

# Making the Grade

I have to go to Oliver Elementary one final time – at least, I hope it will be the final time. I have finished the third grade, and the summer vacation is nearly a week old, but everyone has to go back to school to get their final report cards and find out if they have passed or failed. I think that my mother will come with my brother and me, but she tells me no, she doesn't need to come. She doesn't seem to think final report cards are a big thing, but I am anxious. It's okay to go to Oliver Elementary anytime during the morning to get the report cards, but I want to get it over with as soon as possible. I set out on foot for the school. One of my brothers comes along to find out if he has passed the second grade.

I walk down the hallway at Oliver Elementary and stand outside Mrs. Reed's room. My brother has gone off to find his own teacher. The door is open a few inches, and I look into the room and see old Mrs. Reed sitting at a low table. She sits across from a boy that I recognize as a classmate. He is a quiet boy that I barely know, though he has sat for the whole of the school year only a few feet away from me. Morning light spills through the windows onto the boy's hands, which he has placed on the table. Mrs. Reed is explaining to the boy how it is best that he come again for the third grade next fall. She can't pass him on to the fourth grade, she says. Everyone thinks it's best for him, she tells him. He will do better next time, but he must try harder and pay closer attention. Mrs. Reed sounds as if she is sure everything will be very wonderful, but the boy doesn't appear to agree with her. He doesn't say anything. He just sits, looking down at his hands on the table.

In the entire world, I imagine, there is nothing so bad as to be kept back at school. It is my biggest dread, being kept back. If Mrs. Reed tells me that I must take third grade again, I will have to run away from home. I cannot face my mother and, especially, my father. Everyone will think I am dumb, which is too much to bear. I am already skinny and wear thick glasses, and to be dumb on top of that would be the worst thing. I worry about my mother's choice to stay at home. Does she know I will be kept back? Is she embarrassed to come with me?

The boy stands up from the table. I move away from the door so he won't know I have been watching and listening. He walks slowly out the door and moves past me down the hallway. I stand looking after him, thinking about what has happened, and then Mrs. Reed sees me and tells me to come into the room.

She turns through some papers in a drawer and finds a few sheets that she removes and carries to the table. She sits at the table and points to the chair across from her. I sit where the boy had sat a few minutes before. Mrs. Reed looks over the papers. I watch the sunlight on my hands. I know that what she says to me will make all the difference in my life. I wish that she would stop looking at the papers and just tell me. But she only purses her lips and moves her eyes over the papers and then signs her name with a pen, and then looks at the papers some more. I think I might die right here at this low table with the sun shining on my hands if she doesn't hurry up.

I am running toward home with my brother, our report cards tucked into brown envelopes that make everything seem official and important. I feel the relief of having escaped certain doom. I have made it to the fourth grade, which isn't at Oliver Elementary, but is at another school partway across town. My brother has made it to the third grade. We hurry home, excited to tell our mother the good news.

We turn the corner onto our street and I see our mother kneeling by the fence, pulling weeds. She likes to pull weeds outside in the mornings, before it gets hot. I run up to her waving my report card, telling her that my brother and I have passed. She tells me, "Of course. I knew you would pass." She turns back to the weeds,

and I don't know what to think. She must be happy for us, but she isn't showing it. I decide that she might have more important things on her mind today, which sometimes happens. Pulling weeds makes all kinds of things come to mind. Later on she will show that she is proud of us by making us write to our grandparents to tell them how we passed.

My brother and I run into the house and put our report cards on the dining room table where our father will see them when he comes home. He will show he is proud of us by joking that it took him two tries to get past the first grade, and so we might be smarter than him after all. He will tell us he will be keeping a close eye on us, all the same.

We go back to the joys of summer.