

only weep when you win

My little sister, Taffeta, peered through a kaleidoscope as we walked to school, her face tipped back, her exposed eye squinched shut. She'd found it in the alley behind Arapahoe Court. Since she refused to give me her hand to hold, I led her by the mitten clipped to the sleeve of her red plaid jacket.

"Stop pulling, Grace," she complained. "My mitten's gonna get yanked off."

"Then pay attention to where you're going."

With her eye still pressed to the battered tube, Taffeta shook her head. She looked like a cat with its head stuck in a Pringles can.

"Fine," I said, releasing her mitten. "If you slip in a patch of slush and crack open your head, don't come bawling to me, all right?"

There wasn't any slush left, though. A few weeks earlier it had clogged the gutters like congealed fat, but by now the last of it had melted.

No matter the season, Taffeta always dragged her feet during our morning walk. She hated school with a passion I never could understand. Her kindergarten classmates adored her, just like the judges of every beauty pageant she entered. She had immense brown eyes and hair the color of baby-duck feathers. A legendary music in her voice. People approached us on Main Street all the time just to hear her speak—which my mother loved.

"Everybody just wishes they had a gift like hers," Momma often said.

As a child, I'd resembled Taffeta, even though we were just half sisters. But whatever in me had appealed to pageant judges had long since vanished. My childhood softness had become a skinny awkwardness, as if my fourteen-year-old self had been nailed together from colt legs and collarbones. My hair was the yellowy tan of oak furniture. I french-braided it every morning to ward off the wind, but pieces always broke free and whipped my face like Medusa coils.

"Taffeta?" I called, realizing she was no longer beside me.

I found her crouched beside a fire-ant pile, using her kaleidoscope to poke at the few creatures braving the early-spring air. Twin splotches of mud soiled the knees of her white tights. I sighed, knowing that Momma would find a way to blame the mess on me.

"Taffeta, get up," I ordered.

"Don't call me Taffeta. Call me Taffy and I'll come."

“Taffy’s awful,” I said, although I didn’t think much of Taffeta, either.

“You’re awful.”

“If you don’t get up, I’ll freak out.”

“You won’t.”

I started toward her. But my boot skidded in a slick spot, and I had to grab the chain-link fence so I wouldn’t fall. I glanced around wildly and decided nobody saw.

“I need to tie my shoe,” Taffeta said.

She refused to let me tie them for her, so I crossed my arms and waited. I could already see the school building all the kids in Washokey shared: a faded brick rectangle from the olden days, set against a panorama of dry hills and open range. Endless space. A dead planet.

The badlands.

I’d wandered through the Washokey Badlands Basin so many times I’d memorized the feeling. The forlorn boom of wind. A sky big enough to scare an atheist into prayer. No wonder cowboys sang about being lonesome. Yet somehow, I felt part of something significant out there, collecting mountains whittled into stones to carry with me, like pocket amulets.

I dug in my tote bag until I found that day’s stone: a hunk of white quartz the size of a Ping-Pong ball. It wasn’t anything special, but I liked the feel of it. Rounded on one side, rough on the other, small enough for me to close my fist around it.

“Done,” Taffeta announced.

I grabbed her wrist, ignoring her protests as I towed her schoolward.

Like always, we paused at the edge of the great lawn, still glittering from that morning's watering. But my stomach knotted up even more than usual. The winners of the All-American Essay Contest would be announced in homeroom.

"Can't I go with you today?" Taffeta asked. "I'll be good, Grace, I promise. I hate school. Todd at my table looks up my dress."

"You know you can't come with me. Just keep your legs crossed like Momma told you."

Taffeta scowled at me. "School is horseshit."

My jaw dropped. Before I could demand where she'd heard that word, Taffeta scampered off toward the other kindergartners, brandishing her kaleidoscope. They swarmed around her like ants to a fallen bit of candy.

I remained awhile longer, squeezing my quartz stone and watching the high school students on the other side of the lawn. At the beginning of the year, administration had decided I belonged with the sophomores, a year ahead of my class, instead of with the kids my age. Like I could possibly fit in any less.

It was as if all the other students spoke some language no one had ever taught me. The pretty girls, who squealed with laughter. The monkey-armed guys in cowboy hats, who never looked my way. The wholesome farm kids, like glasses of milk, and the bored bad kids, who made their own fun. I didn't even fit in with the so-called brainy kids—the handful of them—because either they knew how to fake it, to stand out in a *good* way, or they were weird. Like Davey Miller, who

thought wearing socks with sandals was the greatest idea since Velcro.

The bell rang, and the other kids headed for the double doors. I knew that Mandarin Ramey probably wasn't among them, but I searched for her anyway.



My homeroom and history teacher, Ms. Ingle, was proud to be an American. She plastered proof on every available surface. Even the ceiling was a crazy quilt of glossy rectangles, blazing with stripes, spangles, pictures of presidents, and a massive map of Wyoming, emblazoned with *The Equality State* in four-inch fancy letters. Her boyfriend, Mr. Mason, ran the Washokey Historical Society, located in a trailer parked behind the gas station. I'd spent all ten hours of fall's community service project there, organizing sepia-colored photographs of covered wagons and surly pioneers.

Although I liked Ms. Ingle, sometimes I found myself sneering at our forefathers or extending my middle finger, unseen, in my lap.

Then I felt guilty, as if George Washington were hiding underneath my desk.

Davey Miller tapped my shoulder. He sat behind me and was always trying to make conversation. "What's up, Davey?" I asked.

"I forgot to give your pencil back yesterday," he said, blinking hard.

The blinking was a nervous tic. It made him appear

forever on the verge of tears. His little sister, Miriam, was the same age as Taffeta. When Davey dropped her off to play, he often lingered in my kitchen to talk until I fabricated some excuse to make him leave.

“Keep it, Davey,” I told him. “I’ve got plenty.”

Before he could say anything else, Alexis Bunker, who sat to my right, backhanded me across the shoulder. Washokey High mixed kids of all grades in homerooms, and just my luck, Alexis and I had been placed together.

“Grace, guess what!” she squealed. “Did you hear?”

Alexis had squinty blue eyes, freckle-prone skin, and blond hair she’d hot-curled so many times for the regional teen pageants it looked like frayed twine. The summer before, she’d sprouted an enormous chest, and it amused me to watch her attempt to navigate around it. Since our mothers had been best friends since their childhoods, Alexis and I had also considered ourselves best friends until we started high school and realized we had nothing in common. At lunch, I still sat with Alexis and her cronies—aka Alexis & Co.—only because I had no sophomore friends to sit with. Most friendships in Washokey were founded on circumstance, not connection.

“Did I hear what?” I asked, rubbing my shoulder.

“Mandarin Ramey got caught sneaking into the school pool last night with some older guy. Paige’s sister Brandi’s boyfriend was out taking his dog for a walk and he saw. He says the guy must’ve been like thirty. Ain’t she a slut?”

I feigned disinterest as Alexis colored in the details. Nothing she said could shock me, of course. I knew more about Mandarin than anyone.

“Well, ain’t she?” Alexis insisted.

I touched the rock in my jacket pocket. “She is,” I agreed.

Because that was one of the two truths everybody knew about Mandarin Ramey:

1) *Mandarin was beautiful.*

2) *Mandarin was a slut.*

The loudspeaker beeped, and Alexis swung forward in her seat, clunking her beige cowboy boots in front of her. Washokey kids wore all kinds of cowboy boots: stiff and new, creased and battered, bright-colored and fashionable. Alexis’s boots, though, were the only ones with spurs.

“May I have your attention, please. May I have your attention, please.”

Mr. Beck, the principal, requested our attention twice during morning announcements. He wanted to take full advantage of his daily five minutes of fame. Usually, I ignored him with the rest of the class, but that day I stared straight at the speaker, a black circle like a pupil with no eye around it.

“Good morning, everyone, on this terrific Tuesday, April tenth, with the temperature in the low sixties. This is your principal, Mr. Beck.”

“Beck’s stuck in the sixties,” a guy called from the back of the class.

“Ha, yeah, I bet he’s taking a puff of the dooja right now,” called another.

With perfect timing, Mr. Beck coughed. Everybody laughed except Ms. Ingle, who opened her mouth and then closed it.

“First news of the day,” Mr. Beck continued. “I’m pleased to announce I have the winners of the All-American Essay Contest, kindly funded by the members of Washokey’s 4-H and Kiwanis organizations, right here on this paper in front of me. Hold on to your seats!”

I curled my fingers around the bottom of my seat. My essay flashed before my eyes like a reel of microfilm, each paragraph flipping by with an imaginary tick. Certain sentences hopped out at me, the turns of phrase I’d wrangled like rodeo calves. I’d written exactly what I thought would win me the grand-prize trip.

“Third place and twenty-five dollars goes to Becky Pepper, junior.”

Becky Pepper was a 4-H kid, bused in from one of the farms or ranches that made up Washokey’s unincorporated south. I suspected she’d written about the history of beef breeding or dairy science, something the judges would love.

“Second place and fifty dollars goes to—”

Mr. Beck coughed again. I sat very still.

“Grace Carpenter, sophomore. And one hundred dollars and admission to the three-week All-American Leadership Conference in Washington, D.C., goes to our very own junior-class president, Peter Shaw! Congratulations, Peter.”

My heart plummeted to the soles of my feet as I watched the other kids mob Peter. They mussed up his hair, snatched at his glasses. When Ms. Ingle went over to congratulate him, I couldn’t stand it any longer. I snaked my arm through the strap of my tote bag. Unnoticed in the confusion, I rushed out of the classroom.



I was going to end up just like Momma. It was my fate. Born in Washokey and stuck there forever, trying to make myself stand out among the same old people. No matter how hard I tried to steer my life in a different course, something would always knock me back.

These were the thoughts that packed my brain like grid-locked traffic as I crouched in the end bathroom stall, with one arm draped over the back of the toilet. Although no one was there to see me, I tried my hardest not to cry.

“Only cry when you’re happy,” Momma liked to say. “Only weep when you win.”

But it was through eyes blurred by tears that I noticed the graffiti at the bottom edge of the stall door, scrawled in thick red marker:

School is Horseshit.

I mouthed the words over and over. Had Taffeta seen them here? She was an advanced reader for her age, like I’d been. But this bathroom was in the high school wing. The elementary school kids used another, unless it was a real emergency. And besides, a person could only read the phrase from ground level—sprawled out on the grimy tile floor, like me.

How pathetic.

I mashed the heels of my hands into my eyes. Admittedly, I had no desire to be a politician. Or a leader of any sort. But I longed for those three weeks outside of Washokey, longed to see a different part of the country, to sample parts of

another life. Miles of green grass. The Smithsonian—especially the gem and mineral collection. People in business suits. Here I saw nothing but jeans.

The essay contest was supposed to tide me over until my real, final escape to college. And if I tapped into that deep-down part of myself I didn't like to face, I had to admit it—I also wanted to win for the sake of winning.

And to think that Peter Shaw—four-eyed shotgun shooter, demolisher of innocent anthills, a *football player*, for crying out loud—had written a better essay than I had!

Now I'd have to wait two more years to leave. An unfathomable length of time. Two more years of imprisonment in the sun-scorched badlands, surrounded by the same old scandals, the same dusty streets, the same products on the grocery store shelves. How could I possibly stand it? Without something to break up the monotony, I would fade into the hills like one of those solitary ghost-people, who spent their days listening to the wildwinds batter their corrugated shacks.

When I was younger, I used to beg Momma to move away from Washokey. She always shook her head and said the same thing: "I tasted it. That city freedom. But then I came to my senses."

As if Jackson Hole could compare to New York, or San Francisco. We wouldn't even have to leave Wyoming, I pleaded. We had passed many memorable places on our road trips between pageants. Why in the world were we stuck in the Washokey Badlands Basin?

"In a world that's so big and wide," Momma would reply, "you can't blame me if I prefer this knowable portion."

The more Momma told me she wanted to stay, the more I wanted to go. I used to suspect that the badlands were inhabited with malicious spirits who didn't want us to leave. Although now I knew better, I still didn't feel better. Because if it wasn't spirits keeping me in Washokey, then it must be something much stronger. I wondered if Washokey life had infected me—if it had altered some secret part of my brain or reprogrammed the amino acids in my DNA so if I ever got out, I would never be truly happy.

Like a conch shell singing for the ocean. Washokey would pull me back.

Sniffing loudly, I must have missed the creak of the door opening. I didn't know I had company until the faucet splashed on.

I froze midsniffle.

For a moment, I considered hiding out. But then I remembered how, back in fifth grade, Alexis & Co. used to wait outside a bathroom stall until the girl inside finished and then make fun of her for taking so long.

I scrambled to my feet, flushing the toilet on the way up, and pushed open the door.

Mandarin Ramey stood at the sink.

I saw her in fragments, like close-up snapshots. Her kohl-smudged hazel eyes. Her angular cheekbones—everybody said her mother had been part Shoshone. Her black hair, streaked with damp ridges and valleys from the comb of her wet fingers. The uneven hem of her white sweater. Jeans worn low on her hips. As she arched forward to shut off the faucet, the dip of her spine engraved in the apricot-colored skin of her back.

She wiped her hands on her jeans. Then she faced me.

“Grace Carpenter,” she said.

My name sounded foreign on her tongue. How could she possibly have known it?

“So it was you bellyaching in that bathroom stall.”

Mandarin Ramey knew I’d been crying. I felt like throwing up.

“It doesn’t matter to me one way or another.” She leaned against the dented metal sink. “I was only saying. It’s no shame to cry—I heard the essay contest announcement on the loudspeaker. A rotten deal, if you ask me. Peter Shaw’s got prairie oysters for brains.”

She seemed to be waiting for me to speak, but my lips wouldn’t work.

Mandarin Ramey had never stood so close to me. She had never spoken to me before. In fact, Mandarin rarely spoke to anybody at school. She preferred the men she served at her father’s bar over boys her own age, and after her attempt at friendship with a girl named Sophie Brawls went sour a couple years back, she avoided girls altogether. It was amazing how much we all knew about Mandarin. How much, and how little.

“I won fifty dollars,” I said at last.

Mandarin smirked. “Yeah, but it’ll be a stupid savings bond, the kind you can’t touch till you’re of age. And you’re how old, fourteen?”

“Almost fifteen.”

She studied me, her expression blank. Without moving her torso, she dropped one hand to her hip and slipped a cigarette from her back pocket. Every move she made, from the

cock of her head to the cross of her ankles, was graceful, yet calculated, as if she were posing for an unseen camera. She poked the cigarette between her lips and lit it, sucking in so hard her cheeks collapsed inward.

Then she offered it to me. “Want a drag?”

Even the idea—sharing a cigarette with Mandarin Ramey, putting my mouth where hers had been—made my face flush. I shook my head and turned to the door.

“Ain’t you gonna wash your hands?”

I stared at her in horror. She smiled at me. A haze of smoke lingered around her head like a halo.

Which would be more embarrassing—escaping now with unwashed hands, or lingering to wash them? With every split second of internal debate, I died a little more. Finally I hurried to the sink beside hers, jabbed on the faucet, and scrubbed my hands as quickly as I could.

“I was just giving you trouble, y’know.” She yanked a trail of brown paper towels from the dispenser and stuck them in front of my face. “I don’t bite. Really.”

I dried my hands without meeting her eyes.

“Aw, get your ass back to class. Me, I aim to finish this cigarette. I’ll see you in math, all right?” She gave me a playful shove, herding me out.

As the bathroom door creaked shut behind me, I staggered down the empty hall of lockers and around the corner. There I backed into the wall, crackling a poster for the Future Farmers of America. My tote bag slid off my shoulder onto the ground. I could still feel the imprint of her hand on my shoulder, still smell the faintest trace of smoke on my clothes. Mandarin Ramey had spoken to me.

And not only that . . .

Mandarin Ramey *knew my name*.

I gazed out the window across the hall. Great sheets of earth swept into mesas furry with sage, then tumbled brokenly into valleys. The only color in the landscape was an early patch of Indian paintbrushes with blooms like ruby shards. As I watched, several red-winged blackbirds startled and took flight.