

There was once a city, far far away, in which all the people were filled with despair and boredom. The city did not even have a name; everyone simply called it the City of Despair. It was easy to identify as well. All of the skies around it were grey. All of the buildings were grey. The water in the harbor and the streets and the cars and the shops and everything in the city was grey, including the people. They had a greyish tinge about their sullen and sagging skin. They all had grey eyes and grey hair. Every last person was grey. Except for Valencia.

Valencia, on the other hand, was beautiful. She had a bright golden glow all around her, and she had bright golden hair and lively golden eyes. She had pink cheeks and a smiling face, unlike the other residents of the City of Despair. She was quite the curiosity.

She was not, however, much different from the other residents of the City of Despair. She had grey parents who lived grey lives. She went to the same grey school as the grey children did. She lived in a grey house identical to the next house, and the next, and to every house in the entire City of Despair. Nobody knew much about Valencia- they were too puzzled and disturbed by her calm golden happiness to get to know her. People would whisper about her on the streets: *Valencia is two blocks over. Look out! or There goes Valencia. What is it about that girl?* Nobody liked her, and nobody knew her. That was the way it is.

Valencia, despite the fact that nobody liked her, was genuinely happy most of the time. She excelled in school (but could never find a group for Group Work), made up whimsical songs and dances at recess (but with nobody to sing or dance with), and did theatre club, did her homework, and played like any child would in the rest of her time (but with no friends to play with). And nobody understood why Valencia was not upset about the fact that absolutely nobody liked her. And nobody did- except for Baldwin.

Baldwin was a boy with grey parents who lived in a grey house- just like Valencia. But Baldwin was also grey, just like his parents and just like everyone else in the City of Despair. The other children liked him well enough, and so did the teachers. And Baldwin liked everyone else well enough also...but he had a secret. He was very curious about Valencia. He would never

dare tell anyone that, for fear that nobody would like him, just as nobody liked Valencia. Baldwin tried to hide his interest in Valencia. He did not speak to her. He did not play with her. He tried to blend in with everyone else. But his thoughts would not go away.

Meanwhile, Valencia didn't care much about anyone else in the City of Despair. Sometimes she fantasized about having friends, but never truly longed for them. She knew that nobody cared for her, and she did not let that break her armor of happiness. She liked having herself for a playmate. She liked her songs. She liked dancing with herself. She liked feeling free from everyone else. Plus, she didn't want to blend in with the grey people and their grey lives. She liked feeling happy, and did not want to give that up simply so that people would like her more. She did not know that there was someone out there in the City of Despair who appreciated her just as she was.

Baldwin liked Valencia's happiness. There were times that he even longed for it- longed to feel happy and to not be so very grey, even if it was just for a short while. Yet still he tried to hide his interest in Valencia. He hoped that it would make him happy- having friends and fitting in with everyone. However, it only made him become more grey and more saddened than before. So one day, determined to figure out the secret to Valencia's happiness, Baldwin approached her after school.

"Hello, Valencia." he said nervously.

"Hello there!" Valencia replied, smiling brightly.

"I was wondering, Valencia...."

"Yes?" A look of innocent inquisition passed over her golden face.

"If you could show me where you live? I have been wondering...your house must be very colorful....different than the other houses here, isn't it?" Baldwin asked uneasily.

"No, no. My house is no different than the next." Valencia answered with a matter of fact air about her.

"Well, where is it?"

"8383 8th street...." Valencia said slowly, as if she was uncertain whether to answer Baldwin's question.

“Oh, 8th street! I’ve never seen that part of town before! Perhaps you can show me!” Baldwin responded.

“Surely, I can show you.” Valencia said. She was slightly frightened by the boy’s outright and sudden approach, but she didn’t want to give up the opportunity to make a friend at last. She started prancing in her usual way towards home, beckoning for Baldwin to follow.

“Thank you, Valencia!” Baldwin said, running to catch up with her.

“Will your parents wonder where you are?” She asked. Baldwin’s face fell. He had not factored his parents into his plan.

“No! No, of course they won’t. They won’t be home until 6:00 anyways.” He said. This, of course, was a lie. Baldwin’s parents would be wondering where he was. Perhaps he could say that he had gone to the pier to see the boats with Joe. . . . Valencia’s cheery voice snapped him out of his trance.

“Good! Well, if you don’t want to go back to an empty house, you’re welcome to come to our house and stay there until 6:00.” Baldwin stopped in his tracks and looked at Valencia.

“No. No, I don’t think I can...my parents want me to be home by 4:00 to do homework.” He said, unsurely.

“Oh, that’s a shame. Perhaps you can come another time. I’ll show you where my house is, so you can stop by any time you like.” Valencia replied.

“Sure, thank you!” Baldwin sighed in relief. It seemed that this might just work out.

5 minutes later, Baldwin and Valencia found themselves outside of Valencia’s house. It was indeed no different than any other. It had the same 1 story, grey square structure. Grey windows in the same place on the outside as in all the other houses.

“Well, I’m sure my house is no surprise.” Valencia said.

“It reminds me of my house...speaking of which, I had better go.” Baldwin said in his greyest voice.

“Oh...well, come back tomorrow! Maybe you can stay longer!” Valencia replied, brightly.

“Sure.” Baldwin turned around and headed for home, back along the way they had just come. He felt like he had accomplished something. Now he had an invitation to Valencia’s

house, and he knew where she lived. He was finally getting somewhere. All he had to do now was hide that from his friends as best he could.

Valencia was also feeling accomplished as she sat in her bedroom doing homework. She had found herself a friend...or so she hoped. With any luck, Baldwin would be back tomorrow-to stay for a while. However, she decided not to tell her parents. Something inside her told her that they would disapprove.

The next day brought relative sun- sunny compared to the grey weather of the town. The sunlight, of course, was still grey, but it was a brighter grey than it had been the day before. Valencia fingered the schoolyard bike rack thoughtfully and waited for Baldwin to come out.

"I'm ready now." A voice came from behind. Valencia turned abruptly. There was Baldwin.

"Alright. Well, you know the way. So, wanna race?" Valencia asked, with a twinkle in her eye.

"Alright!" Baldwin agreed.

"Ready...." Called Valencia. Baldwin got down into a starting position.

"Set....." Baldwin's muscles tightened.

"GO!!!!!" Yelled Valencia. By the time the word got to Baldwin's brain, he could already see Valencia out in front of him by several feet. The rest of the race was a whirlwind of watching the golden blur just ahead of him, just out of reach.

He collapsed on Valencia's front stoop, out of breath but feeling...happy! Valencia was laughing and smiling as she looked down at him.

"I win!" She giggled, with glee in her eye.

"Ahh, that was fun!!!!!" panted Baldwin as he smiled.

"Come inside, let's have some food." Valencia motioned towards the door and unlocked it with a familiar grey key, nearly identical to all the other grey keys in the City of Despair.

As Baldwin was soon to find out, Valencia's food was like no other food in the whole City of Despair. First of all, it was not grey. Well, it had been grey until Valencia shook something golden onto the plate of cookies and into the milk from a salt shaker. Then the cookies

became soft and warm and golden brown, and the milk became cold and creamy white. It tasted exceptional. When both had eaten their fill, Valencia beckoned for Baldwin to follow her upstairs.

“Come on! Do you want to see my room?” Valencia asked, playfully.

“Sure.” Baldwin followed Valencia up the straight grey staircase and through a familiar grey door, just like the doors in his house. But what was behind the door was a complete surprise to Baldwin.

The whole room smelled of summer flowers, and was filled with bright colors and lots of light. It was beautiful. Her walls had whimsical paintings all over them and everything in the room seemed to be filled with magic and light. Baldwin was quite taken aback.

“Wow, Valencia.” He said, shaking his head and smiling.

“A little break from the normality of this town.” Valencia replied, and smiled.

“How do you do this?” Baldwin asked.

“That, my friend, is a secret.” Valencia smiled mysteriously and wiggled her fingers.

“Oh.” Baldwin said, momentarily forlorn. He quickly gathered his wits and decided to figure it out later. For now, he was at Valencia’s house, and they were going to do what Valencia wanted.

What Valencia wanted was to draw pictures. So draw they did: fairies, trees, oceans, and birds, all with Valencia’s sets of colored pencils. They did not use any grey pencils at all.

“Do you want this one?” Valencia asked, holding up a drawing of a bird riding on a star.

“No, you can keep it.” Baldwin said. “But it is a nice drawing. Do you want this one?” He asked, holding up his picture of a tree with fairies dancing around the trunk.

“Yes. I think it’s rather good.” Valencia said. She took it from Baldwin and pasted it on her wall. “Thank you.” She said.

“I’d better go,” Baldwin frowned. “But thanks. I had a grand time!”

“Me too!” Valencia laughed. She led Baldwin out of the colorful room and back to the overwhelming greyness of the City of Despair.

“Back to reality.” Baldwin mumbled.

“No! I think that if you believe in the magic, it’s real.” Valencia said sweetly. She did not say another thing. She simply herded Baldwin out of the house.

That night, Baldwin couldn’t stop thinking about his time at Valencia’s house. *If you believe in the magic, it’s real.* He mulled it over in his mind. He decided to figure out Valencia’s secret. He believed in the magic, but he just had to find it.

He pulled on his grey coat and ran out into the cold, grey night.

When he reached Valencia’s house, he stopped short in his tracks. He was appalled by what he saw. Valencia was standing on the roof of her house in a golden nightgown with a basket in the crook of her arm. She was reaching up in the sky and plucking the stars from the grey blanket of the night atmosphere. She pulled each star from the sky, one by one, and put it in her basket. He watched her until the basket was brimming full, and she set it down on the roof. She opened a trapdoor on the roof and slid back into the house, dragging the basket of stars behind.

Baldwin stood there, shivering in the grey night, and watched, as more and more stars that she had taken reappeared in the sky. He ran up to her window and peered in. She took one star from the basket, and put it on her head. It slowly melted down into a golden and airy liquid, and enveloped her, making her more brightly gold. She repeated the process until she had used almost all of the stars in her basket. The rest she threw about the room, making it more full of color and magic than before. Then she put the basket in her closet and climbed beneath her quilt. She closed her eyes and Baldwin watched from the window as she drifted into dreams.

He rushed home, taking shortcuts through dark grey allies and grey lawns. He finally reached his own house, and climbed into his room through the window. He jumped into his grey bed and waited for sleep. He seemed to still be waiting to fall asleep when his grey mother came in through his grey door to wake him for school.

He ran up to Valencia first thing when he got to school. He disregarded the skeptical glares from his friends and the other students and went to talk to her.

“Valencia! Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what?” She asked, puzzled.

“With the stars and that?” He hinted.

“What?! How could you have found out?” Valencia shouted, suddenly defensive and fierce.

“I- I just...” Baldwin stammered, crumbling under Valencia’s tall and suddenly intimidating frame.

“You spied on me! I TOLD you it was a SECRET!” Valencia said, face falling.

“I was only trying to help! I-”

“Explain yourself, spy.” Valencia said shortly, arms crossed.

“Well I didn’t want everyone in our City to be so sad all the time. I loved the color and the happiness so much that I wanted to share it with everyone. I-”

“Oh I see.” Valencia replied, softening slightly. “What do you say to coming on over after school today so we can talk?” She asked.

“Sure!” Baldwin said, relieved. Valencia was usually happy, but when her other feelings prevailed, she was downright scary.

That afternoon, sitting in Valencia’s bedroom, Baldwin had come up with a plan that Valencia liked.

“So, we get a basket of stars. Then, we get out my hot air balloon, fly over the city, and drop stars on every house? Is that right?” Valencia repeated.

“Yes. It is still SO cool that you have a hot air balloon!” Baldwin laughed.

“Alright. Meet you back here at 9:00 P.M. OK?” Valencia said with excitement abound in her voice.

“Deal.” Baldwin shook her hand and walked out confidently. He had made a deal. A deal with Valencia.

Later that night, he arrived at Valencia's house a few minutes early to watch her catch the stars again. It was a truly beautiful occurrence. When she finished, he went in through the unlocked door and quietly up to her room.

"Hello!" She whispered.

"Hi. Is the balloon ready?"

"Yes, I pumped it up and it is ready to go."

"Perfect, so lets get on it."

"Deal." Valencia led Baldwin out into the back yard, where an enormous golden balloon was hovering inches above the ground.

"You get in first." Valencia motioned for Baldwin to get in the balloon. He smiled and jumped up and down. Then he quickly opened the door to the basket and got in. Valencia followed. She set the basket of stars down on the floor next to the steering (which she was handling) and brought the balloon up into the sky.

It was colder high above the City of Despair, but Valencia gave Baldwin a star to hold, which kept him feeling bright, happy, and warm as they rose above town. They scattered a few stars on each grey house, lighting each house slowly as the stars melted. They dropped like little gold rain drops from the air, and shrank as they fell closer to their grey targets. As the stars hit the houses, they began to change.

"Look at that one!" Called Baldwin. "That house is red now!"

"And it's taller!" said Valencia.

"But how?" Baldwin asked. He was sure Valencia would have an answer.

"Well," she said. "Remember when you asked me that about something else, and I said that if you believe in the magic, it's real?"

"Yes."

"Well," she continued, and paused briefly to direct the golden balloon, "Sometimes what we think is reality isn't. Sometimes magic helps us to see the world for what it really is. You see, reality is so standardized. If people relied more on magic, we'd all be a lot wiser. We would accept the craziest things that truly make up reality."

"Is that why people didn't like you before me?" Baldwin asked tentatively.

“Because they didn’t believe you?”

“Yes, I think so.” Valencia responded quietly. “I think so. Hopefully, the stars will help them to see better. By the way, thanks for mentioning this, Baldwin. It’s truly magical.”

“Then I’m not dreaming?”

“Who in the world are you,” exclaimed Valencia, “To say that dreams aren’t real?”