

CONTENTS

The Story	9
Part One: The Fall	11
Part Two: The Journey	63
Part Three: The Miraculous	103
Part Four: The Light	139
Part Five: The Way Home	183
For Reflection and Discussion	219
Notes	223
Acknowledgments	225

1

“Yes, well, I am crippled,” said Madame LaVaughn, “and that, I assure you, goes somewhat beyond sadness.”

—Kate DiCamillo, *The Magician’s Elephant*

I have a story to tell. A tale penned in grief and sorrow. But it is also a story abounding in hope, beauty, and the miraculous. It is at times humiliating.

And although this tale has a good end, I must warn you, it is by no means a fairy-tale ending, which simply is to say that this story is real. For in fairy tales the girl always finds her true love, good defeats evil, and everyone is happy! But I have not found such wide-eyed optimism to be the substance of our lives.

In this life on earth, sadly, the girl does not always find her true love. Evil capriciously swallows men, women, and children in its path. And on this side of heaven, a shadow looms over even the brightest of our joys.

Unlike fiction, however, true stories have a power all their own. And in spite of its painful and grotesque underpinnings

—or perhaps because of them—my narrative is, above all things, amazing.

Now, I feel the need to clarify at the start that *I* am not amazing. Did you think this was an epic tale of a mighty heroine? Let me put that erroneous thought to rest. *I* am full of flaws and sharp edges. I am half Irish, and my husband likes to tell people that I am among the Fighting Irish. As you can imagine, a fighting disposition regretfully clashes with the harmony of a family at times; it is, however, helpful, perhaps essential, when catastrophe threatens to upend and best one's life. But I am getting ahead of myself. Let us begin at the beginning.

My story commences on a Friday. And I think we can agree this is a very good day to start a story. I awoke with that peculiar joy, that little heartfelt bliss that wells up inside you when you sleepily realize today is not just any day—today is *Friday*. Friday means I survived the week. Friday dangles the hope of a little extra weekend sleep and some family time traipsing through woodlands, meandering in the open air. And this Friday was brimming with possibilities.

To begin with, Grand Rapids, Michigan, was awash in late spring sunshine. For the past several months, we had a visitor—a blustery guest—who had gifted our doorsteps with almost one hundred inches of snow. The great thaw

had led to a small-scale flood in the lower level of our rented duplex, and I was just beginning to feel “dry.” So to me, this May sun was like a long-lost friend. And like any true friend, the sunshine entered our home with no need of invitation, filling our rooms, our very cores, with its spritely warmth.

My heart was full, as was my happy agenda for Friday, May 29, 2009. Now, if I had authored the day’s events, they would have gone something like this:

1. Eat breakfast as a family with my husband, John, our seven-year-old son William, and our daughter Gwyneth, four years of age.
2. Escort William to school.
3. Prepare a dish for the last teachers’ appreciation luncheon of the school year, and prepare dinner for our evening date with friends.
4. Read some poems or a book during lunch to William’s first grade class.
5. Enjoy the afternoon spring breeze with Gwyneth; perhaps we could discover some wildflowers, late-blooming tulips, or tadpoles.
6. Dine with some sweet friends. I was especially looking forward to seeing our former neighbors. The youngest of the four children, Ava, age five, and Ethan, three, had practically lived at our house during the year we were neighbors. Outgoing, merry, and always entertaining—they were so easy to love.

where i end

This was the cheerful Friday I'd envisioned.

William asked if he could ride his bike to school, so I laced up my well-worn tennis shoes. I didn't grab the jogger stroller because Gwyneth decided to stay home with her daddy. The trek was not so far, but it seemed a good opportunity to sneak in a quick run. William, like a young racehorse out of the gate, boldly led the way through the dewy grass and onto the sidewalk.

I attempted to keep pace with my speedy first grader, and he regularly glanced back grinning cheekily, slightly taunting me. Keeping pace a short distance behind the treads of his red Schwinn, I belted out the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun," the first tune on a mix of songs playing quietly on my MP3 player. William laughed and insisted I stop. I caught my boy at the intersection. We paused briefly on the curb until the WALK signal bellowed, commanding us to cross. Together William and I ventured into the street. This space always made me nervous.

I felt relief after we safely navigated the busy intersection, and I pushed again to keep pace with the boy on the express bicycle. When we finally reached the school, I waited. The start bell hummed to the children, urging them to make some sense of their makeshift lines and ready themselves for the day. I reminded William I'd be back soon. I watched his backpack disappear through the school doors, cranked up my music, and ran straight home—no time for detours or extra miles today.

The morning was a blur of activity. After my shower, Gwyneth and I put our culinary talents to work, which resulted in a black bean salsa dish and a packed lunch. I assured John that I'd be back soon to attend to the kitchen and hoped he wouldn't discover the empty cans and cutting boards littering the counter. I stuffed the brown bag and a true-or-false book about pets into my satchel, grabbed the salsa and tortilla chips, and boomeranged back to Will's school, this time via our green Volkswagen Golf with my four-year-old friend in tow.

So far, no big changes to the day's plans. Gwyneth and I had ventured to school at eleven o'clock each Friday morning all school year long. This was a tradition we both loved. Gwyneth would share her big brother's desk and eat lunch with the class, while I'd read stories and poems. This gave William's teacher a much deserved break, and us an opportunity to visit our William. We knew all the toothy grins, the wild and mild personalities in Mr. Wright's spirited class. And our affable Gwyneth was deeply loved among the first graders.

But today was particularly significant because it marked the end to our tradition. This was the last full Friday of the school year, so we had to bid farewell to story time with our impish friends.

I think we were both feeling a little gloomy about saying goodbye—I know I was—so after lunch we stayed for recess. My budding entomologist William disappeared into

an open grassy field far beyond the school building in search of anything that hopped, buzzed, or crawled. Both Will and his sister have inherited their dad's hawklike vision. Drop any of them in a park or forest and within minutes, they will point out toads, frogs, praying mantises, fish, or any number of birds. I do not possess this visual gift. Gwyneth and I decided to savor the brilliant sunshine on the playground. The swings called to my dear girl, so she cajoled one of her favorite friends, first-grader Mia, into pushing her. With each good-natured little shove from Mia, Gwyneth rhythmically ascended higher, kissing the sky with her toes. Oh, the joy of swinging. I can still picture Mia's rich dark skin, giant-sized dandelion puffed pigtails, and larger-than-life smile.

Sydney and Ameerah, the two little girls hanging on me, responded enthusiastically to my suggestion of a game of tag. Before I knew it, we were whirling about the playground. Now, if you've ever braved a round of tag as an adult with a group of kids, you know that before long, you're the only one being chased—even the kids who aren't "It" are chasing you. Despite these odds, not to mention my jean skirt and flip-flops, I was doing a pretty good job of avoiding the growing kite string of children close at my heels.

Unbeknownst to me, precisely as our game was getting underway, a boy was scaling a large jungle gym full of tubes and slides. He navigated his way to the peak of the play structure where there were three slide options: a fast slide, a bumpy slide, or a zigzag slide. On this day at this time,

however, the boy was not tempted by the cascading purple slopes. Instead, he had a different, quite ill-fated idea; he climbed over the protective barrier atop the edifice. Light and jaunty, I was running. I was feeling victorious, defeating these kids at their own little game. And just as I jetted near the slides,

he
 bounded
 into the air
 and
 crashed
 onto my head.

My neck cracked under the weight of his sneakers—snapping like a whip forward and abruptly back. My agile, sure, and steady frame stopped short, wobbled ever so briefly, and went limp. Entangled together, the boy and I thudded onto the ground.

His elbow: fractured.

I: paralyzed from the neck down.

2

Holding firmly to the trunk, I took a step toward him, and then my knees bent and I jounced the limb. Finny, his balance gone, swung his head around to look at me for an instant with extreme interest, and then he tumbled sideways, broke through the little branches below and hit the bank with a sickening, unnatural thud.

—John Knowles, *A Separate Peace*

The cheerful rollicking playground noise was pierced by screams of a different sort. Frightened and pained voices now shattered the sweet air: the boy on top of me was repeatedly hollering, “My aaarrmm is broken! My aaarrmm is broken!” And in crazy high-pitched panic, one of my tag chasers, a little girl, simultaneously shrieked, “Get . . . off . . . of . . . her!”

Immobile in the woodchips, I lay on my back, one flip-flop on, one off. The wailing boy was lifted off me and whisked to the office. A crowd of curious children began to form a makeshift circle around my body. Mrs. Bratt, a

second grade teacher whom I did not know personally, was soon kneeling at my side, leaning directly over me. Stunned and not a little shocked, I confessed in a wavering voice, “I can’t move.”

She began to pray, and I too was now silently begging God, *Please do not let me be paralyzed. Please do not let me be paralyzed.* The crowd of children pressed and continued to multiply. Someone spoke into the nightmare, explaining to the nervous elementary kids that I was just resting. My sweet Gwyneth knew better. She bolted from the circle, entrusting her feet to find her big brother in the wide-open field behind the school. The little girl who’d been right on my heels in the game of tag must have had the same idea as she arrived just moments before Gwyneth. Tears spilled down her face as she bid William to come, his mom was hurt. More kids descended on Will. They declared, “Your mom is dead.” Bewildered, William suspected trickery. With feline caution and suspicion, he made his way to the playground woodchips. When they reached the logjam of kids, William and Gwyneth blended silently into the mass, two more faces in a crowd whose nearness I sensed but could not see.

Whistles began to blow. And the freedom and frolic of recess was cut short. The pressing crowds were ushered in lines against the brick building with gray siding. Children began to cry (I think because they knew something strangely horrible had happened and not because recess was prematurely scrubbed—maybe it was both), teachers began to cry.

And though it was not a Christian school, many began to pray, including my little friends from Mr. Wright's class.

I don't know how much time had elapsed, but I had been splayed on the ground far too long for my liking. Everyone around me waited, hoped, prayed for me to rise under my own power. It was like that moment in a football stadium when a player is injured; everyone is holding their breath, and when the athlete rises, a collective sigh of relief comes, followed by cheers and applause. But I could not even feel my limbs, let alone call them to action. "I need an ambulance," I weakly confided to the teacher.

My husband was clicking laptop keys in the lower level of our duplex, engrossed in his doctoral dissertation. A father who happened to be at the school dialed my home number and held his cellphone to my ear. I heard my voice on the answering machine and after the beep, implored my husband to pick up the phone. I was not panicked, nor was I crying. But I told John I was hurt, that he needed to come right away. I remembered that I had the car at school, but a close friend was now at my side. I informed John, "Rachelle is coming to get you." He left his dissertation midsentence, a project that little did he know, would not be revisited for many, many, many months.

The incandescent sun, no longer friend, tormented me with its direct and unforgiving glow. I gazed—I had no choice—into its hot light. It blurred my vision; the white star beamed brightly on my pain, untroubled and carefree.

William's teacher was at my side, grief in his eyes. I beseeched him to track down Gwyneth. She had been taken inside the school and given a book to read. My fierce four-year-old was angry and confused. She wanted to help, yet we were both helpless. William was now with his class, also dazed. No words had been spoken between my children and me.

John arrived at the school, followed by an ambulance and paramedics. He came to me first—calm, with a reassuring, almost bright, look on his face; then he searched for our kids. He found them severely shaken and prayed with them.

A small crowd of adults remained around me. A paramedic knelt by my side and introduced himself as Jeremy. I suddenly saw my arm suspended in the air, held high not of my own will or power but by the paramedic. He removed his grip, and I watched as my arm flopped unnaturally, powerless against the force of gravity. Jeremy caught my awkward limb just before it collided with the woodchips. In that moment, my steady world, where bodies work in harmony with brains, was bartered for an unrecognizable universe, something resembling a Salvador Dalí painting; I felt as if I had slipped into a surreal, disorientated dream.

My heart began to pump rapidly—with blood and fear. I felt the panic coursing through my veins.

“Can you feel this?”

“No.”

“Can you feel this?”

“No.”

Jeremy gave instructions. I was carefully rolled onto a board, my neck placed in a brace. When my body was securely in place, the paramedics adeptly carried me across the playground and lifted me into the ambulance. John left our two crying children to join the paramedics and me—he climbed into the front seat of the ambulance. The sirens blared as we made our way through the city, more noise disrupting the bright spring sky.

I arrived at the hospital emergency room naked—my clothes had been cut off in the ambulance. Over the next couple of months, I would see the paramedic Jeremy and tell him that he owed me a jean skirt. I still haven't found its equal. It was the first of many losses, but certainly not the gravest. But I digress. Doctors and nurses surrounded me, flooded me with questions. I was turned this way, and flipped that way. Poked. Prodded. I felt nothing. Well, not quite nothing. What I felt was an enormous weight upon me, an immense pressure, as if someone was stacking bricks on top of bricks. I could not move my body because it was pinned beneath a medieval torture press.

“Are you a runner?” the emergency doctor asked.

“Yes, I run a little. I ran this morning.”

“Do you smoke?”

“No.”

“Can you feel this?”

Feel what? “No.”

But I did start to sense intense pain building in my body. My brain, discerning something was amiss, began to send pain signals. My nerves were on fire.

Following the emergency overhaul, I was placed in a small holding room. A nurse placated my parched tongue with some ice chips. When my kids arrived, the deadness of my limbs hit me afresh. I could not comfort William or Gwyneth with a hug. I could not find comfort in hugging them.

Oh, Lord, I long to put my arms around my son and my daughter.

William had a stack of papers, notes of encouragement from his classmates. He attempted to hand them to me, but through a pained and awkward exchange realized I could not reach for them. Apologetically, he began to sort the pictures one by one, holding them for me to see, then stacking them on top of me. The leaves of paper, light as air, slid off my body but the medieval press bore down, tightening its grip unrelentingly on my chest. A hospital worker entered the room and told us the emergency room doctor had sent orders for me to have an MRI. My dear William, longing to find a place in a world turned upside-down, was cut short.

I spent the next hour in the elongated claustrophobia-inducing tube, feeling surprisingly calm and praying persistently. I prayed for healing, for relief from the ever-increasing pressure on my body. *Lord, I want to hug my children. I want to run alongside my kids. I want to braid Gwyneth's hair. Please, Lord, let this cup pass from me.*

I was wheeled into another holding room to wait. John was hopeful. This is probably just a stinger, right? As college football fans, we'd watched players take a hit to the head, collapse, and lie stunned, immobile in the grass. Eventually, the numbness or weakness resulting from the powerful blow would subside, and soon after, the athlete would be back on the field—worst-case scenario, he'd be out for the duration of the game.

Yet when the ER doctor returned with the test results, John and I immediately perceived the answer from his grave and ashen expression—all hope had drained from his face. This was no nerve-pinched stinger. My spinal cord, he explained, was crushed and lacerated. I needed emergency surgery. He informed us that they were looking for a surgeon willing and able to perform the operation.

Phone calls to family and friends followed this gauntlet of information, as we had no family residing in Grand Rapids.

As many loved ones began their heavy-hearted journey to the west side of Michigan, the surgeon arrived. Initially, on seeing my MRI results, this surgeon said he needed some time to think about whether or not he wanted to take on this operation. The injury was dangerously high, at C3, the third cervical vertebra in my neck.

I liked the look of him. There was no pretense. He told us that I had suffered a Christopher Reeve-level injury, not only dangerously high but gravely serious. He explained that he needed to make a cut across the front of my neck,

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remove the disc crushing my spinal cord, and put my spine back together by fusing together my third, fourth, and fifth vertebrae (C3, C4, and C5) with some donor bone.

My parents arrived, having made the nearly three-hour drive and, upon seeing my mom, I felt once again like a small child; all those moments of vulnerability and fear, the searing pain of freshly skinned knees, of cuts and stitches, collectively converged on my heart. I wanted to be brave, but I found myself needing to fight back tears. I was wheeled into surgery about the same time we should have been arriving to see our friends for dinner. Oh, someone should call them.