

Shine!

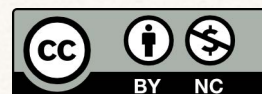
By Maria Gillespie

A pandemic story in 2024



*For my daughters —
Who shine every day*

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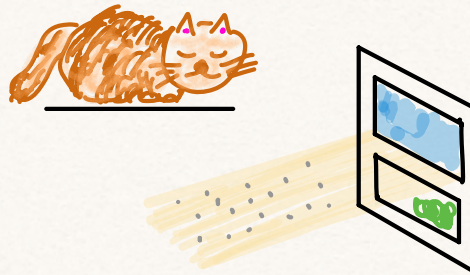
Chapter 1:

You have to burn to start glowing

Today was Monday - choir practice day! Ellison McWellison's favorite day at school.

He hopped out of bed, pulling on his school clothes that Mom had washed and laid out for him the night before, softly singing his favorite song, "Shine", to himself.

"You have to burn to start glowing
The good things always take time
You can't be a star every day
But today we shine!"



It was a sunny morning. The low, gleaming beams of sunrise spiked through the window and illuminated the dust particles floating in the air. Ellison blew towards the beams and watched the dust particles dance excitedly in the breeze.

Just like the tiny invisible bugs that float in the air, he thought, the ones that make you sick if you breathe them in. The ones that good masks keep out. He unwrapped the fresh mask on the top of his dresser - it's Monday, time for a new one, as Mom always said - and put it in his pocket.

He ran down the stairs. "Mom! It's tryouts day!" He poured his cereal and milk and quickly started eating.

"You're going to do great!" Mom said, pulling back her wavy hair - that was now slightly graying - into a smooth ponytail. "Did you remember to pack your homework assignment?"

"Of course, mom," he sighed impatiently. But perhaps Mom was right to check that he had everything packed each morning. He really did tend to forget things. One time, he got all the way to school before he realized he had forgotten to put on his left sock. Dylan had made fun of him for that, but to be honest, he kind of liked the feeling of one foot in his shoe with no sock on.

"Your mask?"

"In my pocket."

"Water bottle?"

"Uhhh, one sec!" One point for Mom. He had forgotten to refill it last night. He quickly refilled it and put it back in his backpack, and he was all ready to go.

"Hey, kid," said Dad groggily, coming down the stairs. "You ready for today?" Ellison nodded, and grinned as Dad clapped him on the back. "You're going to do great, kid." He wasn't sure why Dad always called him 'kid'. It was descriptive, sure, but seemed a little lacking in creativity.

Mom drove Ellison to school, and before he knew it he was putting on his mask and bouncing into the building, a bit jumpy with excitement and nerves. He was going to try out for the lead solo in "Shine" today, and he *really* wanted that part.

History class was first. Ellison's least favorite subject. But at least he gets to sit behind Mariela Martinez, who smiles and waves at him as he comes in every morning. She has long black curly pigtails that she often twirls through her fingers during class. Ellison likes watching them twirl. He often wonders what it would feel like to twirl them too. But mostly he wishes he could be friends with Mariela, and maybe even sing with her sometimes! If only he wasn't too shy to talk to her.

Mariela waved at him and smiled as he headed to his seat. Ellison waved back - and smiled with his eyes, so she could tell that he was smiling behind his mask.

"Boo!" A pair of hands slapped down onto Mariela's desk, and she jumped. It was Dylan Johnson, of course.

"Uh, hi Dylan. You scared me!" Mariela giggled nervously. Ellison stared at Dylan, wondering whether he could make Dylan evaporate if he stared hard enough, like the superheroes in comic books who can fire laser beams out of their eyes. Alas, his classmate retained his solid form and turned to Ellison.

"What're you staring at, Blank Face?" he jeered as he took his seat, which was right next to Ellison's. "I hear you're going to try out for Shine today."



"Yeah, and?" replied Ellison, annoyed. He hated when Dylan called him Blank Face. His face wasn't blank, it just had a mask on it. And he knows he has to wear a mask to protect Dad from the tiny invisible bugs in the air at school, because Dad is "immune compromised", or something like that. And Mom has "asthma", which he doesn't really understand, but he knows it makes it hard for her to breathe sometimes, and sometimes she sprays a funny-looking thing called an "inhaler" into her mouth.

"And," said Dylan dramatically, "I'm trying out too. And I'm going to get the solo," he boasted.

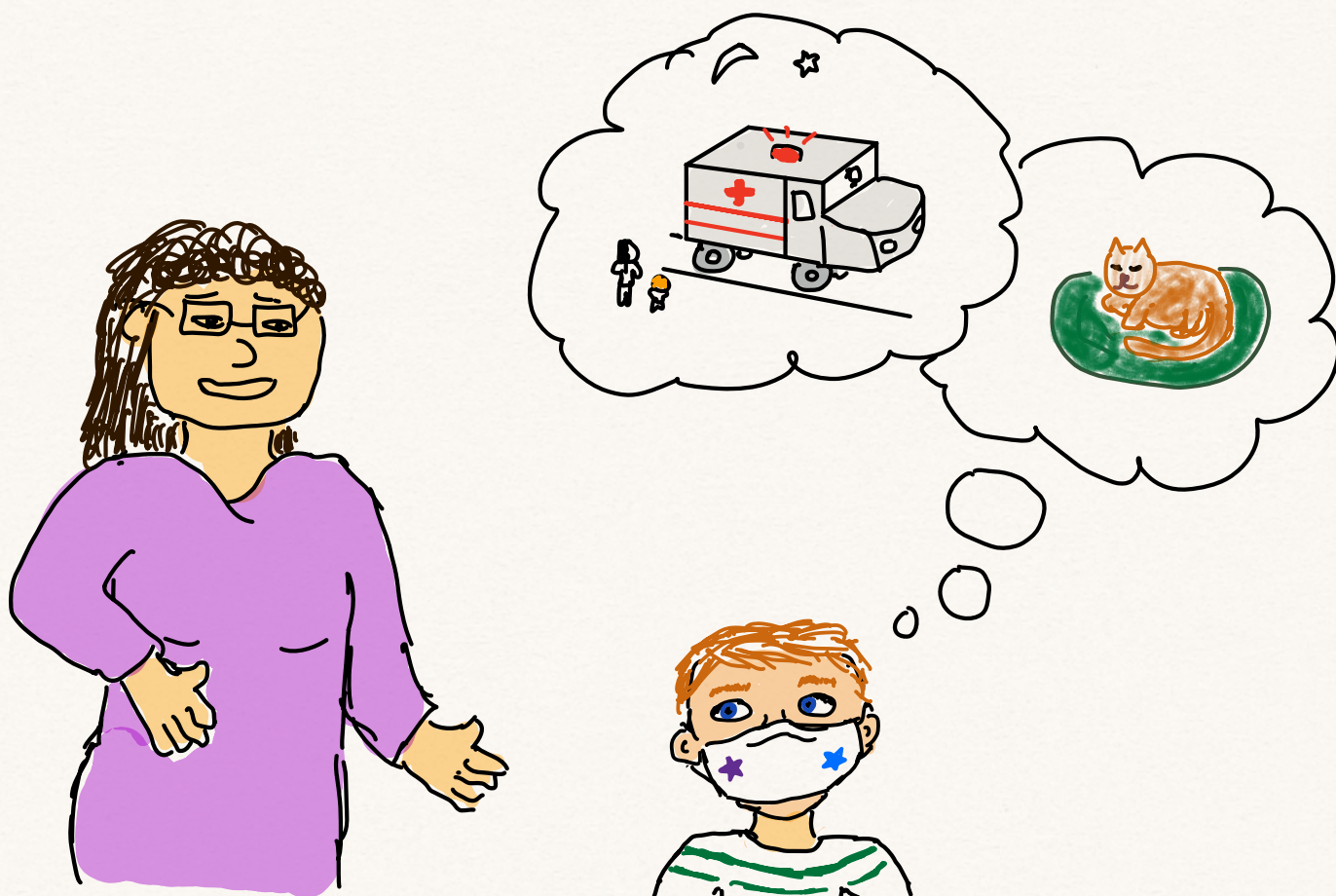
Mariela turned around. "I'm going to try out too but I'm probably not going to get it, that high note is hard!" she said, giggling again. "But Ellison has a nicer voice than you, Dylan, so I wouldn't be so sure."

Ellison's heart soared. Mariela thought he had a nice voice! He barely even heard, or cared, when Dylan replied smugly, "Nah, Miss Allegro would never want someone in a mask to be doing the lead solo. Looks too weird. Covid is over anyway. Masks are dumb."

Well, he heard it. But he didn't care.

History class and math class passed strangely quickly, and somehow also very slowly, as he waited for lunch and choir practice. He ate his lunch at his special table outside. He was glad for the break to clear his head and get ready for the tryouts. He warmed up his voice between bites, hitting the high note exactly the way he wanted to by the end of the period.

Finally, it was time for choir tryouts! He joined the line of students trying out for the solo part in the side room. Miss Allegro was seated at the piano in the room, and called in the students one by one. He strained his ears to listen through the door as Mariela tried out first. She really did wobble on the high note. Otherwise, though, she had a very pretty voice.



Michael tried out, and Angela, and finally it was Ellison's turn. His stomach churned as he walked in the door and Miss Allegro closed the door behind them.

"OK, Ellison, you can take off your mask to try out if you'd like."

Ellison looked up. Take off his mask? After all the other students in line just sang into that little room? He imagined all the tiny invisible bugs they might have breathed out - they didn't *seem* sick, but doesn't the covid bug start spreading before the kids feel sick? That's what Mom told him. Was Mom wrong?

But no. It all came flooding back. The sirens of the ambulance that took Dad to the hospital just after New Years' Eve last year. Mom's breathless coughs as she reached for her inhaler for the fourth time in one day. The way Ellison's brain felt all fuzzy and he couldn't smell his food, and he didn't want to eat anything because his throat was so sore. The way their cat, Marley, got sick too, and curled up into a tired ball at the foot of Ellison's bed and barely moved for a week.

Covid. That awful invisible bug that passes from person to person through the air. The shots didn't work well enough, did they? *At least Dad got through it, Mom always said. We can thank the shots for that.*

He remembered how they got it. Aunt Charise and Uncle John were feeling fine and even took a covid test before coming over for New Years' dinner, but the tests weren't perfect, and sure enough, covid swept through the McWellison household on that freezing cold week of winter.

"Ellison?" Miss Allegro's concerned voice called through his thoughts and he jumped, coming back to reality.

"No thanks, I'll keep my mask on," he said firmly. We're proud to be covid cautious, Mom always said. We're doing the right thing, for ourselves and for our community. And for Marley! For Marley! Meow. He straightened his shoulders proudly, suddenly no longer nervous. He knew this song inside and out.

"OK, we're just going to sing the main chorus," she said, "I want to hear all four lines, starting from 'you have to burn to start glowing', OK?"

"Yep!" said Ellison. And the music started, and he sang from his heart. Oh, how he wanted to shine, and be the star of the show!

"You have to burn to start glowing
The good things always take time
You can't be a star every day
But today we shiiiiiiiiine!"



He held the high note and enunciated the `n' right at the end, and knew he nailed it. Miss Allegro was smiling. "Excellent, Ellison, really excellent!" she said. "I can tell you've practiced!" Ellison smiled with his eyes and nodded, feeling even more proud.

She opened the door. "Next!"

Dylan pushed past Ellison as he sauntered into the room. Ellison rolled his eyes and left, and tried to listen to bits and pieces of the rest of the tryouts even as he joined the rest of the choir for regular practice in the main room. He had to admit that Dylan was a good singer. Ellison wasn't sure he would get the part. But at least he knew he tried his best.

Chapter 2:

The good things always take time

"I have an announcement", said Miss Allegro the next Monday in choir practice. "We've determined the lead singers and sorted you all into parts for each song based on the tryouts last week."

Ellison's leg bounced nervously on the bleachers. He crossed his fingers as Miss Allegro went down the list for each song. Finally she got to Shine.

"For Shine, the lead soloist will be Dylan Johnson."

Ellison's stomach sank, a cold heavy feeling settling over his shoulders. He didn't make it after all. Tears started to well up in his eyes as Dylan punched the air and said "yes!"

Ellison brushed his tears away and tried to get through the rest of the choir practice. He packed up his music quickly afterwards, swinging his backpack over his shoulder and hurrying out of the room.

"Ellison!" called Miss Allegro. "Can I speak to you one moment, please?"

Ellison turned around and walked slowly back to his choir teacher as the other students filed out of the room. "Yes?"

Miss Allegro smiled. "I know how much you wanted the lead part in Shine, and I just wanted to tell you it was a really hard decision between you and Dylan." Ellison nodded. So he was second best!

"Thanks, Miss Allegro," he replied.

Somehow his shoulders still felt heavy as he walked to his next class.

Later that night, at dinner, he had to tell his parents how the day went. He poked at his mashed potatoes with his fork. "I didn't get the solo," he admitted.

"Aw, I'm sorry Ellison," said Mom.

"What? They should have picked you, kid," Dad chimed in. "Everyone knows you're the best!"

"That's just the thing," said Ellison, the heavy feeling in his shoulders returning. "Miss Allegro said my singing was really good and she could tell I worked really hard. But she picked Dylan anyway." He paused, thinking for a moment. "Do you think it could be because I wear a mask? Dylan said no one would pick me if I wore it in tryouts."

Dad sighed heavily. Mom got up to get more food, scraping the beans out of the pan with a frustrated force.

"It might be, it might not," Dad began. "Most people are kind and fair, but it's true that there are some people who don't like things that are different. And it's very possible, yes, that Miss Allegro wasn't comfortable with a masked student doing the solo."

"But I don't understand!" cried Ellison. "The mask doesn't really stop my voice. Not since you guys got me the good breathable ones! And with a microphone..."

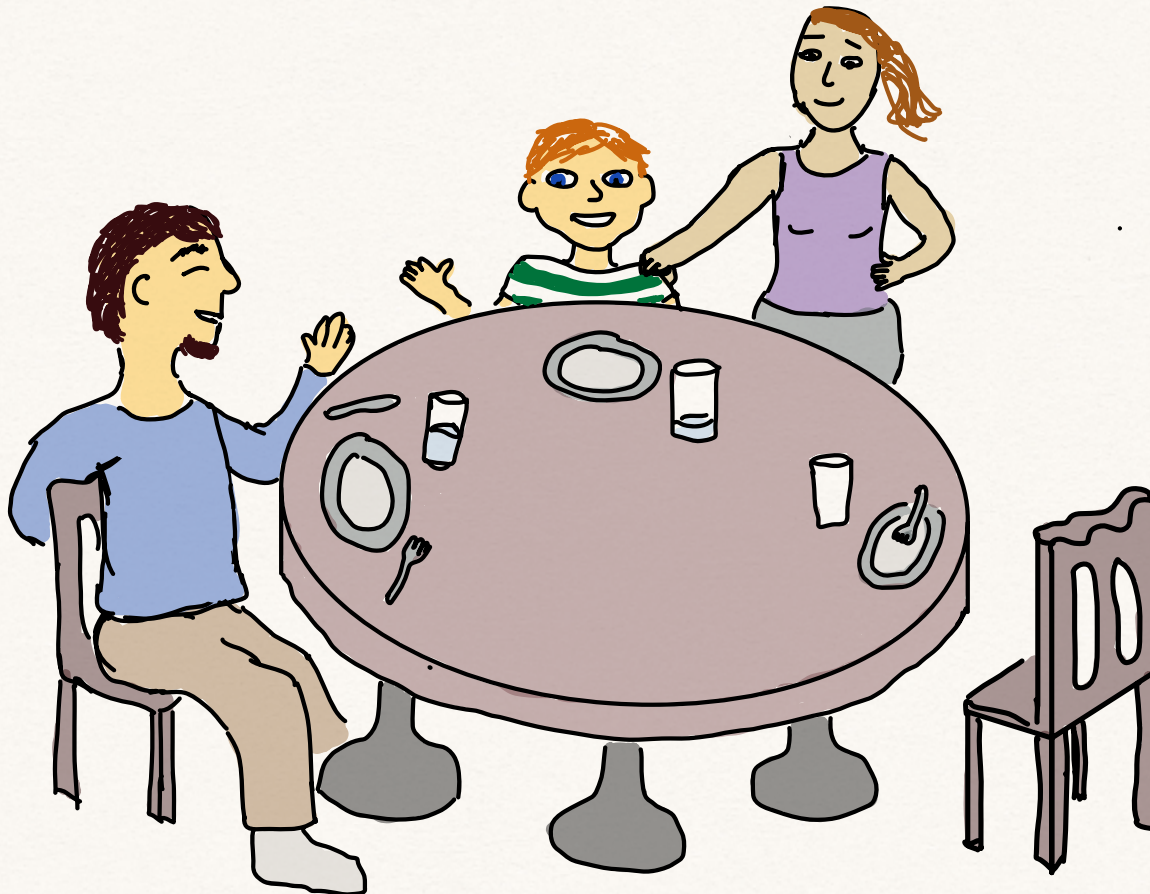
"It's not about the sound," Mom explained. "It's about what it represents. Some people didn't like having to wear masks for the first two years of the pandemic, and your mask reminds them of how hard that time was for them," she explained. "How about this," she continued, glancing at Dad, who nodded as if to give permission. "If you want to take off your mask in tryouts or performances in the future, you can, but make sure to tell us so that Dad and I can wear a mask in the house for the next few days after that. OK?"

Ellison thought about that. "But what about Marley? What if I get her sick? She can't wear a mask!" Marley, in response, jumped up on the table and Ellison scooped her up and petted her as she meowed in his arms.

Dad laughed. "You're a thoughtful kid, you know that?"

"Wait, I've got it!" exclaimed Ellison. "I'll do the tryouts and performances without a mask, and then I'll be the one to wear a mask in the house afterwards! This way I won't get any of you sick, because the mask would block any tiny invisible bugs I breathe out from getting into the air! I'll eat in my room and everything!"

"That sounds like a great plan to me!" said Mom, looking impressed. "But we'll mask too along with you anyway. No need to do it all alone, Ellison. We're all in this together as a family."



Ellison nodded, the heavy feeling in his shoulders suddenly lifting. He was a bit worried about his brain getting fuzzy again if he did catch covid, or losing his sense of smell for even longer, and he knew Mom was worried too. But maybe he'd make the lead next time! And he'd still wear a mask for his other classes anyway.

Mom hugged him extra tight at bedtime, and Dad looked at him proudly. "Second pick isn't bad, you know!"

"I know!" said Ellison, and pulled up his covers, feeling much better as his parents turned out the light.

And as his parents closed the door and their footsteps creaked down the hallway, he could have sworn he heard Dad mutter, "Gosh darn antimaskers", and Mom reply, "Ellison is the best and everyone knows it."

Chapter 3:

You can't be a star every day

Despite not making the solo part, Ellison still practiced every single day for choir, memorizing all the lyrics, perfecting his tone, making sure he did his part to make the school performance a success.

Dad came into his room one evening with his guitar. "Hey kid, want some accompanying chords? How about you teach me how these songs go?" Ellison liked when Dad played the guitar as he sang. It sounded better when they played and sang together.

The weeks passed, and the sun started to get lower in the sky through the window at each choir practice, late autumn gusts of wind sweeping the colorful leaves in an elegant dance in front of the sunbeams. Practices were getting more intense, and an excited nervous energy was growing among the students in the choir.



Three practices to go. It was two weeks until the performance, and Ellison was singing his heart out along with the rest of the choir. Suddenly, someone shouted from the other end of the bleachers.

"Michael, stop coughing on me!"

The music stopped and everyone turned to look. It was Dylan, who was standing in front of Michael, who did indeed seem to be coughing between verses.

"I can't help it!" cried Michael, coughing again. "I just need water! My mom says it's my allergies."

"I thought allergies happened in the spring?" asked Angela, confused.

"They do," growled Dylan, "Get your germs off of me, Michael, I don't want to get sick before my big solo!"

"Go get a drink from the fountain, Michael, then come back," called Miss Allegro. Michael hopped down and scurried out of the room, the sound of his wet raspy cough following behind him. "Now, where were we? Everyone start up again at page 2 in your books, on the count of three!"

As Ellison sang, he noticed that this time his heart was beating nearly as loudly as the bass line. He ran his fingers over the edges of his mask to check that it was nice and snug. He hoped Michael didn't have covid. And as much as he wondered why Dylan didn't just wear a mask in practice if he didn't want to get sick, he hoped Dylan didn't get sick either, and that Michael would get better soon. They were both good singers, and the choir needed them.

Michael didn't come back to practice. Based on murmured whispers between students, he had thrown up in the bathroom, gone to the nurse's office, and got sent home.

Two days later, Ellison noticed that the seat next to him was empty in History class. Dylan was absent. He listened quietly.

Two, no three, kids were coughing now, the same kind of raspy cough that Michael had. Ellison thought about the tiny invisible bugs in the air, and how they were getting trapped in his mask fibers and not getting in his throat. A good thing, too! He needed his throat in top shape for the performance.

He had a hard time paying attention in history class that morning. He kept watching Mariela's curly pigtails being twirled between her fingers, and thinking about her pretty voice, and worrying about the choir. Would they even be able to do their performance if everyone was getting sick?

Suddenly, he had an idea. As the teacher, Mr. Morris, was passing out worksheets, he worked up the nerve to tap Mariela on the shoulder. She turned around, smiling as usual.

"Hey, um, Mariela," said Ellison quietly. "I have an extra mask in my pencil case. My mom always packs one in case mine breaks. Do you want to wear it so you don't get the cough that's going around before the performance?"

"Oh hmm, maybe," said Mariela, looking around nervously. "What color is it?"

"It's just white," said Ellison apologetically, "but sometimes I put stickers on mine, see?" He pointed to the two star stickers on his cheeks that he had decided to decorate his mask with today.

"Ooh, I want stickers!" said Mariela, "and yes, good idea!"

Ellison beamed as he dug into the pencil case to find the plastic-wrapped mask at the bottom, and handed it to Mariela. Then he dug around some more, hoping he did indeed have more stickers.

"Darn," he said, "I forgot my stickers at home. But you can have one of mine!"

Mariela smiled, and after she put the mask on, Ellison peeled a sticker off of his mask and stuck it onto Mariela's masked cheek. "Thanks!" she said, giggling.

"Ellison and Mariela," called Mr. Morris, "It's not play time, it's worksheet time! Let's focus!"

Ellison returned his attention to his paper quickly. But suddenly, history class didn't seem so bad after all.

Chapter 4:

But today we shine

"Ellison," called Miss Allegro after the second-to-last practice the following week. "Can I speak to you a moment?"

"Sure, Miss Allegro," said Ellison nervously, hanging back again as the choir filed out of the room.

"As you may have heard, Dylan Johnson is out sick. He lost his voice. Since we're not sure his voice will be ready in time for the performance, can you be ready to sing the lead melody on Shine just in case?"

"Absolutely!" he replied excitedly. "I'd love to!"

"Excellent," said Miss Allegro. "And... one question, will you need to wear..." she paused.

"Don't worry," Ellison jumped in. So it *was* the mask she was worried about after all! "My parents said I can take off my mask for the performance. I'll just wear a mask around them after, to keep them safe."

"Oh wonderful!" cried Miss Allegro, "I'm so glad you'll be able to sing the lead and look normal! You do have a truly wonderful voice, Ellison. Such talent!" She turned to put away the music book from the piano, and Ellison took that as his signal to leave.

Normal. Sing the lead and look *normal*, Miss Allegro had said. The word bounced around in Ellison's head and somehow seemed to fall down his throat and into his stomach as he made his way to English class. *I'm not normal.*

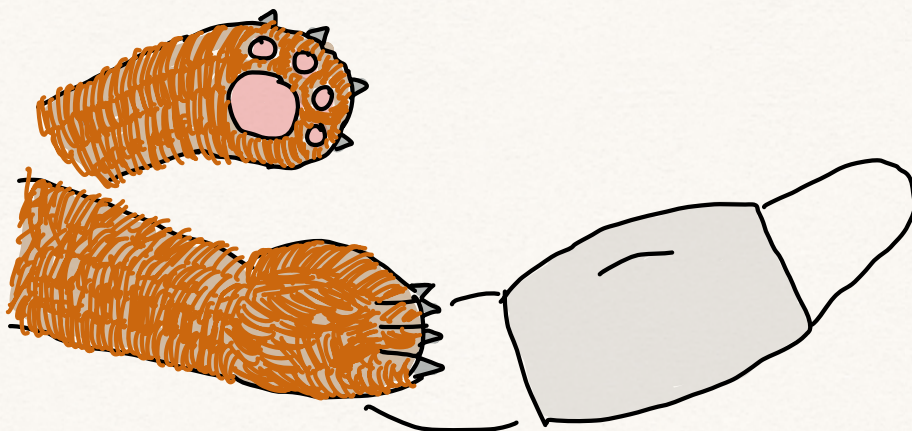
We're proud to be covid cautious, another voice bounced around in his head, his mother's, fighting Miss Allegro's in a battle in Ellison's mind, like a bad mishmash of songs stuck in his head at the same time. *Gosh darn antimaskers*, chimed in his father's deep mutter.

Suddenly his mask felt hot and hard to breathe in. The other students in English class seemed fine. Nice. Normal.

A deep, raspy cough from the corner cleared the voices and brought him back to reality. Right. The tiny invisible bugs in the air. Performance. Dylan. A final voice echoed in his mind. Dylan's. *Covid is over. Masks are dumb, Blank Face.*

Ellison suddenly laughed out loud. "Everything ok, Ellison?" asked Miss Benson.

"Oh, yes, sorry, I was just laughing at... oh, nothing," replied Ellison sheepishly. *Thank you, Dylan.* Ellison's own voice was doing the thinking again. *You're right. I'm not normal, and that's what makes me so cool.*



Ellison practiced and practiced for the lead part in Shine. He had to be ready in case Dylan was still sick. He hoped he was. He hoped he wasn't. He didn't know what he hoped. He just practiced.

Finally it was the big day. Ellison jumped as he entered the classroom and saw Dylan was back at school that morning, sitting in the desk next to his in History class.

"Well, Blank Face," said Dylan in a raspy, hoarse voice. "I hear you got the part."

"Really?" exclaimed Ellison, and then caught himself. "I mean, I'm sorry, Dylan, that you're still sick. Maybe you can lead next time!"

"Meh. Maybe your dumb blank face thing works," rasped Dylan. "We all just had covid, again." Dylan folded his arms crossly.

"Oh no," said Ellison, "My dad was in the hospital last time. Were your parents ok?"

"Eh, my mom needs help eating and stuff again now. I bring her stuff. She was really tired and weak for the whole school year last year after she got it too. But I thought covid was over! That's what my parents told me. They said kids like you are just afraid and it'd be better after the first time." He looked confused beneath his angry furrowed brow.

"My mom says it's not over, and it's not getting much better," said Ellison, shaking his head. "Do you want a mask?" He had snuck into the medicine cabinet and stuffed four extras into his pencil case that morning. Plus extra stickers. Just in case.

"My parents say masks are bad for you," snapped Dylan.

"Well, let me know." Ellison shrugged, and waved at Mariela, who came in wearing the mask that still had Ellison's extra star sticker stuck to it. She waved back and smiled with her eyes.

His parents drove him to the performance that evening in the school auditorium. He went backstage, joining the rest of the choir, as his parents found their seats in the audience.

"Ellison?" he heard a quiet whisper next to him. He jumped and saw that Mariela was at his side. "Um, are you going to wear your mask while you sing?"

"I..." he looked at her starry mask, and her pretty black eyes that were like the night sky. "Miss Allegro doesn't want me to," he said, feeling unsure.

"Oh, ok, maybe I won't then too," said Mariela. Suddenly Ellison started hearing that raspy cough again. Angela was coughing, just like Michael was in the practice that got Dylan sick. He did some quick thinking.

"Actually, I think I'm going to!" he changed his mind with resolve. "Let's do it together?"

"Sounds good!" said Mariela, and her shoulders seemed to relax. "Oh! Do you have an extra one?"

"Yes?" said Ellison. He had extra masks in his pocket, and pulled one out.

Mariela grabbed it. "Thanks!" Ellison watched, perplexed, as Mariela ran over to Angela and had a hurried conversation with her. Angela nodded, and to Ellison's amazement, took out the mask and put it on. Of course! Smart thinking by Mariela - if Angela wore a mask, her bugs can't get out and get anyone else sick!

Ellison knew that this was his cue. He took the star stickers from his pocket and went over to join them, silently offering them to Angela.

"Ooh, a sticker!" Angela exclaimed, then burst into a fit of coughs. "Hang on, just need water." She lowered the mask to take a sip from her bottle, and then raised it again, helped herself to two purple star stickers, and fixed them to her mask. "Thanks, Ellison! I didn't want to get anyone else here sick, but my mom said she didn't want me to miss the performance!"

Before they knew it, it was time to go onstage. They lined up on the bleachers at the direction of Miss Allegro, who narrowed her eyes as Ellison took his place. Ellison worried she would come up and tell him and Mariela and Angela to take off their masks. But suddenly, Dad jumped up onto the stage and whispered something to Miss Allegro. Miss Allegro seemed to be arguing back at first, but then her eyes went wide, and she nodded. Eventually Dad jumped back down into the auditorium seats in the front row, which was reserved for parents of the singers.

The music started, and Ellison sang his heart out. Every line that the choir had practiced so hard was a melodic and beautiful moment. At least that's what Ellison thought. He saw Mom recording with her video camera from the front row, occasionally giving a thumbs up or pausing to burst into applause.



Finally, it was time to Shine! It was the final song in the performance, and Ellison stepped up to the microphone. He felt everyone's eyes on him, and looked down at his parents, who both gave him double thumbs ups. He glanced back at Mariela, who waved and smiled with her eyes. He took a deep breath. He could do this.

*The stars, they are shining
Above, up there in the sky
Can we shine like them?
Can we try?
Can we try?*

*You have to burn to start glowing
The good things always take time
You can't be a star every day
But today we shine*

*Some days are lonely
And some nights are grim
Clouds form above us
The stormy skies dim*

*But then we just keep going
Keep doing the right thing
We wait, and watch, and wonder
We hum, we dance, we sing*

*You have to burn to start glowing
The good things always take time
You can't be a star every day
But today we shine*

*The hail falls, the lightning strikes,
Cold wind blows from the north,
Together, in our shelters
Pass cocoa back and forth*

*The clouds part ways, the skies will clear,
And warmth replaces rain
The sun will set, the night will come
And the stars will shine again*

*You have to burn to start glowing
The good things always take time
You can't be a star every day
But today we shine!*

Today we shine

Yes today we shiiiiiiiiine!

Ellison held the last high note for the entire final measure, ending with a perfect 'n', and was thrilled to hear the microphone carry his voice throughout the auditorium perfectly.

The audience burst into applause and stood up and cheered. Mom dropped the video camera in her excitement and fumbled to pick it up. Miss Allegro gave him a thumbs up and winked. The rest of the choir joined him at the front and they all took a bow together.

Today, they shined!



"Great job, Ellison," cried Mariela outside after the show, coming up to him and giving him a hug. "You were amazing!"

"Thanks, you too!" said Ellison, hugging her back. She waved goodbye and turned to go, her pigtails bouncing as she started towards her parents. "Wait! Mariela!"

Mariela turned around.

"Want to be friends? Maybe you can come over to my house and we can sing together."

She beamed at him, and Ellison took off his mask in the fresh outdoor air and beamed back. "I'd love to!" Mariela said, giggling. "How about this weekend?"

"Mom, can we have Mariela over this weekend?" asked Ellison.

Mom smiled behind her mask, which Ellison knew she wore outside sometimes just to be extra safe. "Sure thing, let's set it up!" Ellison's and Mariela's mothers shook hands, chatted, and exchanged numbers as Ellison and Mariela talked and laughed about how much fun the performance was.

Finally it was time to go home. "Ellison! You were incredible!" Mom exclaimed, and Dad clapped him on the back as he climbed into the back seat of the car. "Proud of you, kid!"

After going home, eating a quick bowl of cereal to wind down for the evening, and slipping into his PJ's, Ellison finally laid down on his pillow, staring up at the glowing stars on his ceiling. You have to burn to start glowing, he thought. The good things always take time. You can't be a star every day, but today - today, he shined.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Bryan Gillespie and Jack Sanders for helpful feedback and editing suggestions, and thanks to Joy Vines for her encouragement and help with the publishing process. Finally, thanks to the wonderful families I've met through the covid-safe and high risk communities for their inspiration.