The Gift

“They called me Mr. Glass.”
-From the movie Unbreakable

“...But I knew I was out of luck
The day the music died.”
-Don McLean, American Pie

She was born without the Gift.

She was born on a moonlit night when the stars shone bright and the crows crowed and the nightingales sang about the birth to take place. She was born in a household of great magicians, amidst the grandeur and splendour of a party where every magician in the city worth his name was dancing and singing glories of the God. She was born to music, and rhythm, and to the sound of guitars playing a hundred songs all together, both old and new. She was born to the clanking of glasses, the laughter filled with wine, and the conversation of the rich, powerful and wise.

She was born in a small room by the back of the house. But the room was no less decorated than its front, and huge canvases of great magicians looked down upon the little child that lay crying on the tiny bed. Her mother was unconscious, spent, but her father looked upon her with the beaming face of a man who has just become a father and who has just stared into his daughter's eyes. He took her little hand and unclenched the fist, already seeing, in his mind's eye, his daughter beautiful and wise and beaming at him with a wand in her hand, already a magician. He unclenched her fist, hoping to see in her hand the spark which would confirm once and for all that yes, indeed, she had the gift, she was one of them, and her future would be nestled in the luxury, privilege and respect accorded to wise magicians.

But the spark wasn't there.

Her hand was small and pink and tender, and her fingers were so tiny they could be crushed between his index finger and thumb, but there was no spark, no hint of that characteristic icy blue flame beneath the skin. His daughter did not have the Gift.

In the room then were the father, his wife, and the two high priests, but the wife was unconscious and unaware of the tragedy. She would come to know of course, and that couldn't be helped, but he looked at the two high priests and they understood that this tragedy shouldn't be mentioned outside, for what was more demeaning to a family of wise magicians than to have a daughter who didn't have the Gift? All three men looked at the child and heaved a deep, long and morose sigh, even as the little child wept on with her eyes closed, and even as the party outside reached a whole new frenzy of drunken revelry. The nightingales had fallen silent, however, and the moon had gone and hid itself behind the clouds.

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She grew up to be a timid and tender girl of eight, her hair long, reaching to her knees, and her eyes big, beautiful and scared. At night when her mother tucked her in bed, she pulled the bed covers over her so that she could escape from the darkness, and lay down facing away from the window so that she wouldn't have to see the skeleton of the trees outside as they swayed to and fro in the persistent breeze. She trembled at the sound of the ravens, for her mother told her that ravens were the vehicles of the Devil, and she feared the spiders, because they had thin, needle like legs and they
kept coming close to her.

Then one day her mother decided to take her out. She trembled at the idea, because she felt she would not be able to cross the creek or that she would slip and fall if she tried to climb the rocks. She looked at her mother in apprehension, and saw the long flowing apron fall to the ground, and the black gleaming cloak of a wise and well-to-do witch take its place. She was afraid to see this sudden transformation, but her mother knelt to the ground, looked into her eyes and with that warm, enduring smile that only mothers can give, said, “Come on, Nihinya, Let us go”.

And she watched in awe as her mother jumped nimbly from stone to stone as she crossed the creek, and as the wild, rushing water smoothly made way for her feet, and the sloshy, slippery moss on the stones held her feet in place. She saw her mother as at ease as in the kitchen, beckoning her to come to her, and she felt her own feet running, picking up speed, jumping from stone to stone, playfully over the water, the little drops and currents swirling about her like children wanting to play. She ran and hugged the big, warm figure that was her mother, and held her hand, and looked down in awe at the little silver fish that swam about their feet in swarms, round and round and the water as it sparkled in the sun.

That was the start. From that day onwards this became their own private little excursion. Every trip was a bit longer than the first, every trip explored a different part of the forest around the house. Every day she got up with the enthusiasm of a child given a new toy. She looked on the dawn with ever-increasing eagerness, in anticipation of the day to come. Every night she slept thinking of this creek or that valley, this rock or that tree trunk, and the fragrance of blue orchids and the song of the nightingales. Even at night as the ravens cackled and the tree branches waved about in darkening patterns, she looked at them and thought of them as they were during the day, bright, happy and peaceful. She dreamt of these trips during the night, she relished them during the day.

She was ten when her mother took her to school. The school was quite far off, and the way to it led through the Dark Forest, a passage of dingy caves and bat infested tunnels. When her mother took her through it she took her wand, and by the blue, diffuse light emanating from its tip they navigated the dark passageways. “Will I get a wand too, mother?” Nihinya asked. “You don't need one”, she told her daughter, smiling warmly, “You see, this wand, is only a way of getting to your mind. You only have to think, 'Light', and the cave would light up”. “Really?”, asked her daughter, incredulous. “Of course”, she answered back, “Do you want to try?”

“Let me put out the light of this wand. Now. Close your eyes.” Nihinya closed her eyes tightly. “Now think, Light!” she cried out. “No no. Don't say it aloud. Just think, Light. Softly, the way you touch a flower petal. Imagine that you have a lamp in your hand, and you are opening the wick slowly, gently. Imagine that there's a light inside you, and it's growing bigger and bigger every second, till it fills the entire cave.”

Nihinya closed her eyes again, and imagined a lamp in her hand. She imagined the flame slowly growing, slowly extending beyond herself, lighting up the stalactite closest to her, then the next, then the next, till the warm yellow glow of the flame had filled every nook and corner of the cave. “Open your eyes slowly”, she heard her mother say, and lo and behold a warm and yellow glow filled the entire cave, and somewhere in front of her a tiny flame glowed with blinding intensity.

Awe-struck, she followed her mother into the cave, holding her hand as she looked all around her. She felt in her hands the icy, watery touch of the smooth sides, she let her feet splash on the puddles of water, she reached up to touch the ceiling. She jumped from rock to rock the whole way, her
excitement growing every second.

She was walking by her mother's side, letting her hand slide smoothly along the icy sides of the cave, when suddenly she touched something clammy. She shouted out in alarm and suddenly there was a mass of black leathery wings upon her, and there were tiny mouths trying to bite her, and claws that tried to get into her skin. She screamed in fear, but the more she screamed the more they tried to bite, and the more they tried to bite the more helplessly she screamed. Then suddenly the biting stopped and the wings lifted and her mother's warm hands came out of the side and took her into her arms.

She would never again forget this image of her mother, suddenly big, strong, her eyes shining, her face radiant, and her hands letting a bat fly away. “Don't be afraid, Nihinya”, she said, looking up, and Nihinya followed her eyes up to the ceiling of the cave, where the dark mass of wings had finally organized itself into a large swarm of bats flying on ahead. Nihinya drew closer to her mother, trembling with fear. “But they tried to bite me”, she said. Her mother knelt down and held her daughter's hand in her own. “They won't, Nihinya. See? They are just fruit bats, they feed on fruits. They have nothing to do with us, but they will fear you if you fear them. Don't look at them as your enemies, Nihinya. They are your friends. Don't doubt them, because when you doubt”, she said, looking into her daughter's eyes, “When you doubt, you'll make your worst fears come true.” She whispered these words, and looked into her daughter's eyes, and pressed her daughter's hands. “Hold out your hand now, and watch how they will fly about you, and around you, but never onto you. And watch where they go, because whenever you are in trouble, you can just follow them, go where they go, and they will always lead you to safety.”

“Now come”, she said, getting up. “We have to get you to school.”

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The world was such that having the Gift marked you out for great things in life. The schools for those special children with the Gift were posh, huge and more grandiose than the other schools which were just one storey buildings or converted barns. The children in these schools walked in long, black, graceful robes and carried themselves with such elan that other people wondered if class was not made but born or injected into the blood. The boys were all blue eyed and fair and handsome, and the girls were all confident and beautiful and graceful. They walked around silently, purposefully, down the corridors of their elite school of the wise and the rich, ready to show, at a moment's notice, that they had the Gift. The older students and the teachers walked with wands, but that did not prevent the younger students from showing their skill in magic, often at disciplined, well-regulated duels.

Nihinya joined the school at the age of 10, and although she did not have the Gift, upon her father's instructions, who was the richest and wisest in the land, the officials of the school took her in anyway. With the help of a huge contribution from the father, the teachers were told to never ever ask Nihinya for a show of her magical skill, for of course she didn't have any. For her part, Nihinya didn't mind either, for though she enjoyed watching students fight with each other through a flurry of spells, she never really understood any of it. She was the odd one out, not only in terms of her appearance, for she was way shorter, olive-skinned and with black hair, but also because she shied away from any kind of company. She made few friends, for the other students whispered behind her back that of course she doesn't have the Gift, and they looked at her with the mix of pity and scorn that wise people bestow upon the not-so wise. She sat alone in class, she participated in none of the duels, and she scarcely did any magic at all.
The other students did not know, but of course Nihinya knew they were all whispering behind her back, though she didn't understand what they were talking about. Once she heard her close friend say that she did not have the Gift, so when she went back home that night she asked her mother if it was true. Her mother said that of course, no it was not, that she did have the Gift, for could a child without the Gift have ever lighted the cave the way she lighted it?

Reassured by her mother thus, she went every day to school, confident in her heart that she had the Gift. Every day she crossed the cave to get to school, and every day she made the cave light up, and every day she watched the bats fly about her and around her but never onto her. She felt happy and content with that sole show of her magical prowess, or so she told herself, even though there was no audience. She ignored the comments people made, she went through the classes diligently, she tried her best to make as much of school as she possibly could.

But of course this was a school for wizards and witches, and soon magic became an integral part of what they studied. In every class some student would be asked to demonstrate something, and she couldn't help noticing that she was never asked to do so. All the teachers conveniently bypassed her, as if she did not exist. She twitched, she yearned to be able to show the rest of the school that of course she knew magic. She was the greatest magician's daughter!

Soon, yearning turned into frustration, and it wasn't long before frustration turned into doubt. How could it be, she asked herself, that every one in this school believes I don't have the Gift? How could so many people be wrong? There must be a fire if there's smoke?

Then one day, in the midst of a class, she did it.

“I would like to try, Sir”, she said.

All eyes were on her. There was a moment of stunned silence, and then some giggling started in the back. “Silence”, said the teacher, then turned his attention to Nihinya with the cold icy look of warning and foreboding. “Are you sure, young lady?”

“Yes Sir”.

“Of course, if you have the Gift you can do it.”

“Yes, Sir”.

Silence followed. “Do you have the Gift?”

“I think so Sir.”

Suddenly the entire class started laughing uncontrollably. “Silence!”, screamed the professor again, but he was smiling too.

“Nihinya, can you please hold up your hands?”

She held up her hands.

“Can you show it to the rest of the class please?”
Bewildered, she showed her hands to the rest of the class.

“Now will the rest of you show her your hands?”

All the students showed her their hands. As she looked at all those hands, a growing horror built up inside her. The blood in her veins boiled and throbbed and made her ears burn, as with growing indignation and rage she saw the unmistakable blue flame beneath the skin of each of those hands held up, and she looked at her own hands, dull, lifeless, as dark as the night, and she didn't even hear the words of the professor or the silent sniggers of the children as huge tears ran out of her eyes and onto her outstretched palms.

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Her mother was ill then, very ill, and she lay helpless on the bed, trembling, muttering incomprehensible phrases under her breath. Her husband sat beside her constantly, holding her hand, trying all the magic he knew, even as her body burned with an intolerably high fever and her limbs grew pale and lifeless.

Nihinya's father could not understand the illness at all, and neither could all the priests of the world. They hung their heads in ignorance and shame as they stood around the bed, and everywhere they could hear the unmistakeable sound of a death clock slowly ticking as a life was coming to an end. Already her nose was bleeding, and already her eyes were as red as the rest of her body was pale, and in the unflattering moonlight she already looked like a corpse.

As Nihinya's classmates were laughing at her on that fatal day, her mother started to have uncontrollable convulsions. During these fits her body would contort impossibly, and she would cry out in pain, and all that the people standing around could do was to avert their eyes and close their ears. Every now and then, an ear-splitting scream would tear through the household, and it wasn't long before Nihinya's father began hoping that the pain would end soon, even if it was to end in death.

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Nihinya walked out of the classroom with clenched fists, hearing clearly every word that was whispered behind her, and every snigger that rang out through the corridor. She held back her tears, and gritted her teeth, and looked at her feet as she walked, then ran out of the school campus, not wanting to look at any of the faces around her, not wanting anyone to see her tears.

Why, why, why? She asked herself. Why did no one tell me? Why did mother not tell me? Why do I not have the gift? What is wrong with me? What did I do wrong? She looked at her hands again as she ran, but they were as dark as ever. She did not have the Gift. She was born into a family of great magicians and she did not have the Gift. How could that be? She hated herself. Hated herself for being so naive, hated herself for being so different from everyone else, hated herself for being such a pathetic excuse for a magician. She felt despair and hate and regret and rage all at once. She hated having heard the sniggers of the children. She hated the teacher, she hated them all. She wished she could go back and land a resounding slap on each of those laughing faces. But who was she but a slum girl born by accident into a rich family? They were right, she did not belong. She did not belong in this company of handsome boys and graceful girls. She would never be a magician, she would always be an outcast, and at every step of her life she would be sniggered upon, laughed upon, looked down upon.

She came to the mouth of the cave, and suddenly she stopped. She would have to cross the Dark
Forest, and even this early in the day the caves and tunnels were darker than the night. For the past so many years she had always lighted up the cave. What devilish magic had allowed her to do that? She did not have the Gift, she could have done none of that. Was it a trick of the eyes? How would it work, how could it work without the Gift?

She closed her eyes and thought 'Light', but her thought was feeble, it crashed against a big wall of indecision and shattered faith and broke into hopeless little shards. She tried to think of a lamp in her hands, as her mother had told her, but all she could see when she closed her eyes was the blue flame beneath every hand, every hand but hers, and her own dark, lifeless hands. She opened her eyes, then closed them again, but she could conjure up no image of a lamp.

She started walking into the cave nevertheless, but her fear was getting the better of her. She groped along the walls, she tripped and fell. Then suddenly she touched something cold and clammy, and suddenly there was this flurry of black leathery wings around her, and tiny mouths trying to get a piece of her. She didn't understand, she thought they would fly away, around her and about her, but never onto her, but even that thought had no conviction about it: it hung like a question in the air, and the bats paid no heed to it and kept on attacking her.

They wounded her, and they sucked her blood, and she screamed out in pain. The more she screamed, the more blood they drew till long thin rivulets of warm liquid started running down her face, her hands, her legs. She fell to the ground, helpless, she tried to chase them away with her hands but the more she waved her hands about the more bats she seemed to draw towards her, till finally as the last vestiges of resistance were sucked away she closed her eyes and let go.

She was back in her childhood standing in front of her mother, getting ready to go out, getting ready to cross the creek. But she was afraid. Her mother jumped nimbly from stone to stone, and the moss on the stones held her feet in place. But she was afraid to go, and her mother was beckoning her and she reached out, but all she could get were bats' wings, and an agonizing surge of pain.

Then the black wings were her black robes. She was back at school, and she was holding out her hand for the world to see, and she was looking at all those hands, all those palms stretched out in front of her, the icy blue flame just beneath the skin, and she was back in the cave with her mother and her wand and the icy blue flame at the tip of the wand, and she was in school again amongst the wands and the duels and her own hand, empty, and there was no lamp in front of her, nor any light except the shadow of a blue flame that wasn't hers and that was mocking her from so many different sides, and she just could not believe the lie she had lived all her life.

She just could not believe, and she was further back in her childhood, in her bed, hiding from the ravens that perched on the skeleton branches and cried out their vows of death. She was back in her blanket hiding away from a reality that was way too real for her, and she was standing in front of her mother who was going to take her out, jumping over the stones of the creek and climbing the mountains and trees, and she stood a mile away from her mother, and she was so far away, so far away, that she just could not believe.

She just could not believe anymore, and between her and the blackness all around the voices of the bats screaming in her ears became more and more distant, the fluttering of the wings became more and more distant, and the teeth and the claws became less and less painful. She felt herself fading away, she felt the life draining from her, and she thought that this was how it would have felt to be born.
Then somehow she was in a small decorated room, no more than a few minutes old, and her father was opening her fist to see if she had the gift, and he couldn't see and she couldn't see and she closed her eyes and cried.

And then her mother's voice came, softly, in the midst of the darkness and the silence, yet very, very close: “When you doubt, you make your worst fears come true”.

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“When you doubt”, his wife whispered at him, tugging at his shirt with her pale hands, and staring at him with eyes that were bloodshot with the heat of fever and fits, “you make your worst fears come true”.

And with that she fell onto the bed, limp, and lay there like that for several hours. The priests and the doctors checked her pulse, looked into her eyes, now closed, and decided she was sleeping. Her husband sat down by the side, reliving that last moment of insanity his wife had just shown, and ran a cold, bloodless hand through his hair.

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It was a small flame at first, a small golden flame that was flickering like that of a candle, but then she realised it wasn't the light of a candle, but a lantern. 'Light', she thought, and the thought felt like one bold tick in a clock somewhere. In front of her again came the images of all those hands with the icy blue flame in them. She looked at her own hands, and there was no icy blue flame in them, only her dark hand with the orange light of the lantern in front of her. Then she realised it wasn't the lantern lighting up her hands but her hands lighting up themselves. She looked at her hands and found them enveloped in a golden flame, glowing bright and powerful. She thought 'Light', and the flames grew stronger and she felt the fire in her veins, throbbing through the blood, burning the back of her eyes. She thought 'Light, flames, fire', and the flames grew tall and they rushed like wildfire through the forest and the creek and the mountains. She thought 'fire, light', and the fire rushed through the rooms of the school and the playground and burned the wands and the books. She thought 'fire, flames, light', and she felt her rage and anger and sorrow amalgamate into a power she had never felt before and she felt the power course through her veins like red hot mercury and bellow out in huge flames through her nostrils, and in a blink of an eye she felt her entire substance being thrown outwards on the world she had so come to hate with such power and brilliance that every darkness was burned, every fear was scorched, every envy was dissolved and all that was left to hate was hate itself. The last image she had before everything vanished in a blinding flash of light was of her mother standing in her magnificent gown of black and telling her, “Come on, Nihinya, let's go”.

She felt no pain. The bats had stopped biting. The blood had stopped flowing. She opened her eyes.

The cave was filled with a golden yellow light, brighter and more intense than it had ever been. Above her on the ceiling the bats were going their way. When she lifted her hand to try touch them the bats flew around her hand. They flew around her and about her but never onto her.

She looked at her hands. In the middle of each palm, just beneath the skin, a brilliant golden yellow flame flickered incessantly.

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Nihinya's mother recovered by that evening, and by nightfall, Nihinya was at home. Nihinya's father was stunned to see her daughter, now sixteen years old, so radiant and beautiful, and with so firm a step that when she crossed the creek her father had the impression that the stones themselves moved so as to come beneath her feet. She was wearing that long gown that they had given her in school, but that gown had been charred so much it seemed a stronger shade of black and a lot more elegant. But what was strangest, her father thought, was her hands, which glowed a brilliant gold.

She walked into the house and sat beside her mother, who turned to look at her.

“What...happened, Nihinya?” her father asked.
She didn't answer. She just looked into her mother's eyes, and held her mother's hands.