breath as she reached the gate and walked up to me. I took her hand and looked up at the three kids, my eyebrows lifted.

‘Oh, who’s this, then?’ one of the boys said. He was a lot smaller than me, but taller than Grace. He had a dark complexion and sleek, black hair. ‘One of your *babysitters*?’

‘Yes, actually,’ I said, and felt my limbs unfreeze. With Grace by my side, I felt suddenly empowered and, seized by anger and guilt, felt a feverish rush to compensate for my inaction. I stepped forward and gave the three kids my withering glare. ‘Now you stay *away* from Grace, okay?’

I felt a tug at my hand. Grace was pulling it, a strange expression on her face. ‘Let’s *go*,’ she said.

‘One minute, Grace.’ I turned back to the three bullies. ‘If I hear *anything* from Grace about you bullies in the future, you’ll regret it, understand?’

‘Let’s *go*,’ Grace said again, dragging at my hand.

‘You can’t *do* anything,’ the dark-complexioned boy said. ‘You’re just a *babysitter*.’

‘I can’t do anything?’ I said, raising my eyebrows. ‘*Watch* me, little boy.’ I drew myself up and turned around. ‘Come on Grace,’ I said, squeezing her hand back. ‘Let’s get back to Bruno.’

‘Who’s *Bruno* then?’ the other boy taunted as we walked away. ‘Your imaginary boyfriend?’

I turned back. ‘He’s her *cat*, you idiot!’ I shouted. ‘*Ow!*’

I looked down beside me. Grace had squeezed my hand with so much force that it hurt. ‘That *hurt*,’ I said, unnecessarily.

Grace said nothing. Her lips were pressed together in a tight line. ‘Let’s just go home,’ she said.

‘Okay.’

No more words were spoken as we walked back to Grace’s house, but I observed her evolving emotions with rising perplexity. She didn’t let go of my hand, but her face was drawn tight, and I could see in the tense movements of her legs and arms that something was very wrong.

When we arrived home and I opened the door, she let go of my hand immediately and stomped inside without taking off her shoes. I followed her into the living room, and she

slammed her schoolbag onto the dining table.

‘That was a *stupid* thing to do!’ she spat.

I started. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘That was *really* stupid! You should *not* have interfered!’

‘I-I...’ I said. ‘They were picking on you, Grace! What did you want me to do, stand by and do nothing?’

‘That was *exactly* what you should’ve done!’ She turned to me, her eyes ablaze. ‘They didn’t know about Bruno. And I always made *very* sure that they didn’t know he existed. You *ruined* it!’

‘I... Grace, I’m sorry,’ I said. ‘I just did what I thought was best.’

‘Well, you thought *wrong*. You were *stupid*.’

For a moment I felt like protesting, but I refrained. Grace puffed out a snappish breath, then pulled out her homework. I wondered if I should offer to help her, just to prove that I was not stupid. Instead, I took up my own bag, took out a book, and settled down on the davenport.

Grace remained at the dining table for the rest of the evening, even though her homework couldn’t have taken that much time. And as long as she didn’t move, I was afraid to move too, so I stayed on the davenport. When Mrs Mandelbrot came home, I didn’t say goodbye to Grace, but walked home, my head spinning. I was so unsettled by Grace’s outburst that I didn’t bring it up at home, and I went back the next week without telling anyone what’d happened. Full of good hopes of forgiveness, I met Grace that day with the same smile I always gave her. But in vain. There were no more incidents at the school gate, but Grace remained frosty with me all throughout the next week, and on Tuesday the week after.

By Thursday—two weeks after my transgression—I felt wretched. I still wasn’t sure what I’d done wrong, and I didn’t know what to do to make it up to Grace. She never suggested we’d do something together anymore, and we never went anywhere anymore either. When I made some timid suggestions that we’d go to the park, or the library, or the ice cream parlor, she said she had homework to do. And so, when I went to pick her up that Thursday, I had little hope of reconciliation.

We arrived at Grace’s house and went through the motions of taking off our shoes, shedding our coats, and getting something to drink, when Grace halted.

‘Where’s Bruno?’

I looked around. I hadn’t noticed his absence, but it *was* weird; usually he came running to Grace when we arrived home.

‘Did your parents leave him inside this morning?’ I asked. ‘He could be outside.’

Grace’s shoulders relaxed. ‘Yes,’ she said, ‘That’s probably it.’ But she stared out the living room sliding doors with a frown, worrying her bottom lip.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked when she padded back to the hallway.

She came back with her jacket and slippers. ‘I’m going to look for him.’

‘Okay.’ She hadn’t asked me to join her, but she didn’t protest when I went to fetch my own coat.

We had gone through the sliding doors and walked several paces onto the lawn when I spotted the elder tree in the corner of the garden. I gasped. Grace followed my glance, and it was all I could do to catch the back of her head and press her face into my stomach.

Nailed against the tree was Bruno. He was dangling from his tail, his paws suspended with rigor mortis. The side of his head had been smashed in. On the nail, a note had been stuck, and I was just close enough for my squinting eyes to catch its message: “WEIRDO.”

I felt a tug at my hand, and looked down. Grace was looking up at me. She looked pale, but her eyes were dry.

'I'd like to go see him,' she said, with a voice like glass. To my surprise, I heard a hint of supplication in her tone.

'Are you sure?'

She didn't answer for a while, just looking up at me. I returned her gaze unsteadily, my stomach ajumble. Then, she nodded.

'Okay,' I said.

Slowly, I allowed her to turn around, and I walked with her toward the elder tree, always keeping my hand on her shoulder.

When we were a few paces away, she breathed in and shuddered.

'Oh Grace,' I whispered. I'd always found the cat a bit of an annoyance, but even I felt a prickle of tears when looking at such brutality. Such butchery.

It wasn't a question who'd done it, and I felt sick. I knew that kids could be cruel, and I'd understood from Grace that the bullying was bad, but I'd never imagined this. Added to that the realization that the murderers wouldn't even have known about Bruno if it hadn't been for me, and I felt all kinds of horrible. I didn't feel like I had the right to either comfort Grace or apologize, but I squeezed her shoulder.

'I'm so sorry.'

Grace said nothing for a while. When she looked up at me, I could discern no emotion in her eyes.

'I'd like to bury him,' she said softly. Saying the words seemed to make her quiver, but a moment later she was back to her old, self-contained self. I almost wanted her to cry, then.

I just nodded.

We took a shovel from the tool shed, and found an empty spot in the flower border for a shallow grave. After digging the hole, I got a pair of garden gloves and pliers from the tool shed for the unappealing job of taking Bruno down. I first ripped the scrap of paper from the nail and put it in my pocket. It burned against my hip.

Then for the main job.

At first, I tried to do it myself, but the nail had been driven in quite deeply, and I couldn't exercise enough muscle to pull the nail out *and* hold up Bruno to make sure he wouldn't fall when the nail did come out. With gut-wrenching guilt, I gave Grace the garden gloves, so she could hold up her cat while I tugged at the nail. It proved difficult to do a neat job, as well as an effective one, because I didn't want to rip the tail by applying too much force. Pulling at the nail, I kept thinking that this was probably the most horrible thing I'd ever had to do. So many years later, I can say it still is.

After what seemed like an hour, I got out the nail, and Grace caught Bruno in her arms. For a minute, I didn't dare to move as she stared at her cat, with his bashed-in face, his broken eye, and whiskers red with blood. Flies were flitting around him, but Grace took no note of them. Slowly, she carried him to the grave, and put him down onto the soil. Then took off the garden gloves, which I took silently.

I wondered what to say.

'I think, we should sing him a song,' Grace said. She said it slowly and deliberately, but I could hear a quiver in her voice.

'O-kay.' I swallowed. 'What would you like to sing?'

Grace was silent for a few seconds, then started singing under her breath. '*Nothing's gonna harm you, not while I'm around...*'

My heart did break a little, then. I sang along as well as I could. I looked down at

Bruno's beaten form, his fur muddy and awry and his pose all wrong. He hardly looked anymore like the cat I used to know.

After we finished our song, Grace took a fistful of dirt, and threw it over her cat. 'Goodbye, Bruno,' she whispered.

I took another fistful, and did the same. 'Goodbye, Bruno.'

Then she did cry, and I was almost relieved. I hugged her close, and she clung to me like she never had before. I cried, too. It was the first—and would be the last—time I saw Grace cry, and even without the circumstances, I think the sight of it would have been enough to open my floodgates.

When her sobs subsided, I kissed the top of her head. 'You go inside now,' I said. 'I'll cover him up.'

Grace tensed for a moment, and I feared she'd protest, but then she nodded into my stomach. She went back inside.

I buried Bruno. I started with small shovels while I could still see him, but my movements became more forceful as I continued. I was angry and hurt. I could feel it in my stomach, as if I'd swallowed an electric wire which was now humming and burning against my organs, discharging small currents as it moved. I had made one mistake. A mistake I hadn't been even aware I was making at the time, and I felt that Grace's bullies had been targeting me as much as her in killing Bruno—to punish me for my one little slip. I was angry. I was sure I'd never felt *so* angry before, and I wondered for a moment if that's what being a mother felt like.

When I came inside, I found Grace leafing through a little book, muttering words under her breath.

'What are you doing?' I said, closing the door behind me.

'It's customary after a Jewish burial for the family members to say Kaddish. I just forgot the words...' A look of anguish crossed her face. 'I'm trying to find them.'

I sat down across from her, pulling a tired hand through my hair. It never occurred to me to dissuade Grace from saying prayers for her cat. Even in hindsight, I'd never found it laughable. I could only admire that Grace, though still so young, had already found a way to mourn.

Wondering how I could help her, I looked around the living room, and found one of the pictures perched on their book case. There, all the family snapshots languished, in expensive-looking wooden, gilt, or silver frames. There stood a picture of Grace with Bruno when he was still a kitten. I walked over there, took up the frame, and put it on the table in front of Grace.

'If you want to pray to something,' I said. I had no idea if this was appropriate, but Grace nodded.

'Thank you.'

I stayed with her until her mom arrived. I detained her in the hallway, explaining shortly what had happened. Mrs Mandelbrot looked so shocked that she didn't say anything during my speech, nor after. Feeling her shocked eyes on me, I suddenly felt profoundly uncomfortable, and I quickly took my leave. It was only when I was halfway home that I realized I hadn't said goodbye to Grace. I felt guilty about this for a moment, but I pushed it away. In the future, I would be there for Grace as much, and as well, as possible. And I would stop the bullying, if I had to do it all by myself.

So fulfilled with my new intentions, I promptly told my mom and brother what had happened when I sat down at dinner that evening. Remembering the note in my pocket, I produced it as evidence. I burned it later.

My mother was predictably shocked, and even my brother seemed uncomfortable.

'So,' I said, a challenge in my voice. 'What should I do?'

'Well, I uh, I don't know, honey,' my mom said, reaching up to puff up her hairdo. 'Did you tell Meredith?'

'Yes.'

'Then I uh, think you should maybe, wait to see what her parents will do, first. I can't imagine that they won't take action after *this*.'

I pulled a face. I sometimes doubted the Mandelbrots' investment in their daughter's life, but I couldn't say that, of course.

'Just wait a bit, honey,' my mom said, putting her hand on mine. 'If it doesn't sort out itself, we'll see what we can do. For now, I think it's important to just be there for her.'

And I had wanted to do nothing rather. But the next Tuesday, my mom found a slip in the mailbox, saying that Grace was ill, and her mother had taken time off to take care of her. That my services wouldn't be required for the rest of the week. And please not to visit, because Grace was contagious.

I felt like tearing the note into little pieces. I didn't know what I was more angry about: the fact that Grace was 'ill' (no doubt a result of Thursday's incident), or that I wasn't allowed to visit. I went up to my room and boiled silently.

Next Tuesday, another slip fell through the mailbox, with a much more shocking message: the Mandelbrots were moving. Grace would attend a different school. I was thanked for my services, and the money I would have earned last week was included as a token of gratitude.

I felt miserable. I had thought the Mandelbrots would go to the principal, talk over the problem, see that Grace's tormentors were punished. I thought the news of Bruno's demise would be all over town in a matter of days. But even though my mom knew—and she was a gossip—I never heard a whisper. I seethed, I raged, I shouted. I cried a lot. It was unfair. Grace had been abused, and Grace was now being punished. And *I* was being punished, I thought in my most self-pitying moments, for being deprived of her. In my grief, I forgot all about her behavior during those last weeks. Partly, I felt like I'd deserved to be punished, given the result of my slip, and partly, her bad behavior seemed negligible compared to the brutality of her bullies. It didn't matter anymore, I thought. All was over.

Grace's tormentors, however, didn't go unpunished. A few weeks after Grace's departure from my life, my mom came home from visiting a friend, flush with excitement. There had been a few incidents at Grace's former school, she told me. With growing wonder and pride, I listened to my mom's story. Tom Polino, she said, had been caught red handed while trying to steal a bike and sneaking it off school grounds. Bram Cramer had been discovered sticking chewing gum between the pages of his teacher's binder, and with that, he was nailed down for every gum-related incident during the past year. Marybeth Reynolds, finally, who was in Grace's own class, was exposed for committing fraud multiple times on her calculus tests, by letting her high-tech watch do the math for her.

None of the exposures could be tied to Grace, especially since she had already changed schools by the time the discoveries were made. If it hadn't been for their near-simultaneity, and the identity of their subjects, they could have been entirely random discoveries. Very few people knew about Bruno's murder, after all, and Grace had been gone for a few weeks by the time her tormentors were unmasked. Moreover her past, and known, harassments, had been ignored by students and gone unnoticed by staff. After her departure Grace, on the whole, had been quickly forgotten. But I knew, and I suspected the kids themselves knew, that this, somehow, was Grace's doing.

Later, when the immediate drama had passed, and I gained some objective distance, I reconsidered the course of events, and Grace's role in it. It took me a long time to figure her out, but I finally concluded that to Grace, the cardinal sin was not pride or envy, but stupidity. Her partiality to certain people had nothing so much to do with kindness, friendship, or loyalty, but whether she thought the other person smart. For a long while, it appeared that I belonged to the privileged few who were deemed clever enough to deserve Grace's affection, but the minute I misstepped I was treated the same way as all her other babysitters—with contempt. The only reason that I'd stuck around longer than the others was because I—unconsciously—had managed not to misstep for such a long time. After my one and fatal mistake, however, I'm sure I wouldn't have held out for much longer than her other babysitters.

Her contempt for stupidity, and approval of shrewdness also, I thought, explained why she allowed her bullies to go unpunished for such a long time. While they treated her badly and held no affection for her, they were always smart enough, in their harassments, to evade detection, thereby earning Grace's respect. In this sense, I thought the careless way in which Grace talked about her sufferings almost approached appreciation; she might almost have seen it as a challenge, to see what Polino's gang would come up with next. It was only when they were stupid enough to kill Bruno (a mistake in itself, purely by virtue of it being a step too far) and nail him to a tree, in full daylight, in the sight of neighbors, parents, and babysitters, that Grace decided that enough was enough.

And I, too, decided that enough was enough. Whether caused by my perturbation at Grace's behavior; my horror at witnessing what grotesque proportions child cruelty could assume; or my sense of guilt on account of my role in the events, I declined every offer to babysit ever since.

That night, however, I went to sleep with a renewed confidence in the world. Though I still found it unfair that Grace had been forced to leave, my sense of justice was somewhat appeased. I wondered about her. She might have seemed small and insignificant, but to me, it didn't seem unlikely that someday, in her own shrewd, polite, and arbitrary way, Grace Mandelbrot would rule the world.

## **Insight**

*by Lore De Greve*

Stark arctic sky  
Stygian with clouds  
Howl of the wind  
Eyes that frown

I am this  
You are these

## The Slippers

by Vera Verhelst  
(In Memoriam)

In wintertime, my dad always wore suede moccasins inside the house. The kind of slippers that are so comfortably warm, the moment you put your feet in it, you immediately feel at home.

That was a problem. You see, at the beginning of the winter in which my eldest sister turned fourteen, she discovered that homey feeling. Whenever my father was not at home, she took his slippers and leisurely enjoyed the comforting sensation on her feet. She had slippers of her own, but they hurt. Or at least, that's what she said.

My father didn't like her to take his slippers. Not because he didn't want his daughter to wear his clothes, but because she wasn't very tidy. Every time she had worn his slippers, he had to look for them. By the end of October, that was every day. He had to search the full three hundred and sixty square meters of our home to find his cherished pair. Entering her room was a perilous adventure. But my father was brave. Sometimes he found them, sometimes he didn't.

My dad was rarely angry; it was not his style. First he bought her the same kind of slippers, but she lost them the very same day. Then he bought a second and even a third pair, but they were all lost the same week. He even took his slippers with him in the car when he left for work, but the moment he forgot, my sister won the battle again. My father needed a solution for the slipper problem.

One day in November – the case of the slippers was already going on for weeks by then – my father came home with another new pair. They looked amazing when he unwrapped them: fluffy on the outside and a thick, cream-colored woolen lining around the ankles. I noticed the gleam in my sister's eyes as soon as she saw them. I also noticed the faint smile that played around my father's mouth when he said he had an appointment that evening. I immediately thought about mousetraps or something hidden in the cap, but my sister was too greedy to suspect anything. She looked at the slippers as if they were hers already. So when my father left home, I made sure I kept close to her. I didn't know what would happen, but I knew I didn't want to miss it.

It was a marvelous scene. She had such a grin on her face when she threw off her socks and smashed a foot in one of my father's slippers. At first, a surprised look appeared on her face. She frowned. Then looked down in horror and jerked back her feet. Her toes were dripping with blood. A little piece of brown fur stuck between her toes.

She started yelling: "Speedy!"

Fighting her tears for the cruel ending of her dwarf hamster, she fell on her knees and looked inside the cap. She trembled when she put her hand inside the slipper, only to find small pieces carefully cut out of fake fur and soaked in red paint.

My sister sulked for days, but from that day on my father found his slippers every evening on the same spot where he left them. Problem solved.

## Blanket

*by H.J. Gerald*

My mother has asked for  
an electric blanket this Christmas;  
to tuck under her sheets  
and warm her cold-boned body,

No longer able to do it herself  
or to count on someone else  
to do it for her.

She has asked specifically  
for a blanket with thermometer,  
so she can set the right degree  
at exactly thirty-seven.

Thirty-seven—  
that magical temperature  
that spills enclosing, towering heat  
of suffocating summer days,  
delirious with swelter;

but also of a breath-reviving  
touch of flesh on flesh;

that number which somehow encodes  
the time-enshrined enigma  
of uniquely human warmth,  
and uniquely human love.