

Losing Grace

Kathryn Roberts

It is close to Christmas, and James Street market is packed with people. The air groans under the scent of roasting nuts, extravagant bouquets and the freshest fruit, undercut by the fecund odour of recently caught seafood. Everyone is well dressed — not in the conscious manner of those seeking to impress, but in a style that suggests that these are merely the least of the clothes in the wardrobe. Store owners and their lackeys dash purposefully around, wielding boxes of spices and cinnamon quills, roasted meats, produce and armfuls of baguettes.

Amongst this maelstrom of activity, a figure cuts cleanly through the crowd, a solar system of refinement in a galaxy of hectic industry. She pauses to inspect the gleaming glasses arranged like beauty pageant hopefuls in the window of the Wheel & Barrow, before making her way to the Fresh Fish Co. Her son trails in her wake, enquiring bemusedly into why, exactly, it is that they need an entire case of the freshest cherries.

She reaches the counter, and looks down into the depths of the ocean. Trout, oysters, lobster and Moreton Bay bugs stare glassily up at her, their shiny scales and clear eyes eerily mimicking the state they abandoned only hours before. The young assistant selects the requested 12 salmon fillets carefully, before bundling the slippery, coral ribbons into a tight paper package. Grace takes the package, thanks the girl, and turns to look for her son. He is not there.

This is scarcely an unusual occurrence. James has always been one of those inquisitive children, always wanting to know the whys, hows and wherefores of everything and everyone. She cranes her neck, stretching her already impressive height an extra few inches. She picks her way along under the covered area, winding through the enticing produce and fresh cheese section. James does so love to talk to the vendors, even though she would rather he remained by her side, especially when there are so many people around. Unsuccessful, she crosses to the other side of the markets. She can see, at a glance, that James is not one of the children pressed to the glass of the pastry cabinet — his red, floppy hair makes him difficult to miss, even if she has despaired at its unruliness on more than one occasion.

She passes through FlowerTrap, with a little more urgency now. James is generally to be found at one of the food stalls, hoping to snaffle ‘a little something’ from a kind merchant, many of whom have watched him grow up. She asks a flustered delivery man, ‘Have you seen a little boy? Red curly hair, blue eyes?’ The man shakes his head, before continuing on his way — he has been so busy with the meat today, he probably wouldn’t notice a child, red haired or not.

She tries other stalls, other retailers. In each, the answer is the same. No, they haven’t seen her son. It is too busy — the crush of people could easily swallow a small adult, let alone a 10-year-old boy. Her composure begins to fragment — James has never been missing for this long before. He usually orientates himself no more than a few metres from his mother — after all, she is the centre of his universe. She paces the length of the markets, looking, looking everywhere — under fruit stands, over the heads of the mindless shoppers around her, and behind the cases of Tiro and San Pellegrino mineral waters. The precious salmon fillets are crushed heedlessly in her hand, leaving grimy smears on the otherwise impeccable manicure — the shopping bag is with James. She pivots again on her low heeled Bruno Menegatti’s ... and slips. Inexorably, unavoidably, disastrously, she is falling.

A tall, rangy, middle-aged man steps quickly around the young father pushing his squalling child in a stroller, and catches hold of Grace's slim arm. With a gentle, practised movement, he steadies her. The moment of danger passes, and she is restored to her impeccably refined, dignified self. She looks up, into pale eyes barely obscured by a faded fringe.

'Thank you for your chivalry, young man.'



My heart quails, and I feel my hand tense slightly on the fragile bones in her wrist. The years have stolen more than height from my mother. These forgetful episodes grow more common, as do moments of treacherous instability — I've told her many times that those shoes she so loves are no longer practical. But she has always been one for image. Image, and perfection. Perfect wife, perfect mother, perfect host. My mother was all these things and more, which makes her current, slow slide into the ravages of old age especially intolerable. These things simply do not happen to people like her.

An unfamiliar expression of confusion and distress races across her face, to be replaced almost instantly by the familiar countenance of elegant composure. Silently, I thank the powers that be that I will not be forced to re-introduce myself to my mother in such a public place — nothing could be more damaging to her formidable dignity.

'There you are, James. May I have the shopping bag, please?'

Wordlessly, I hold open the bag, and she places the salmon gently on top, her hands shaking ever so slightly. She draws a linen handkerchief from her handbag, and wipes the last fishy remanent from her fingers.

'Where did you wander off to? I was almost worried.'

This is as close as she will ever get to admitting the reality which is now her future, a fact we are both well aware of. 'Come on, Mum. Let's go home,' I suggest, and we turn and head for the exit.

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The middle-aged man and his mother wend their way slowly through the crowd. Everything around them is industry, but James walks slowly, allowing Grace to call over her shoulder to hurry him along. He follows, carrying her shopping bag, full to bursting with items she has bought — even though there will only be three for Christmas dinner this year.



Kathryn Roberts wrote this in 2010 when she was in Year 12 at Loreto College Coorparoo in Queensland.