

In Colour

by Thomasin Sleigh



Grace wrapped a tea towel round the handle of the kettle and carefully poured hot water into the teapot.

“That’ll need two minutes before you take it in,” reminded Mum.

But Grace was already at the door, school satchel slung over her shoulder. “I’m going to be late,” she grumbled.

“Two minutes never hurt anybody.” Easy for Mum to say. She wasn’t the one who’d be told off by Mrs Spencer, and Jim was bound to dawdle, making them even later.

Grace waited impatiently. After one minute, she balanced the strainer over Grandma’s favourite cup and poured the tea. Then she hurried down the hall. Tea slopped into the saucer, but Grandma wouldn’t mind.

The room smelt of talcum powder. It was like dusty flowers. In the dim light, she could just make out Grandma’s false teeth. They were in their usual glass on the bedside table, her own personal science specimen.

“Hello, Gracie,” Grandma said. She sat up and switched on the bedside lamp. “Tea in bed – aren’t I spoilt!” She took a tentative sip. “Lovely.”

“Aren’t you going to put your teeth in?” Grace asked. It was the first thing her grandma always did, but she looked tired this morning.

Grandma took the glass and gave it a little shake. Then she put the teeth on top of her head. “How’s this?” she asked with a grin.

Grace laughed. “In – not on,” she said.

Grandma shrugged. “You know best. Now shouldn’t you be off? We don’t want you in Mrs Spencer’s bad books, do we?”

Grace nodded. Grandma knew all about her troubles with Mrs Spencer – unlike Mum. She only ever half-listened.



When they got home from school, the house felt empty. The hall clock ticked loudly in the silence. “Mum?” Jim called, but there was no answer. “Where’s Mum?” he asked.

“How should I know?” Grace said. She was more interested in afternoon tea. It was Monday. Baking day. There should be loaf. Maybe even afghans. After a snack, she’d visit Janey, the horse in the paddock next door.

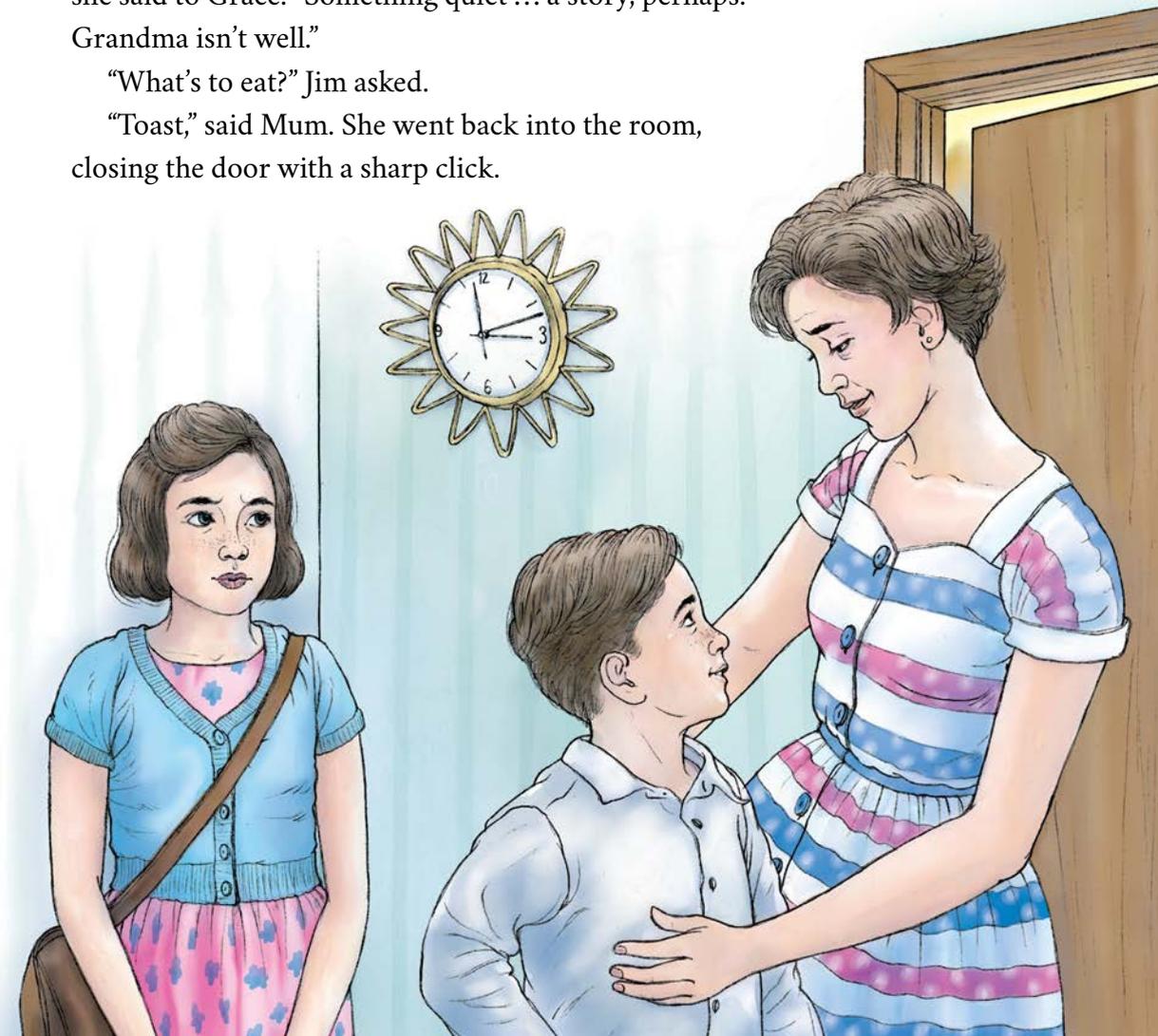
Mum appeared in Grandma’s doorway. “Not so much noise! How many times have I told you?”

Grace frowned. They’d barely made any noise at all. Mum was irritable. She’d probably looked after Grandma all day and got nothing else done.

Mum put her arms round Jim. “You need to look after your brother,” she said to Grace. “Something quiet ... a story, perhaps. Grandma isn’t well.”

“What’s to eat?” Jim asked.

“Toast,” said Mum. She went back into the room, closing the door with a sharp click.



Toast! Grace flung her satchel on the floor. As she went past the sideboard, she noticed something – the photo of Grandma was missing, the one where she wore the big hat with the ribbon. It was an old-fashioned photo, from a time Grace couldn't imagine.

In the kitchen, the porridge pot was still soaking in the sink. They usually sat in here after school while Mum got tea on. Grandma liked to help Grace with her arithmetic. She could do sums in no time, closing her eyes while she figured them out. They had competitions to see who got the answer first.

Grace had a sudden, terrible thought. What if Grandma didn't get better? There would be no help with arithmetic, no one to talk with about school and Mrs Spencer. It was a thing Grace couldn't even contemplate.



The following evening, Grandma was up and well enough to set the table. They had a routine: Grace took care of the plates and glasses, Jim filled the water jug, and Grandma laid out the salt and pepper and cutlery.



"Are you having a cake for your birthday, Bess?" Dad asked while they ate dinner.

"Oh, no need for that," said Grandma. "You know I don't want a fuss."

"Of course we'll have a cake!" said Mum. "It's not every day a person turns eighty. I was thinking chocolate. What do you say, Mr Jim?"

Jim nodded. "I'll help."

Grace pushed her beans to one side and looked at Grandma. Eighty. How could anyone be that old? She closed her eyes to do the arithmetic. It was 1958, so that meant Grandma had been born in 1878 – a different century.

"Grace ...," said Mum. "Beans."

Grace looked down at her plate. If she hurried, it would still be light enough to go out to the paddock. She shovelled the loathsome things in, then asked to be excused.

"People haven't finished," said Dad. He nodded towards Grandma. Her plate was almost full. She'd been eating like a bird lately.

"And Grace, don't talk with your mouth full, either," added Mum.

Grandma scrunched up her nose. She didn't like beans, either.



On Saturday, Aunty Pam and Uncle David came over with the cousins. There were enough kids to have a game of stuck in the mud. Grace and Jim knew all the shortcuts – around the back of the water tank and through the orchard – and they laughed and ran until Mum called everyone inside to watch Grandma open her presents.

In the sitting room, Aunty Pam was passing tiny sandwiches on the best plates. "Happy birthday," said Mum, handing Grandma a flat package.

"I don't need any presents," Grandma tutted. "No fuss, remember."

Grace stood around the back of the sofa to watch. Slowly, Grandma removed the violet ribbon and wrapping paper. Inside was a photograph, the one from the sideboard – only it wasn't black and white anymore.

"What on earth!" Grandma exclaimed.

"I had it coloured," said Mum, pleased. "By a woman in town."

"How wonderful!" Grandma held the photo close to take a better look.



“She used special paint and brushes,” Mum explained. “It’s quite something, isn’t it.”

“I remember this hat,” said Grandma. “It was my best one ... and the ribbon really was blue.” She touched the glass for a moment, then turned to Mum, her eyes full. “How did anyone know?”

Mum smiled. “You told me.”

Now it was Grace’s turn for a proper look. In the photo, her grandmother’s hair was a dark, glossy brown. Her lips were a rosy pink. She looked so young. She looked like Grace.

“How old were you, Grandma?” Grace asked.

“Twenty-one exactly. I rode into Whanganui to have my portrait taken. It was my birthday present ... just like this is today.”

“What was your horse’s name?” Grace asked. “Do you remember?”

“Topaz,” said Grandma. “She was my favourite.”

Topaz. It was the perfect name, Grace thought.



Later that night, Grace woke to the sound of voices. She found Mum in the hall in her dressing gown. “What’s wrong?” Grace asked.

“Grandma’s not so good,” Mum said. “Dad’s gone to collect the doctor.”

Grace felt a rush of fear. “But it’s the middle of the night!”

“That’s right,” said Mum, “so back to bed, there’s a good girl!”

“Will she be OK?” Grace asked.

“Let’s just wait for the doctor,” said Mum.

It was cold in bed. Grace turned on to her stomach and bunched up her legs. Then she stayed very still, straining to hear. Mum was moving around in Grandma’s room – but there were no voices. Why weren’t they talking? Grandma always talked.

Grace lay quietly in the dark. It was a long time before she finally heard her father and the doctor at the front door.



illustrations by Elspeth Alix Batt

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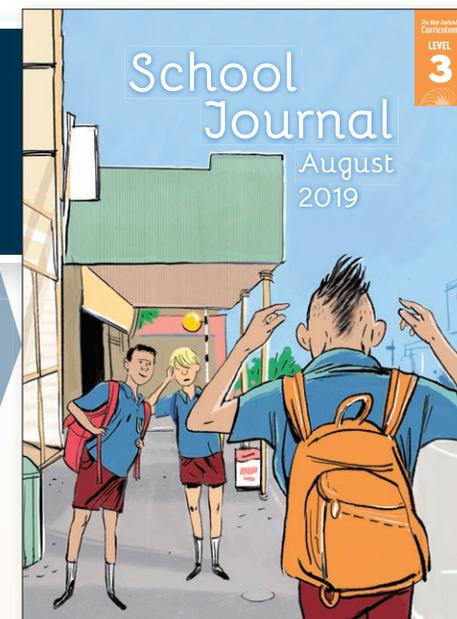
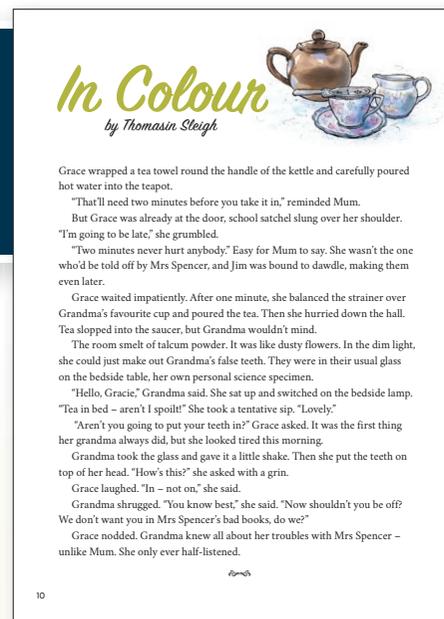
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