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THE COMPETITION

Frances has forty

 thousand reasons to

raise her voice

From the author of  THE HELPLINE

KATHERINE COLLETTE

THE DAY BEFORE

The National SpeechMakers Public
Speaking Championship

Frances

When I first got the invitation, I thought it was a joke. A tour of the newly renovated headquarters of SpeechMakers Australia. Who would want to see that? They claimed, in what seemed to be hyperbole even for SpeechMakers, that it was an ‘unmissable experience’ and ‘very exclusive’. Only the one hundred and twenty semi-finalists competing in the national championship, which started the day after the tour, had been asked to attend. Oh, and the volunteers. And a few Highly and Moderately Esteemed SpeechMakers, including the winners of a twenty-five-words-or-less competition they’d run in the monthly magazine. But no one else.

Head office said it would be a unique opportunity to see where the ‘magic’ happened and how SpeechMakers was brought to life. Like it was an amusement park or the

birthplace of Frankenstein instead of a city-fringe office block. *And* you had to pay. It cost \$280.

I told Keith I wouldn't be going on the tour and he frowned, a well-worn crease appearing between his bushy white eyebrows. 'Frances,' he said, 'you have to go. You'll regret it if you don't.' The tour of head office was the cherry on the icing of a much-desired cake for Keith. He'd been trying to win the national championship for about a hundred years. 'Anyway,' he said, 'if you don't go you might be disqualified.'

'Why would I be disqualified? They've invited so many people, they won't know if one's missing.'

Keith said they would, because he'd have to tell them. For safety reasons, he said.

The morning of the tour, I was still thinking about not going. They wouldn't disqualify me, Keith was just saying that, and the whole event sounded so lame it probably ought to be humanely euthanased. But I'd already paid by then. Or rather, my parents had, on their 'emergencies only' credit card, which...well, it wasn't like we'd officially agreed on a definition of 'emergency' before they left.

Besides, what else was I going to do? I couldn't lie in bed all day—it was a bunk in a dorm room at a hostel and there were eight other people in there. The only privacy you got was in the toilet cubicle and you wouldn't want to sit in there for too long. The germ count in public toilets is next level, you could get hepatitis just from looking at the flush button. So I said to myself, *Frances, just go on the stupid tour. Not like anything bad will happen.*

•

The buses left from the conference centre at 9 a.m. I walked there along the track next to the river, working up a sweat in the humidity. I was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt, which you could call my signature outfit, though that might imply it looked better than it did. As I went, I ate a banana from the communal kitchen. Food was meant to be labelled, according to a laminated sign on the fridge, and this wasn't, so.

When I arrived it seemed like all the semi-finalists and half the conference attendees were already there, gathered under the front-entrance awning and on the footpath around it. The mood was light-hearted, lots of laughter and enthusiastic chit-chat but the noise and the sheer numbers made it a little overwhelming.

I felt unsettled. It was hard to pinpoint why. Something in the air, a tiny chemical imbalance that made my skin prick as I looked across the crowd, goosebumps rising, hairs standing to attention. It didn't *seem* like anything was out of order or unusual but that didn't necessarily mean...

Then I spotted Keith and the sense of foreboding morphed into irritation.

He was standing at the front of the group next to Roger Hildebrand, the two of them looking like twins with their bald heads, beige slacks and pastel polo shirts. Keith seemed to be talking to Roger. At least, his mouth was moving, but it didn't look like Roger was listening. He was signing autographs for a cluster of women gathered around him clutching copies of his best-selling book, *The Seven Steps to Standing Ovarions*.

I fanned my face, moving the thick Brisbane air across it.

Keith wasn't looking at me but I glared at him, half-hoping he'd see, wishing our eyes would meet for the briefest moment so that I could turn my head and look away and thus ignore him in the most pointed fashion.

I was still mad at him. I had been for weeks now, and I wasn't sure he'd even noticed. He didn't seem to grasp the significance of what he'd done.

I wished the buses would hurry up and come. I wanted to get the tour over with. As I waited, I let my eyes wander across the crowd and didn't see anyone from Glen Iris. They were probably here somewhere: Marcus, Yujia; other people whose names I'd never bothered to learn.

The bad feeling was still there. But then the bad feeling was often there. It didn't have to mean anything. Doctor Smithfield was always saying, *Frances, what are the chances something awful will really happen?* Remote, was her implication.

But not, apparently, all that remote, because at that very moment I saw a face.

Someone I recognised—or thought I did—and as that glimpse slipped into the corner of my eye and almost instantly out again, I felt a shudder run through my whole body. My skin contracted around my ears and neck and tiny shivers raced down my back.

Then the buses arrived. There was a rumble of engines and one, two, three of them came off the main road and down the driveway and pulled up squarely in my line of vision. Tinted windows flashed where the face had been and by the time they'd stopped up ahead and I could see again, the face

and the body to which it belonged were gone. Some of the same people were there but not *her*, not the girl...Woman? She was twenty-one. The same age as me.

I would have sworn it was Rebecca Chu, right there in front of me. But looking now, it mustn't have been. A person couldn't just disappear, and the group I was staring at, all of them wearing matching blue SpeechMakers T-shirts, definitely didn't include her.

It was weird. There'd been a moment of utter certainty, and now the opposite. What an oddly specific hallucination. But I was always doing that, thinking of the worst possible thing that could happen, or person that could appear, half-willing, half-dreading they actually would. The cataclysmic events I thought up weren't real, they were in my head.

I thought they were.

I made my way to the queue for the first bus. Everything was okay, I told myself, there was nothing to worry about. What did Doctor Smithfield say? *Just breathe. Focus on your senses, what you can feel and hear and see.* I tried to concentrate on the warmth of the sun on my back, the people I could hear talking, the traffic in the distance.

On the bus, I sat up the back and scrunched down, peering through the gap between seats so I could see everyone who got on. I thought Keith might come and sit next to me but he didn't. He went in the first row next to Roger.

The person who did sit next to me was tall and lanky and had a large straw hat on. He was older than me, late twenties maybe, and had a slightly pathetic air about him.

He unclipped his phone from his belt and put it in the seat

pocket in front as he sat down. ‘This’ll be interesting,’ he said.

‘Do you think?’ I looked steadfastly out the window, scanning faces. *Not Rebecca, not Rebecca, not Rebecca*. See? None of them was Rebecca. Why did I keep trying to make things more difficult for myself?

Once we were on the road, Roger got up and stood in the aisle, holding on to the rail above. ‘Welcome,’ he said. ‘I’m Roger Hildebrand, your conference host’—a little smirk, like *of course you all know that already*—‘and although this isn’t the official welcome, I’d like to *informally* greet everyone and congratulate you on making it this far.’

It was quite an achievement, he assured us, since an unprecedented 16,782 SpeechMakers from right across the country had entered and we were the final one hundred and twenty.

‘I know some of you have been here before, and others have tried for years to get this far.’ Roger smiled: he was the sun and we were tiny planets warmed by his rays. ‘Either way, this year is particularly special.’

The whole bus nodded and murmured. For the first time ever the SpeechMakers national champion was actually going to get something. Keith would have said the winner always got something: the quiet, understated knowledge that they’d excelled in their field of endeavour and earned the admiration of others. But this year they’d get something everyone else thought was worth quite a bit more, i.e. forty thousand dollars.

However, Roger wasn’t talking about the prize money. There was another reason it was special, he claimed, but he

couldn't say what it was yet, we'd find out later. Suddenly his face looked grave. Or like he was trying to appear grave, while masking an undercurrent of excitement. Keith started to ask, but Roger said, 'My lips are sealed.' Then he proceeded to part them and profess his great pleasure to be taking us on the first-ever tour of the national headquarters. And—another surprise—it wasn't just a tour we were going on! It was also a 'bonding activity' to help us 'get to know' our fellow contestants!

If it had been a public bus, I'd have pulled the cord.

We stopped anyway a few seconds later, in front of an unremarkable building. Brick with lines of windows six across and four up. The only interesting thing, in relative terms, was a large sculpture of a loudspeaker (the SpeechMakers logo) set in the forecourt with a placard in front that read: *Be heard.*

The bus doors opened. I waited in my seat while the other contestants piled off. The other buses hadn't arrived but I was feeling calmer. What an idiot, thinking I'd seen Rebecca. As if she'd be a SpeechMaker. What were the odds of that? So ridiculous—another ledge I'd invented to talk myself down off. I'd done the same thing that morning at the hostel, convinced myself there was a spider in the dorm room and started screaming at a mark on the wall. And yesterday on the plane to Brisbane it got bumpy and I started muttering to the man next to me that I was too young to die, and he said we hadn't taken off yet, we were just rolling over the raised lights on the runway.

Roger didn't wait for the other bus to get there before starting the activity, which required us to pair up with a buddy.

Keith made his way towards me and I took quite a bit of delight in saying I already had a buddy, thank you very much, and turned, beaming, to the straw-hat man beside me.

Roger handed out sheets of paper. In our pairs, we had to use clues written on the sheets to guide ourselves around the building to places of so-called interest. I read out the first one. *If you're in a hungry mood, go here first and find some food.*

'Kitchen,' I said.

'Hang on... ' My buddy raised a finger. 'Let's just stop and have a think about it.'

An hour later I was the first one back at the bus. Roger, coming over to congratulate me, looked over my shoulder and raised an eyebrow. 'Where's your buddy?'

I pointed at the building behind me. 'In there somewhere.' All I wanted to do was get back on the bus and sit up the back with my headphones on.

Roger was standing in the doorway. 'You're supposed to be with your buddy.'

'We got separated.'

'But it's a group activity. A bonding exercise.'

'He'll come back.' I tried to press forward but Roger didn't move.

He consulted the clipboard. 'Okay...What's his name?'

'Ummm...' Had he introduced himself? I hadn't really been concentrating. 'I only met him this morning.'

Roger frowned, clearly—and unfairly—thinking what a terrible person I was. I mean, it was a proposition with a lot of supporting evidence, but he didn't know that. I thought

about trying to slip past him, but Roger was having none of it. He pointed back the way I'd come. 'You better go find him.'

My neck went slack, like my head couldn't be bothered staying up as I walked back to the building. I looked around, but my buddy wasn't anywhere obvious. Not in the stairwell, nor at the printers or near the recycling bins, which were the last three clue locations and a fair indication of the quality of the tour.

The two women who had been sitting in front of me on the bus came down the hall. I asked them if they'd seen my buddy anywhere. They didn't seem to recognise me, which wasn't surprising to a person who spent her life trying to be as unmemorable as possible but was, as always, disappointing.

One of them rallied. 'What's his name?'

How was I supposed to know? 'He had a hat on.' I mimed its size and shape. They shook their heads and walked off.

I went to the communications department, the payroll office, the accessible bathrooms. There were lots of other contestants wandering around but no sign of a stupid-looking hat. I was standing in a ground-floor kitchen contemplating a door that appeared to lead outside, when I heard people in the hall.

'Let's try down there,' said one, and I froze. I hadn't thought about Rebecca Chu at all in the last hour, I'd been too preoccupied, but now my stomach sank and my toes curled to grip the floor and stop it slipping away. I swallowed, panicking, thinking I was about to hyperventilate as I looked through the doorway towards the corridor, bracing myself for the confrontation.

But no one came. I waited for five whole minutes, checking my watch, before peering out into the hall again. A few SpeechMakers, walking around in pairs, looking buddied-up, but no sign of Rebecca anywhere.

No sign of straw-hat man either. I went upstairs and checked the accounting department (clue #7) and a cleaning-supplies cupboard. Nothing. Eventually I went back to the kitchen and tried the outside door, which turned out to lead to a small courtyard: empty.

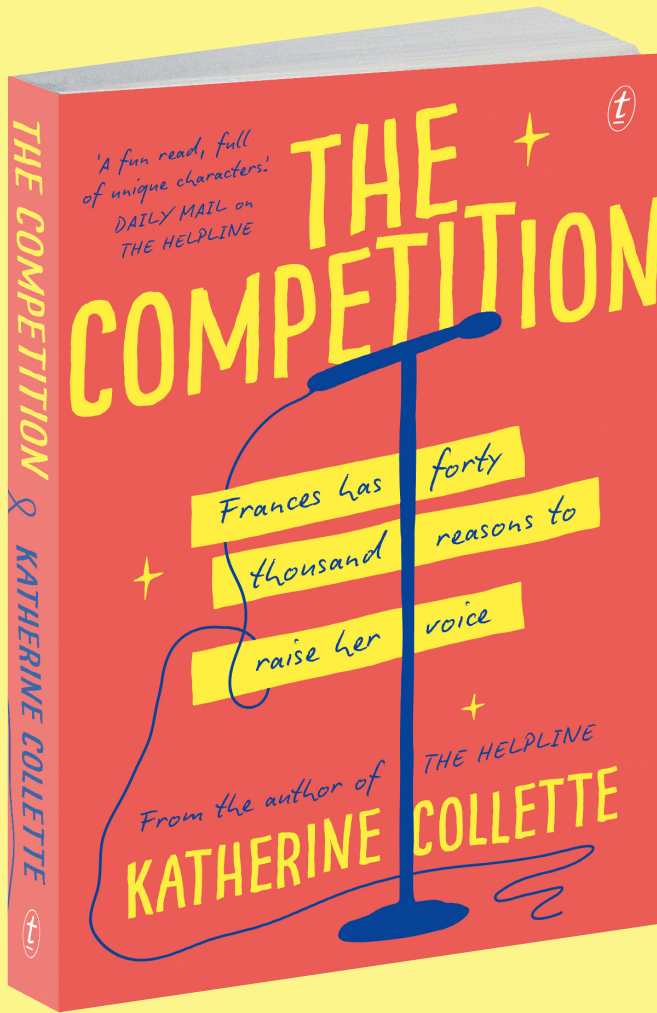
I was about to head back in when I heard something. A small voice, barely carrying over the wind. *Is anyone there... Can you find my buddy... Her name is Frances...*

He was stuck in an outdoor toilet with a dodgy lock, in an area that wasn't even on the tour.

Forty-five minutes and one time-consuming door removal later, the bus was pulling out of the car park. Roger stood up the front, microphone in one hand, other hand on the overhead rail. 'Wasn't that fun?' he said, in defiance of the collective mood. 'And congratulations to James and Anika, the first team back. Not that it was a competition. *Teamwork*, that was today's official learning.'

I stared out the window, ignoring the glares of the other passengers and ignoring *Neil Stevenson*—sitting next to me, still in the straw hat—even harder.

I was thinking about Rebecca Chu. Wondering if it really was her and whether she knew I was here. And what she might be planning to do if she did.



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