

“The Pin”
A Short Story by Katrina Solano

Grace could remember the first day she met Millie. She had been walking to work, last summer when she had a job at the retirement community. Grace hadn't enjoyed the job, but it paid her car insurance and there was no way she was giving up her car. She never wanted to be there. The place smelled of old people, even if they were rich old people. It was a very high-end retirement community Grace worked at. She worked in the dining room, serving dinner to the residents five nights a week during that summer.

On this particular afternoon, Grace had been especially bummed out about going into work, because all of her friends were going to a bonfire on the beach. She knew there would be others, but this was the first of the season and Grace hated to miss it. She had just been heading down the stairs at the end of the brick path leading down to the main building of the community, when she heard a voice behind her.

“I always like to pretend I am a model when I go down stairs. I like to pretend I am a model anytime, really.”

Grace turned around to see who it was behind her. She wasn't friendly with any of the residents, so she knew she wouldn't know whoever it was, but she felt awkward ignoring the woman. When Grace turned behind her, it took all her self control not to pull a shocked face. The woman was tiny, barely taller than Grace and quite thin. She had short gray hair, done in finger waves. Her lips were painted a bright cherry red, as were her nails. She wore a gold sequin cardigan with bracelet length sleeves. Grace could have sworn she saw something similar at the mall just the week before, but never thought

she'd see someone from her work wearing it. She had on plain black pants and bright patent red kitten heels. When Grace glanced up at her he noticed the woman had her chin in the air and was marching down the stairs elegantly. Soon, she was on the same landing with Grace.

“It’s quite fun, let’s try together!” the woman said linking elbows with Grace. Grace immediately went red in the face, but didn’t have time to protest, as the woman was stronger than she looked and had begun dragging Grace down the stairs.

“I like your sweater.” Grace said, as they slowly stepped down the stairs, the woman still clutching Grace and holding her head up high.

“Oh thank you! I bought it at one of those stores you kids all shop at. The sales girl asked me if I was shopping for my granddaughter and I said ‘No! I’m shopping for myself!’ and didn’t she give me a funny look? I don’t see why this isn’t a sweater for all ages. Everyone loves sequins.” Grace smiled. This lady was a spitfire alright.

“I think it looks great on you.”

“Thank you. Say, you’re pretty good at this! Have you done this before?”

“Done what? Gone down stairs?” Grace said, without thinking. She immediately regretted it, thinking the woman would think she was being rude. Instead, the woman let out a loud laugh.

“You fresh thing! No, I mean have you modeled?”

“No,” Grace said, shaking her head, “I don’t think that’s for me.”

“Really? You’re a lovely girl, if you don’t mind me saying. Maybe a bit short, but why are models so tall anyway? It never seemed right to me.” Grace nodded in agreement

. They had reached the bottom of the stairs and the woman had un-hooked her arm from Grace's.

“You heading in to work?” she asked.

“Yes, I'm a server in the restaurant. Maybe I'll see you later?” Grace asked.

“I'm sure you will! How could you miss me in this sweater? Name's Millie, by the way.” The woman held out her hand for Grace to shake.

“I'm Grace.” Grace replied, returning the handshake.

“Of course you are! The name suits you, since you move like a model. Oh I forgot to show you!” Millie pulled at the lapel of her cardigan, holding a portion of it out for Grace to see.

“My sister got me this pin. Isn't it clever?” Grace leaned in for a better look. It was a hot pink button pin that said “I'm not a model, I just look like one” on it in sparkly writing. Grace grinned.

“That's great. It suits you.”

“Alright dear, I'm going to meet my friends. Keep an eye out for me later!” and with that Millie sashayed away. Grace watched her go for a minute, and Millie waved and air kissed with nearly everyone who came across her path. There was just something about her that made her sparkle, even without her cardigan. People seemed happier when they were around her, and her smile was infectious.

Grace saw Millie a lot after that. Once you knew her, she considered you her friend forever. In fact, Millie and Grace became quite close as the months progressed. Grace started dreading work less and less, because she knew Millie would be there wearing one

of her outlandish yet somehow cool outfits and would make Grace smile. For example, there was the day Millie decided she was channeling *Grease* and came in wearing her black workout pants and a leather bomber jacket. She had slicked on her cherry red lipstick and slid a red headband over her trademark pin curls. She certainly was getting even more strange looks than usual that night.

“I do not own shiny spandex pants like Ms. Newton-John wore, nor do I have the legs to pull them off, so these are the tightest pants I own! I wear them to my Jazzercise class. Did you know they have Jazzercise here?” Millie was discussing her outfit choice with Grace over dinner one evening. Millie normally came to dinner with her “posse” as she called them (“My grandson taught me that word! Did I use it right?”) but sometimes she came alone on quiet nights so she could talk with Grace. Millie had taken to requesting tables in Grace’s section and refusing to sit anywhere else.

“I think it’s a very original interpretation, Millie. I adore your jacket.”

“Thank you! My daughter gave it to me. Well, she didn’t give. I may have snatched it out of her closet last time I was visiting, but don’t tell her that.” Millie giggled. Then Grace noticed what Millie had added to her *Grease* outfit for accessories. Aside from her model pin, which she never took off, regardless of if it matched or not, she had a handful of rings on both hands.

“Wow Millie, couldn’t pick just one today?” Grace said, holding up her hands and wiggling her fingers to let Millie know she was talking about her rings.

“You know me too well! Of course I couldn’t. These are all the cocktail rings I own. Of course, I’m afraid some are cutting off circulation while others are in danger of

taking someone's eye out if I wave my hands too much." Millie held out her hands for Grace to admire the rings. They were all large and ornate. The gems (which Grace assumed were fake) varied in color and size. There was one that looked like a flower with beautiful gold petals. Another was just a giant ruby surrounded by smaller crystals. Grace's favorite was a deep purple gem; it seemed to catch the light and throw shimmers on everything.

"Oh Millie, I love this purple one!" Grace exclaimed, clasping Millie's hand in her own as she got a closer look.

"Mmm, yes, that one is lovely." Millie paused and looked down at her hand adoringly, "You take it." She said suddenly, tugging the ring off her finger and offering it to Grace.

"Millie! No, I couldn't do that. You keep it." Grace said, pushing Millie's outstretched hand back at her.

"No! I want you to have it! Here, take this green one too. I think it will fit you." Millie pulled another ring off her finger, this time a beautiful pale green stone.

"Millie really, I can't take these."

"Grace I insist. You'll upset me if you don't. You don't want to upset an old woman, do you? Besides, you need more sparkle in your wardrobe." Grace slid the rings onto her fingers. They really were lovely. She held her hand out and let the gems catch the light. She was smitten.

"Are you sure?" Grace asked, tentatively.

“Of course! Look at them, they look beautiful on your little hands. And they really brighten up that dreary work outfit.”

“Thank you Millie! I love them.” Grace said, reaching over to give Millie a hug. She smelled of Chanel No.5, which didn’t surprise Grace one bit.

“Oh you’re welcome, you’re welcome,” Millie said, patting Grace on the arm, “Just don’t think I’m going to give up my pin.” Millie looked down and straightened her model pin affectionately. The pin was the one constant in Millie’s outfits. She never went a day without it.

The summer wore on and Grace and Millie became great friends. Millie loved hearing about Grace’s life outside of work: her friends, her family, her non-existent love life. Millie dispensed a lot of “dating advice” but it was mostly what she thought Grace should wear if she went on a date: “High heels! I can’t wear them anymore, but when I was your age I towered over everyone!” “Buy a little dress. Not black. People say you need a little black dress, but buy a little dress in a color. You’d look smashing in fuchsia.” “Don’t slather on lipstick. No man wants to come away from a kiss with bright pink lips. Oh don’t look at me like that, who am I kissing at this age?”

Every once in awhile Millie would bring something for Grace to have. More cocktail rings, an armful of silver bangles, a long pendant necklace. Grace fought against Millie giving her all these things, but Millie was so adamant that Grace started accepting them without a fuss. Her friends got a kick out of Millie, though they’d never met her. Grace would describe her outfits to them and they would laugh, but they all wanted to

meet her. They were especially envious when Millie started giving Grace bits and pieces of her jewelry collection. The pieces may have come from an old woman, but she did have good taste, even if the way she mixed her things was a bit eclectic.

Towards the end of the summer, Millie started missing dinners. Sure, she would miss them here and there if she was visiting family or something, but she always told Grace ahead of time so Grace would know not to expect her. Around the end of August, Millie started disappearing a few nights a week with no notice. It always saddened Grace when her shift ended with no visit from Millie. When Grace would ask what happened to her, Millie would shrug her off: "Oh it was the heat, it wears me out sometimes." "I had nothing to wear Gracie, truly. I felt so uninspired I just stayed home." Grace was suspicious, but didn't press Millie. She figured if something was wrong Millie would tell her.

And Millie always showed up on a night after she'd been missing with a gift for Grace. A pen with feathers on the end so Grace could take orders in style. A long silky tunic that Millie had decided she no longer liked. For a few weeks in a row Grace received Millie's small collection of 50s style cardigan and shell sets. Once those were through Millie gave Grace a set of fake pearls to wear with her retro inspired twinsets. Grace wasn't sure she would wear the sweaters exactly how Millie was hoping - she wasn't as into theme outfits as Millie - but she figured she could incorporate them into her wardrobe somehow. The sweaters were well-made and actually looked nice on Grace.

As fall began, Grace wasn't working as much because school had started up for her again. She was a senior which meant she was busy all the time, both with classes and

spending time with friends. There were football games and parties and homework to do. She was getting a lot of use out of her sweaters and the jewelry Millie had given her. Grace could see herself becoming more adventurous with her fashion choices, and she liked the positive feedback she got from friends whenever she tried one of her new looks. Grace gave all the credit to Millie.

Grace had been so busy with school and working less hours, that she hadn't immediately noticed that Millie had been missing much more often. She came into work one night after having a few days off, and was hoping to see Millie to tell her about a great new store that had opened at the mall. Their window displays had a lot of sequins, and she was sure Millie would love it. The night wore on slowly, with no sign of Millie. There was no sign of her during Grace's next few shifts either. She was beginning to get worried, when one afternoon she headed into the dining room and was immediately pulled aside by her boss.

"Grace, I know you're very close with Millie, and there's something you ought to know." Grace's boss, Susanna, had pulled her into the small back office. Grace slumped down into a chair. She was immediately panicked and Susanna hadn't even told her what had happened yet.

"Grace, Millie has been quite sick. They're not sure how well she will recover," here Susanna paused and drew a deep breath, "They're not sure she'll recover at all." Grace didn't say anything for a long time.

"Grace, are you alright?" Susanna finally asked "I know this must be hard to hear...but don't get too sad just yet. Millie has spunk, I'm sure she'll pull it together..."

“Right, exactly. She’s just a bit sick. Millie will be back.” Grace said, trying to bolster herself up even though she felt like crying. She hadn’t truly realized how much Millie had meant to her until the moment Susanna told her she might not be around anymore. She wished Millie would fling open the door to the tiny office and say “Ha! Fooled ya kid! Do you like my Michelle Obama themed outfit? I don’t have her arms but I think I look darn good!” That didn’t happen though. Grace then had to go out and finish her shift, going through the motions without realizing she was even doing them.

A few weeks went by, with no sign of Millie or any word on her condition. Grace grew increasingly more upset. Her friends and family tried to cheer her up, but nothing seemed to make Grace feel better. She just wanted to see Millie, to be with her and see how she was doing, but she couldn’t. The retirement community had a strict privacy policy. They couldn’t stop residents and staff from becoming close, but Grace wasn’t allowed to visit her in her condo unit and had no way of contacting her.

Then, one Saturday afternoon, Grace’s cell phone rang with an unknown number. Normally Grace screened unknown numbers, but something told her to answer this one.

“Hello?” she said.

“Grace? Is that you?” the voice on the other end was quiet and frail, but Grace instantly knew it was Millie. Her eyes welled up with tears, just from hearing the voice of her friend.

“Millie! Oh Millie how are you? I’ve missed you!” Grace said, thrilled to be speaking to Millie again. She felt like she had so much to say and would never have enough time to fit it all in.

“Grace! Oh, I’ve missed you too kid. You’ll never believe the trouble I had to go through to get your personal number from those sticklers,” Grace heard Millie pause to catch her breath. It was strange hearing her voice sound so quiet and far away. Millie’s voice was usually loud and attention grabbing. “Anyway, I just wanted to see how you were Gracie. I’m sure you’ve heard I’ve been ill. I’m staying with my daughter so I am well taken care of.”

“Good Millie, I’m glad to hear it. I can’t wait for you to come back. I have so much to tell you.”

“I can’t wait either. I can’t wait to hear everything you have to say. Gracie I have to go, I only had a minute, my daughter is so strict with me. I just wanted to let you know I haven’t forgotten you. Alright kid, you know that I wouldn’t just leave you hanging right?” Millie sounded distressed.

“I know Millie, I know. Just get better okay?” Grace was barely speaking above a whisper now. Whether it was a cue from Millie’s small voice or to keep herself from crying she couldn’t say.

“I’ll talk to you again soon Grace, goodbye now.”

“Goodbye Millie.” Grace hung up the phone feeling both sad that she didn’t get more time to talk to Millie and happy that she heard from her at all. She hoped this was a sign that Millie was on the mend and would be back soon.

Unfortunately, more weeks went by without Millie. One afternoon, Grace came into work and saw Susanna standing and talking with a woman she had never seen before. The woman looked haggard and was holding two large shopping bags.

“Grace?” Susanna called, gesturing her over to where she stood with the woman. Grace walked over. The woman looked at her and Grace could see tears in her already swollen eyes. Grace’s heart dropped into her stomach.

“Grace, this is Millie’s daughter, Samantha. She’s like to talk to you alone, if that’s alright?” Susanna said quietly. Grace nodded. Susanna led them into a small library down the hall from the dining room. She shut the door behind her and left them alone.

“She’s gone, isn’t she?” Grace immediately asked. Samantha just nodded, and tears began to fall down both of their cheeks. Samantha reached over and pulled Grace into a hug. As she pulled away she took a deep breath and tried to gain control of herself.

“Grace, my mother was truly very fond of you. She talked of nothing else from the day she met you. I don’t know you myself, but I feel as though I do. When my mother knew she wasn’t going to make it, you were the one she was most concerned about. It was my idea to have her write you a letter. I brought it for you today.” Samantha handed Grace a piece of folded white paper. Grace unfolded it and saw a hand-written note, obviously painstakingly done.

Grace,

I hate that our last communication will be by note when our entire relationship has been built on face to face chats. You’re a special breed, kid, I want you to know that. This summer, getting to spend time with you and watch you grow, was one of the best times I have ever had. I see myself in you Gracie, and I know you’ll go on to be a truly fabulous and remarkable woman. I know you’ll miss me (I never said I wasn’t vain) but try not to get too upset, alright? It is just my time and there is nothing that can be done about that.

If you're ever stuck trying to decide what to wear, just ask yourself: What Would Millie Do?

Love you bunches,

Millie

P.S. Please take good care of these things and walk like a model when you wear them! I'll be watching.

Grace looked up from the note with tears in her eyes. Samantha still had the two shopping bags with her, which she now pushed towards Grace.

“My mother wanted you to have these. She picked out everything from her wardrobe, just for you.” Samantha said. Grace began digging through the bags, her eyes clouded with tears. At the top of one of the bags was the gold sequin sweater Millie had been wearing when Grace first saw her. Grace pulled it out of the bag and put it on, right over her work uniform.

“Millie was wearing this the first day I met her.” Grace said, fresh tears falling from her eyes. She continued pawing through the bags recognizing the leather jacket and various other pieces from Millie’s excessive wardrobe. It looked like she had only given Grace the very best offerings. Grace was folding a brightly colored tunic when something fell out of it onto the floor. Grace looked down, saw the hot pink and the glitter, and knew instantly what it was. Brushing away her tears and throwing her shoulders back, Grace reached down, picked Millie’s pin up from the carpet, and pinned it to her sweater.

Millie’s funeral was a few days later. Grace carefully picked out a black dress to wear, even though she knew how Millie felt about them. She did her best to choose one Millie would have approved of. At the last second, she decided to go against tradition

completely and threw the gold sequin cardigan on over her dress. She slicked on some Millie-approved red lipstick and pinned Millie's beloved pin onto her sweater. her mother gave her a funny look when she came down the stairs, but Grace knew Millie was helping her get dressed that day, and she knew she would approve.