

## Amazing Grace

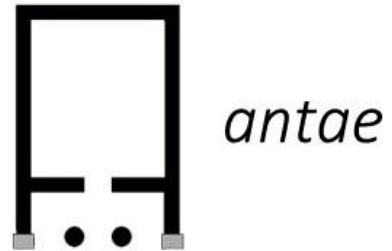
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## Amazing Grace

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It was hard for Bronagh these days. Her arms were stiff in the morning, her bones felt like they'd been shaken the whole night. Her fingers were bad too. The only one she could keep straight was the index finger, the rest of them curved toward her palm like foetuses. The veins snaking down her legs felt like roots when she touched them. They clustered closely on the instep of her foot. It was her eyesight that was the worst though. All she saw now were shadows, shadows of things. Bronagh recognised people by their voices and their hands. She felt young fingers helping her out the bath tub, kneading her scalp, silencing her thoughts as they brushed past her temples, a calloused palm leading her to the kitchen, a wrinkly one closing around her own. Her sense of smell was strong too. Once, they had brought her a baby and she'd smelt it before she'd touched it. The glorious blend of corn-starch and milk. As they walked into her room with the tray, she knew the food on it; whether there were strawberries in her porridge this time, or blueberries, whether it was lemon custard or banana.

In the mornings, as she woke up, she waited in her bed, listening to the robins outside. She imagined what they must look like, perching on a branch, their orange coats spreading themselves across their breasts, starting at their bellies and reaching just over their eyes. When she heard the drumming of rainfall, she remembered how the water droplets streaked the window panes, how different the world looked behind the tearful casement, like a Monet, short strokes of paint, the detail lost. Somewhere amidst these thoughts she would hear footsteps, a door creaking, the clatter of a tea-tray, curtains being drawn, feel the morning light on her face, the steam against her cheeks, the rim of a cup pressed to her lips, the tea, hot on her tongue, burning her throat, then, later, the water, tepid on her skin, rinsing away the rich rose lather.

The home sometimes invited schoolchildren to visit the elderly. One time a boy had come to speak to her. His voice was thin, like a bird's.

'I'm Steven, I'm ten. How old are you?'

'I can't remember.' She chuckled, trying to give this boy a face; dark eyes and light hair or light eyes and dark hair. A contrast was always good.

'Do you have problems remembering?'

'Yes, a little.'

'Do you have a husband?'

'No, I don't.'

'Do you know anyone who fought in the war? My great grandfather did but I've never met him.'

'Yes, I know someone.'

Then he unzipped his schoolbag. 'Look,' he said, 'look at the pictures. Dad has a whole collection at home. They're from the war, grandpa gave them to him.'

'I can't see,' she said, 'I'm sorry, I can't see.'

The boy grew quiet. They stayed in silence for a bit, then she heard him hoist his bag over his shoulders.

'I have to go.' His footsteps died quickly. No one else came to talk to her.

Bronagh too had photographs. There was a low stack she kept under her pillow. When she'd first moved in she knew exactly what they were, she kept them in order; the first was always of her parents on a bench, their hair, clothes, the trees behind them black. The edges were yellow as were their faces. The second was of her on a beach in early Spring, skinny and smiling. The third of her brothers, wearing Sunday suits. Her favourite was the fourth, taken from her childhood home, a picture of the street from the window in her room, the houses, rising up with the hill and the rows of chimney pots like reed pipes against a dark sky.

She would go over these, one by one, keeping in mind which one she held. Then, one time she'd felt the pain, it shook her bones, went through them like a carver goes through meat and they fell out of her hands; her parents, her brothers, her home.

'I'll get them for you,' said the nurse. 'There you go.'

A young hand opened hers, the photos were pushed against her palm. She wanted to ask if the nurse could tell her which were her parents, her brothers, herself, to put them in order, but she heard the door creaking, then closing, then nothing.

The pain had begun to loosen its grasp. With her index finger she traced the edges, the straight longer ones and the curves at the corners. She left two of them on her lap, held the other two up, measured them with the width of her hand to see if perhaps one was bigger than the other. They seemed to be of the same size. Then she remembered; the one with her parents in it had a small tear in the side. It had happened when she was lifting them out of the album. Bronagh took up another photo and ran her fingertips over the edges, the thumb beneath, index on top, scanning the paper-thin memory, until finally the cut in the photograph arrived. It was her parents. At least she could be sure of this.

Most days, she sat in her chair by the open window. She felt short bursts of fast wind on her face and hands, numbing her ears. Sometimes it was timid, it went in the gaps between her fingers and gently moved loose strands of hair along her jaw or cheek.

As she sat there in the cold she heard children laughing, crying, parents shouting, dogs barking, dried leaves scraping against the ground, ducks yodelling, gates creaking. She smelt the keenness in the wind, the earthy tang of freshly dug soil and freesias, saw flecks of red brick peeping out of ivied garden walls, leaf blades sagging, dew or rain sliding off them and children's chubby fingers pressed against their mothers' skirts, the edges of their nails black with soil.

Then the door creaking again, footsteps, a warm hand closing over her arm, the window turning on its hinges, a small bang, wind gone, hands on her arms, lifting her gently out of the chair, time for tea, the ease of the bedclothes' flannel after the cold, the powdery, silk skin of blueberries on her lips against the bitter taste in her mouth.

Then night came. At first she would feel warm and lie still for some time. She'd turn to the left, tug at the pillow, bring it closer to her head, turn right, sit up for a bit, lie down again. But then, it would all turn black, she saw black, nothing but black. The warmth coiled itself around her legs and arms, the bedclothes shook off their ease, the feather filled bag grew heavy on her, the mattress stiff, its metal springs prodded her in the back, in the side. All she heard were doors open and close outside; people were always moving and talking. And she was burning, her body bled sweat, it trickled down her face, down her neck, she tried to see the freesias again but the colour seemed wrong in her head; could they be completely purple or did they pale at the base? Which colour were those outside her window? They could be red, white, orange, which was it? She didn't know. And were they scattered around trees or did they run in lines? Did people stoop down to collect them or did they leave them in the wind? She would never know. They were erased from her mind, these images, coloured over in thick black ink. Hell was probably this; hedged by one's own heat, tossing about, thoughts crumbling to dust, black dust, growing in clouds, knocking on the skull, knocking everywhere to find purchase, but finding brick instead, brick on brick on brick of stone cold brick. She lay there with her eyes open wide, unable to see a thing.

But somehow it always went away, the heat and the sweat, after hours of dreamless sleep. And then there were the robins again, the footsteps, steam against her face and tea burning her tongue.

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From all the days, it was this day that she lived for. They made her pretty for it too, they came earlier than usual and combed her hair and dabbed at her face, they even did her nails; filed and shaped the free edges, cut the torn skin at the root of the thumb and clipped the dead tissue before putting polish on them. On days like today, they sat her on the wheelchair, lifted her feet onto the footplates and wheeled her out of the room. They helped her up and led her to the car, pushed her head down and put the belt over her shoulders, buckled it and drove her away. Mostly the ride was smooth, they were rarely stuck in traffic and now she knew what to expect; she knew the car would swerve right first then right again, then left and then straight, she knew when they were halfway there; the road was rock-strewn and the car always slowed. Her niece held her

hand throughout, going over the veins and creases with her thumb. Finally, the car slowed down until it came to a standstill, then the engine was turned off.

“We’re here auntie.”

One car door was slammed shut, another opened. Wind on her face. Her skirt swelled around her, an arm was wedged through hers.

“Do you want to walk it?”

“Yes.”

The top of a walking stick was squeezed between her fingers which she spread out over its wooden head, and grasping it firmly, she began to move, lifting the stick slightly over the ground and leaning on it while holding on to her niece.

“What do the people look like today?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, what can you see? How are they walking, how are they talking? Are they happy? Are there any couples, parents and children or friends? Tell me who there is.”

“There’s a middle-aged couple, a few feet away from us, they’re going into the church now, they seem happy, they’re holding hands and there’s a girl on the church steps waving at her mother. She’s getting something out of the car.”

She wanted to know how they were walking, if one of them was walking a little faster than the other. Usually that happened. Was the girl smiling? Did she have dimples? Was she very young? And her mother, did she notice her daughter? Did she wave back?

They walked in silence. Incense lay thick in the air, pews groaned, people mumbled, shuffled across the room, guitar chords were being strummed. It felt hot. She could feel the light on her face, hear the clicking of rosary beads.

And then the music broke out, startling her. She never knew when they were about to begin, her niece never told her. *Amazing Grace*. She knew it by heart but she preferred to listen quietly, then she could hear the violin’s mourning. It was this morning that she waited for all week. And she saw it better than anything, this violin, its hourglass body, its neck and gold scroll, the varnish rolling over the wood, the bow moving up and down across the strings which sighed at its touch.

Then there were readings, the voices too soothed her pain, heaved words from the pages she couldn’t see and brought them to life; Christ transfigured on the mountain, walking on water, raising a girl from the dead, giving a blind man sight. She sat and listened and the words grew in her mind, the words in the songs and the readings; she repeated them under her breath, raised them up to her palate and held them there, relishing the taste. That was all that was left. Words.

And then, when it was over, she sat alone for a while, inhaling the incense, while her niece talked to people outside. It was this silence that she appreciated, these few moments in the vacant church.

“Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

Her hands closed around the wooden stick’s top, an arm was wedged through hers, be careful, stairs, down, down, down, wind swelled the skirt, ruffled her hair, car door opened, head pushed gently down, door slammed, no more wind, car started, straight, right, then left and left again.