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# about grace

*a novel by the author of*

THE SHELL COLLECTOR

# about grace

A NOVEL



ANTHONY DOERR

Scribner

*New York London Toronto Sydney*



SCRIBNER  
1230 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10020

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*Designed by Kyoko Watanabe*  
Text set in Garamond 3

Manufactured in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Doerr, Anthony [date]  
About Grace: a novel/Anthony Doerr.  
p. cm.

1. Separation (Psychology)—Fiction. 2. Fathers and daughters—Fiction.  
3. Runaway husbands—Fiction. 4. Caribbean Area—Fiction. 5. Precognition—Fiction.  
6. Alaska—Fiction. 7. Dreams—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.O34A63 2004  
813'.6—dc22 2004045433

ISBN 0-7432-6182-8

ALSO BY ANTHONY DOERR

*The Shell Collector*

*for my mother and father*

There must be some definite cause why, whenever snow begins to fall, its initial formation invariably displays the shape of a six-cornered starlet. For if it happens by chance, why do they not fall just as well with five corners or with seven? . . . Who carved the nucleus, before it fell, into six horns of ice?

—From *“On the Six-Cornered Snowflake,”*  
by Johannes Kepler, 1610

# BOOK ONE







# 1

He made his way through the concourse and stopped by a window to watch a man with two orange wands wave a jet into its gate. Above the tarmac the sky was faultless, that relentless tropic blue he had never quite gotten used to. At the horizon, clouds had piled up: *cumulus congestus*, a sign of some disturbance traveling along out there, over the sea.

The slim frame of a metal detector awaited its line of tourists. In the lounge: duty-free rum, birds of paradise sleeved in cellophane, necklaces made from shells. From his shirt pocket he produced a notepad and a pen.

*The human brain, he wrote, is seventy-five percent water. Our cells are little more than sacs in which to carry water. When we die it spills from us into the ground and air and into the stomachs of animals and is contained again in something else. The properties of liquid water are this: it holds its temperature longer than air; it is adhering and elastic; it is perpetually in motion. These are the tenets of hydrology; these are the things one should know if one is to know oneself.*

He passed through the gate. On the boarding stairs, almost to the jet, a feeling like choking rose in his throat. He clenched his duffel and clung to the rail. A line of birds—ground doves, perhaps—were landing one by one in a patch of mown grass on the far side of the runway. The passengers behind him shifted restlessly. A flight attendant wrung her hands, reached for him, and escorted him into the cabin.

The sensation of the plane accelerating and rising was like entering a vivid and perilous dream. He braced his forehead against the win-

dow. The ocean widened below the wing; the horizon tilted, then plunged. The plane banked and the island reemerged, lush and sudden, fringed by reef. For an instant, in the crater of Soufrière, he could see a pearly green sheet of water. Then the clouds closed, and the island was gone.

The woman in the seat next to him had produced a novel and was beginning to read. The airplane climbed the troposphere. Tiny fronds of frost were growing on the inner pane of the window. Behind them the sky was dazzling and cold. He blinked and wiped his glasses with his sleeve. They were climbing into the sun.

## 2

His name was David Winkler and he was fifty-nine years old. This would be his first trip home in twenty-five years—if home was what he could still call it. He had been a father, a husband, and a hydrologist. He was not sure if he was any of those things now.

His ticket was from Kingstown, St. Vincent, to Cleveland, Ohio, with a stopover in Miami. The first officer was relaying airspeed and altitude through loudspeakers in the ceiling. Weather over Puerto Rico. The captain would keep the seat belt sign illuminated.

From his window seat, Winkler glanced around the cabin. Passengers—Americans, mostly—were reading, sleeping, speaking quietly to one another. The woman beside Winkler held the hand of a blond man in the aisle seat.

He closed his eyes, rested his head against the window, and gradually slipped into something like sleep. He woke sweating. The woman in the seat beside him was shaking his shoulder. “You were dreaming,” she said. “Your legs were shaking. And your hands. You pressed them against the window.”

“I’m all right.” Far below the wing scrolled reefs of cumuli. He mopped his face with a cuff.

Her gaze lingered on him before she took up her novel again. He sat awhile and studied the clouds. Finally, with a resigned voice, he said, “The compartment above you isn’t latched properly. In the turbulence it’ll open and the bag inside will fall out.”

She looked up. “What?”

"The compartment. The bin." He motioned with his eyes toward the space above them. "It must not be completely closed."

She leaned across the blond man beside her, into the aisle. "Really?" She nudged the blond man and said something and he looked over and up and said the bin was fine and latched tight.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite."

The woman turned to Winkler. "It's fine. Thank you." She went back to her book. Two or three minutes later the plane began to buck, and the entire cabin plunged for a long second. The bin above them rattled, the door clicked open, and a bag dropped into the aisle. From inside came the muffled crunch of breaking glass.

The blond man lifted the bag and peered inside and swore. The plane leveled off. The bag was straw and printed with an image of a sailboat. The man began taking out pieces of what looked like souvenir martini glasses and shaking his head at them. A flight attendant squatted in the aisle and collected fragments in an airsickness bag.

The woman in the middle seat stared at Winkler with a hand over her mouth.

He kept his gaze out the window. The frost between the panes was growing, making tiny connections, a square inch of delicate feathers, a two-dimensional wonderland of ice.

### 3

He called them dreams. Not auguries or visions exactly, or presentiments or premonitions. Calling them dreams let him edge as close as he could to what they were: sensations—experiences, even—that visited him as he slept and faded after he woke, only to reemerge in the minutes or hours or days to come.

It had taken years before he was able to recognize the moment as it approached—something in the odor of a room (a smell like cedar shingles, or smoke, or hot milk and rice), or the sound of a diesel bus shaking along below an apartment, and he would realize this was an event he had experienced before, that what was about to happen—his father slicing his finger on a can of sardines, a gull alighting on the sill—was something that had already happened, in the past, in a dream.

He had standard dreams, too, of course, the types of dreams everyone has, the film reels of paradoxical sleep, all the improbable narratives concocted by a cerebral cortex working to organize its memories. But occasionally, rarely, what he saw when he slept (rain overwhelmed the gutters; the plumber offered half his turkey sandwich; a coin disappeared, inexplicably, from his pocket) was different—sharper, truer, and premonitory.

All his life it had been like this. His dreams predicted crazy, impossible things: stalactites grew out of the ceiling; he opened a door to find the bathroom stuffed with melting ice. And they predicted everyday things: a woman dropped a magazine; a cat delivered a broken sparrow to the back door; a bag fell from an overhead bin and its con-

tents broke in the aisle. Like dreams these apparitions ambushed him in the troubled fringes of sleep, and once they were finished, they were almost always lost, disbanding into fragments he could not reassemble later.

But a few times in his life he had fuller visions: the experience of them fine-edged and hyperreal—like waking to find himself atop a barely frozen lake, the deep cracking sounding beneath his feet—and those dreams remained long after he woke, reminding themselves to him throughout the days to come, as if the imminent could not wait to become the past, or the present lunged at the future, eager for what would be. Here most of all the word failed: These were dreams deeper than dreaming, beyond remembering. These dreams were knowing.

He shifted in his seat and watched phalanxes of clouds pass below the wing. Memories scudded toward him, as distinct as the fibers in the seat-back in front of him: he saw the blue glow of a welding arc flicker in a window; he saw rain washing over the windshield of his old Chrysler. He was seven and his mother bought him his first pair of eyeglasses; he hurried through the apartment examining everything: the structure of frost in the icebox, a spattering of rain on the parlor window. What a marvel it had been to see the particulars of the world—rainbows of oil floating in puddles; columns of gnats spiraling over Ship Creek; the crisp, scalloped edges of clouds.

## 4

He was on an airplane, fifty-nine years old, but he could be simultaneously—in the folds of memory—a quarter century younger, in bed, in Ohio, falling asleep. The house was still and going dark. Beside him his wife slept on top of the comforter, legs splayed, her body giving off heat as it always did. Their infant daughter was quiet across the hall. It was midnight, March, rain at the windows, and he had to be up at five the next morning. He listened to the click and patter of drops against the panes. His eyelids fell.

In his dream, water swirled three feet deep in the street. From the upstairs window—he was standing at it, palms against the glass—the neighborhood houses looked like a fleet of foundered arks: flood-water past the first-floor sills, fences swallowed, saplings up to their necks.

His daughter was crying somewhere. Behind him the bed was empty and neatly made—where had his wife gone? Boxes of cereal and a few dishes stood on the dresser; a pair of gum boots waited atop the stairs. He hurried from room to room calling for his daughter. She was not in her crib or the bathroom or anywhere upstairs. He pulled on the boots and descended to the front hall. Two feet of water covered the entire first floor, silent and cold, a color like milky coffee. When he stood on the hall carpet, the water was past his knees. His daughter's whimpering echoed strangely through the rooms, as if she were present in every corner. "Grace?"

Outside more water muttered and pressed at the walls. He waded

forward. Pale spangles of reflected light swung back and forth over the ceiling. Three magazines turned idly in his wake; a bloated roll of paper towels bumped his knee and drifted off.

He opened the pantry and sent a wave rolling through the kitchen, jostling the stools. A group of half-submerged lightbulbs like the caps of tiny drifting skulls sailed toward the refrigerator. He paused. He could no longer hear her. "Grace?"

From outside came the sound of a motorboat passing. Each breath hung in front of him a moment before dispersing. The light was failing. The hairs on his arms stood up. He picked up the phone—the cord floating beneath it—but there was no dial tone. Something sour and thin was beginning to rise from his gut.

He forced open the basement door and found the stairwell entirely submerged, lost beneath a foamy brown rectangle of water. A page from a calendar floated there, something of his wife's, a photo of a candy-striped lighthouse, darkening and turning in the froth.

He panicked. He searched for her beneath the hall table, behind the armchair (which was nearly afloat now); he looked in ridiculous places: the silverware drawer, a Tupperware bowl. He waded with his arms down, feeling below the surface, dragging his fingers along the floor. The only sounds were of his lower body splashing along and the smaller percussions of waves he'd made lapping against the walls.

He found her on his third pass through the family room. She was in her bassinet, atop the highest shelf of his wife's plant stand, against the foggy window, her eyes wide, a blanket over her shoulders. Her yellow wool cap on her head. Her blanket was dry. "Grace," he said, lifting her out, "who put you up there?"

Emotion flitted across her face, her lips tightening, her forehead wrinkling. Just as quickly, her expression eased. "It's okay," he said. "We'll get you out of here." He held her against his chest, waded through the hall, and dragged open the front door.

Water sighed in from the yard. The street had become a clotted, makeshift river. The sugar maple on the Sachs's lawn was lying immersed across the street. Plastic bags, snagged in the branches, vibrated in the passage of water and sent up a high, unearthly buzzing,



a sound like insects swarming. No lights were on. Two cats he had never seen before paced a low branch of the front yard oak. Dozens of possessions were adrift: a lawn chair, a pair of plastic trash cans, a Styrofoam cooler—all slathered with mud, all parading slowly down the street.

He waded down the steps of the front walk. Soon the water was to his belt and he held Grace high against his shoulder with both arms and fought the current. Her breath was small in his ear. His own breath stood out in front of them in short-lived clouds of vapor.

His clothes were drenched and he had begun to shiver. The force of water—slow, but heavy with sediment and sticks and whole clumps of turf—pushed resolutely at his thighs and he felt it trying to raise his feet and carry them away. A hundred yards up the street, behind the Stevensons' place, a small blue light winked among the trees. He glanced back at the entrance to his own house, dark, already far away.

"Hang on, Grace," he said. She did not cry. From the location of the telephone poles standing in the dimness he could discern where the sidewalk was and made for it.

He clawed his way up the street, hanging with one arm on to lamp-posts and the trunks of trees and pulling himself forward as if up the rungs of an enormous ladder. He would reach the blue light and save them. He would wake, safe and dry, in his bed.

The flood hissed and murmured, a sound like blood rising in his ears. The taste of it was in his teeth: clay and something else, like rust. Several times he thought he might slip and had to stop, propped against a mailbox, spitting water, clutching the baby. His glasses fogged. His legs and feet were numb. The flood sucked at his boots.

The light behind the Stevensons' wavered and blinked and rematerialized as it passed behind obstacles. A boat. The water was not as deep up here. "Help!" he called. "Help us." Grace was quiet: a small weight against his wet shirt. Far away, as if from a distant shore, sirens keened.

A few steps later, he stumbled. Water surged to his shoulders. The river pushed at him the way wind pushes at a sail and all his life, even in dreams, he would remember the sensation: the feeling of being