

Today We Shine!

By Maria Gillespie

*A simplified version of Shine!
for younger readers*



*For my daughters -
Who shine every day*



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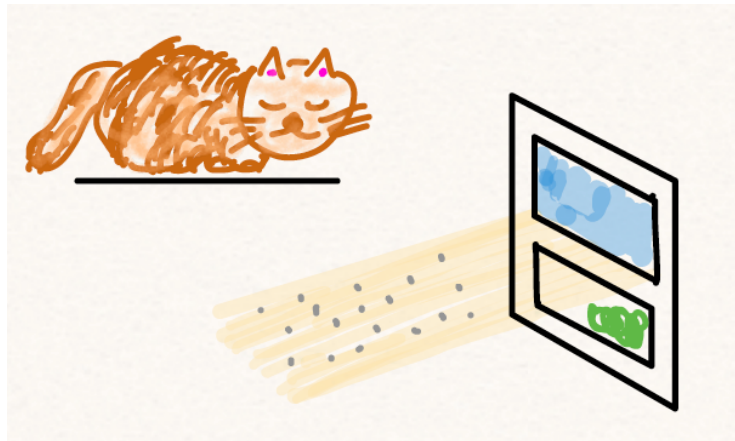
Chapter 1. Choir Tryouts

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

He hopped out of bed, pulling on his school clothes, singing his favorite song, "Shine", to himself.

*"You can't be a star every day
But today we shine!"*

It was a beautiful sunny morning. Glowing beams of sunlight shone through the window on the dust particles floating in the air. Ellison blew at the dust and watched it dance in the air.



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 hair into a smooth ponytail. "Did you remember to pack your homework?"

"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!"

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. He sits behind Mariela Martinez, who smiled and waved at him 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. He wished he could be friends with Mariela, and maybe even sing with her sometimes! If only he wasn't too shy to talk to her.

"Boo!" Mariela jumped as a pair of hands slapped down onto her desk from the other side. It was Dylan Johnson.

"Uh, hi Dylan. You scared me!" Mariela giggled. Ellison stared at Dylan. He never liked him. He was the one who made fun of Ellison for forgetting his sock that one day.

"What're you staring at, Blank Face?" he growled 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 didn't like it when Dylan called him Blank Face. His face wasn't blank, it just had a mask on it.

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

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 suddenly felt much better. Mariela thought he had a nice voice!

"You can't sing properly with a mask on," said Dylan. "And Blank Face never takes it off. He won't get the part."

That wasn't true, thought Ellison, he goes to choir in his mask just fine, and masks don't block your sound. But he ignored Dylan.

Ellison ate his lunch at his special table outside, and was glad for the break to clear his head and get ready for the tryouts. He warmed up his voice between bites.

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.

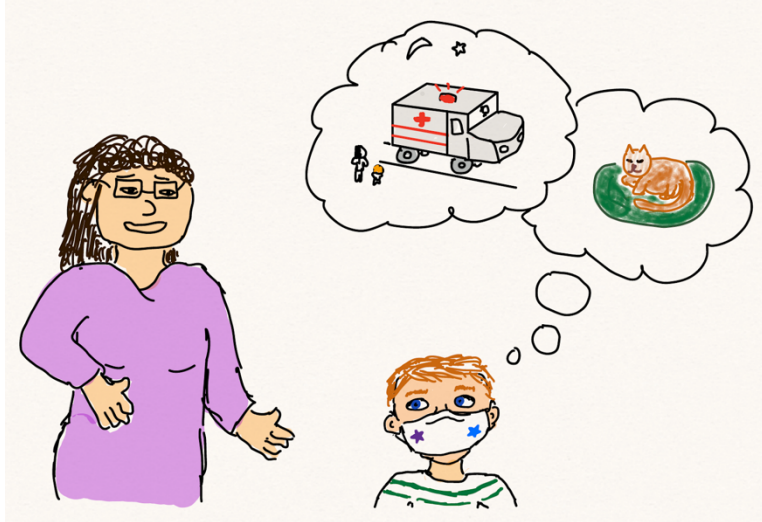
Michael tried out, and Angela, and finally it was Ellison's turn. He walked in.

“Hi Ellison, are you ready?”

Ellison gulped. Should he take off his mask, so the sound was better? What if Dylan was right?

But no. He remembered how Dad had to go to the hospital in an ambulance when they caught covid last year, and Mom had a lot of trouble with her breathing. He remembered feeling really sleepy for a week, and his cat being very sick too.

He remembered that the tiny invisible bugs that cause covid float in the air and are breathed out by people before they even know they are sick. And a lot of students just breathed into the air before him! He'd better keep it on, to keep Dad safe. After all, Mom always says that Dad is “immune compromised”. That means it's important to protect him from sickness by wearing a mask indoors.



"Ellison?" Miss Allegro's concerned voice called through his thoughts and he jumped.

"Sorry, yes I'm ready!" said Ellison.

"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!

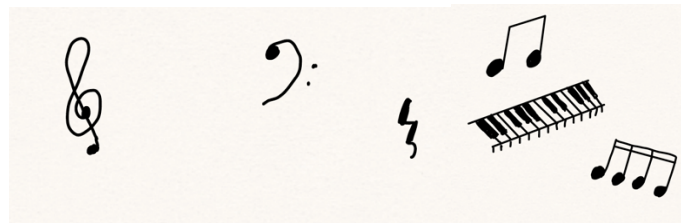
*"You have to burn to start glowing
The good things always take time
You can't be a star every day
But today we shiiiiiiiine!"*

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 walked in after Ellison left. Ellison lingered at the door to listen, and 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. Together

"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. 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, and hurried to leave 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. "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 he still felt sad as he walked to his next class.

Later that night, at dinner, he told 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 you can't sing in a mask."

Dad sighed heavily. Mom frowned and got up to get more food.

"It might be, it might not," Dad said. "What matters is that you tried your best. But it's true that even though you sing great in a mask, some people might not like the way it looks for a performance."

"But I don't understand!" cried Ellison. "I'm wearing it to keep us healthy! Why do they care what I look like?"

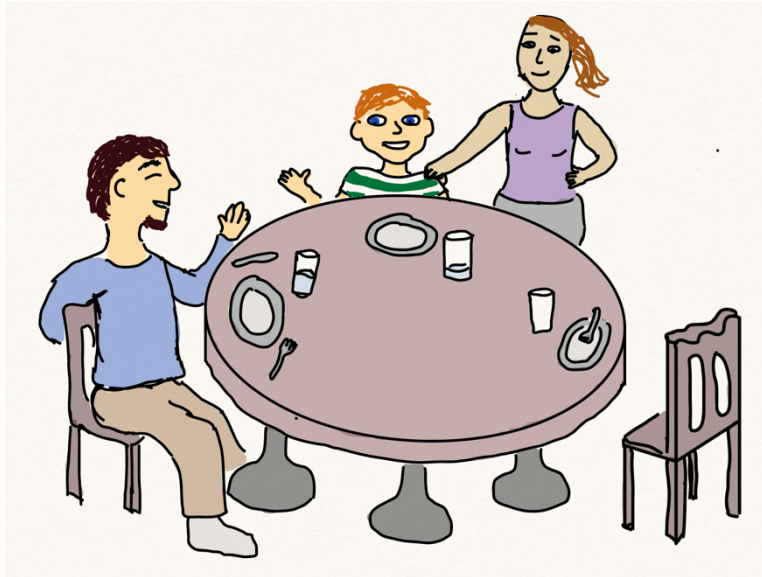
"Some people just don't like things that are different," Mom explained. "How about this," she continued, glancing at Dad, who nodded. "If you want to take off your mask in tryouts or performances in the future, you can, but make sure to tell us so that Dad and I can wear a mask in the house for the next 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 around you 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!"

"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. He loved his family, and the way they always did things all together.

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.

Chapter 3. Practice

Despite not making the solo part, Ellison still practiced every day for choir. Dad came into his room one evening with his guitar. “Hey kid, want some music with your singing? 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 around in the air. 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!"

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

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

As Ellison sang, he ran his fingers over the edges of his mask to check that it was nice and snug, so that whatever bugs Michael might be coughing out, he wouldn't catch them. Feeling all safe and secure, he sang on.

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 cough that Michael had.

He stared at the back of Mariela's chair, 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. "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. "What color is it?"

"It's just white," said Ellison, "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 bag with a new 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 looked back at his paper quickly. But suddenly, history class didn't seem so bad after all.

Chapter 4. Performance!

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

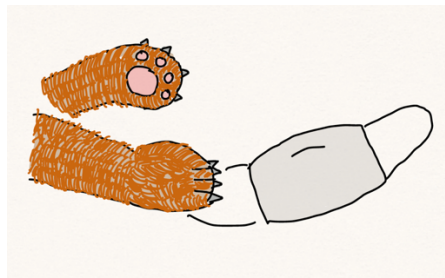
"Sure, Miss Allegro," said Ellison nervously, hanging back again as the choir filed out of the room.

"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 cried. "I'd love to!"

"Excellent," said Miss Allegro. "Keep that mask on, we need that voice all ready for the big day!" She smiled and gave him a wink.

"Oh I will!" said Ellison happily. *So maybe my mask is actually helping me make the lead part after all*, he thought as he walked to his next class.



Ellison practiced and practiced for the lead part in Shine. He had to be ready in case Dylan was still sick.

Finally it was the big day. Ellison saw that Dylan was back at school that morning, sitting at his desk in History class.

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

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

"Meh. Maybe your mask works," coughed 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?"

Suddenly Dylan's face fell, and it was the first time that Ellison had ever seen him look sad. "Well, my mom needs help eating and stuff again now. 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." He looked confused.

"My mom says it's not over, it'll always be around now," said Ellison, shaking his head. "Do you want a mask, to start to wear it so you don't catch it again?" He had snuck into the medicine cabinet and stuffed four extras into his pencil case that morning. Plus extra stickers. Just in case.

"No thanks," said Dylan, but he looked unsure.

"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. "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! Let's do it together?"

"Sounds good!" said Mariela, smiling. "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, as Mariela ran over to Angela and said something to her. Angela nodded, and put the mask on.

Of course! Smart thinking by Mariela - if Angela wore a mask, her bugs can't get anyone else sick! Ellison took the star stickers from his pocket and went over to join them, offering them to Angela.

"Ooh, a sticker!" Angela exclaimed. "Thanks, Ellison and Mariela! 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.

The music started, and Ellison sang his heart out. 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.

He sang the whole song flawlessly, ending with the chorus:

*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
Today we shiiiiiiiine!*

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 despite the mask.



The audience burst into applause and stood up and cheered. He noticed Mom drop the video camera in her excitement and fumble 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. "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 can't be a star every day, he thought, but today - today, we shined.*

Did you know?

- ***Not all masks are created equal!*** Masks made out of cloth, or surgical masks, are pretty good, but not as good as respirator masks - KN95 or N95 labels on masks mean they give especially good protection against sickness!
- ***Wearing a mask is just one way*** that you can help kids like Ellison not get sick! Other good practices are to wash your hands before you eat, clean the air with air filters, and stay home when you're sick so you don't spread your bugs around!
- ***Opening the windows*** in your house when someone is sick can help let the germs float out instead of getting the rest of your family sick!

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For more content for kids who wear masks, see the World Health Network's Kids' Zone: <https://whn.global/kidszone/>