



It Was a Little Bit About the Play

LOOKING BACK, KATE COULDN'T EVEN REALLY SAY WHY she thought she'd get the part. She'd never thought of herself as a drama person before. Or a singing person, either.

Last year, when she was still in primary school, she'd gone to see the secondary school musical, which was *Into the Woods*. She'd been so swept away that she went back again the next night. It just looked so much *fun*. Everybody looked so confident and grown-up and romantic and happy. They looked like they knew who they were and where they belonged, in a warm, glowing world full of hilariously complicated

problems that somehow all worked out all right in the end.

So this year when she saw the poster announcing auditions for *Anything Goes*, Kate signed up immediately. It wasn't even a decision. She knew exactly which part she wanted, namely Hope Harcourt, beguiling young heiress.

Part of it was that she was at a new school, and she was still trying to figure out where she fitted in. In primary school she'd always been looking for her thing, her talent – something, anything, that she was good at, that would make her special. And she'd finally found it – boy, had she found it – but then the irony was that she couldn't tell anybody about it!

So a fat lot of good that did. To everybody else she just looked as plain and ordinary as she always had.

Plus she felt like she'd outgrown her old primary school friends, and she somehow hadn't managed to find any new friends to replace them with. She wondered sometimes if it wasn't just a tiny bit the *Silver Arrow's* fault – if spending so much time talking to a steam train and saving animals made it harder to relate to her classmates who led normal lives.

But that's where the musical came in. Being Hope Harcourt would be like being the conductor on the *Silver Arrow* only everybody would know about it, and they'd be in it with her. And at the end of the show when Hope Harcourt had her happy ending, it would stay that way. She felt guilty about wanting a life apart from the *Silver Arrow*, but wasn't everybody entitled to their own life? And to friends who weren't a magical steam train? She was eleven going on twelve. Sometimes you just need somebody to talk about cat stickers with.

There was just the little business of actually getting the part.

Obviously, you had to sing a song at the audition, and Kate had basically never sung anything in her life except Christmas carols and 'Happy Birthday'. She wasn't going to sing 'Happy Birthday' at her audition, so she went with 'Silent Night'. There was no way she was going to sing in front of Tom, or her parents, or her uncle, or her friends, so she practised in secret, picking out the notes on their piano to make sure she was on pitch.

Or more or less on pitch. Sometimes it was hard to tell. 'How are you going to get up and sing in front

of Mr Lee and all the other kids if you can't sing in front of your family?' Uncle Herbert asked her on one of his visits. It was one of those questions that's so reasonable and sensible that the only thing you can do is pretend you didn't hear it.

Tom would never have had a problem with this. He was always walking around rapping and singing pop songs at the top of his lungs. He *liked* people hearing him! Stuff like that just came naturally to him.

The auditions were held in the auditorium, the same one where she'd seen *Into the Woods* last year. At night it had seemed glamorous, but now in the daytime it was just big and empty and echoey. The chairs were those wooden ones where when you stood up, the seat automatically bounced up on a spring and made a huge bang. She recognised a few of the kids who'd been in the show last year, and they were funny and relaxed and confident, just like they had been onstage. They laughed and joked with each other and Mr Lee as if they were still in the musical and somebody had written witty lines for them to say.

Mr Lee called the auditioners up to the front one

by one. A tall, willowy girl belted out a song called ‘The Ladies Who Lunch’ with a lot of funny facial expressions and grown-up-sounding jokes that Kate didn’t get. Her voice had that vibrato thing that real singers have. Kate didn’t think she sounded like that. Though you could never tell. She’d read somewhere that you could never really hear what your own voice sounded like, because the sound was transmitted to your ears through your jawbones, or something like that. So maybe she sounded like that and she just didn’t know it.

A few of the kids tried to sing pop songs but cracked up in the middle. A couple more really did sing ‘Happy Birthday’. (Valuable life lesson: The first note of ‘Happy Birthday’ is the lowest note in the song, it only goes up from there, so if you start too high you’ll end up squeaking at the top.) Two unbelievably good-looking Year 9s did a duet from *Frozen*, complete with little snippets of funny dialogue that sounded exactly like the film, and they even sang harmony together in the chorus. A girl who Kate had seen around since Year 1 but never talked to, and who she’d always felt bad for because she was so shy, got up and without a hint of nerves belted out a song

from *Dear Evan Hansen*, and her voice was like an opera singer's. When she was done, the whole auditorium applauded.

By the time Mr Lee called Kate's name, it had crossed her mind that she might be making a mistake, but by then it was far, far too late. And in stories isn't it exactly the girl who thinks she could never be a star who always ends up *being* the big star and is showered with flowers and confetti while she stands there saying, *Who, me?*

She really hoped that that was what was going on here. Because it was definitely how she felt.

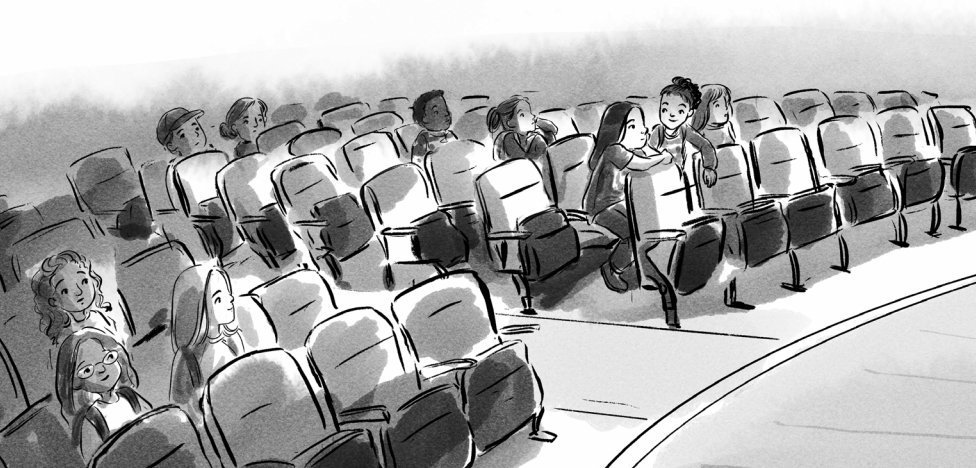
But in those stories did it feel like you were on the moon as you climbed the stairs up to the stage? Did your legs feel like numb stilts, and did your scalp start prickling with itchy sweat? The auditorium went quiet around Kate except for tiny noises that suddenly sounded incredibly loud, and Mr Lee's smile as he asked her what she was going to sing was so kindly that it made her want to cry. And how exactly did your vocal cords work, again? Because it had gone clean out of her head. Mr Lee had to sing the first few notes of 'Silent Night' for her to get her started.

When she was done she ran back to her seat, her face glowing with embarrassment.

That was on a Monday. On Thursday morning when she got to school, the cast list was up, and there was a mob of kids already gathered around it, buzzing and chattering away excitedly about who'd got what part. She waited on the edge of the crowd for a while, listening. What was that they were saying? Were they saying, *Who is that unknown sixth grader who came out of absolutely nowhere to capture the coveted role of Hope Harcourt, the beguiling young heiress who gets to sing 'It's De-Lovely' with brash young stowaway Billy Crocker?*

Nope. They were not.

There were two names next to each of the lead roles so that different kids could play them in the



Friday- and Saturday-night performances. But Kate would not be playing Hope Harcourt on either night. She got put in the chorus, with the failed pop-song kids and the ‘Happy Birthday’ kids.

Kate spent the rest of the day in a swamp of embarrassment and shame. *How* could she have done it? *Why* had she ever thought that she was special or talented in any way? She was too embarrassed to even talk to anybody about it; when her parents asked how it went, she just pretended, not very convincingly, that it wasn’t a big deal. The only one she told her real feelings to was her magical steam train friend, the *Silver Arrow*, which tried its best to sympathise, but let’s face it, her problems were somewhat outside its experience.

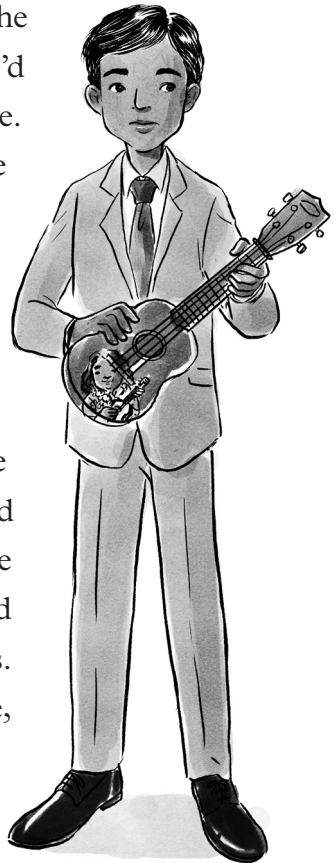


Of all the many aspects of this unfortunate situation that she might have obsessed over, for some reason one in particular tormented her more than the others.

After she'd run back to her seat, her face as red as a baboon's bum, a boy she'd never seen before was called up to the stage. His name was Jag. She'd passed him on her way up the aisle.

She'd noticed him even before that because he looked like such an oddball. He was tall and thin, with dark skin and black hair – she thought he might be Indian – but that's not what was odd about him. He had ramrod-straight posture and an oddly blank expression. He was wearing a kid-sized suit and tie and shiny black leather shoes. He'd been sitting alone, like Kate, not talking to anybody else.

She had to admit he had confidence, though. Jag



waved off Mr Lee's offer to accompany him on the piano because he'd brought with him – could it really be? – a ukulele, which he was going to play while he sang.

The ukulele looked like something you would buy in a toy shop. It had a picture on it of a man who was wearing a bright yellow Hawaiian shirt, and the man was himself playing a ukulele. Kate couldn't see whether there was a smaller man on that man's ukulele who was also playing the ukulele, with an even smaller man on that one. But she wouldn't have been at all surprised.

The song that Jag played was ... weird. His voice was high, and the melody was meandering and sort of spooky – it was barely a melody at all, it just sort of wandered around. The lyrics were something about a magical boy who goes on some kind of a journey? And then learns something about love? All accompanied by the plaintive twanging of the ukulele.

At the end Jag bowed. There were some sniggers from the hall, and somebody did a falsetto impression of Jag's singing until Mr Lee glared out at the audience. All in all, Kate was just glad that somebody

had humiliated himself even more comprehensively than she had at the auditions.

But then – *but then* – when the cast list went up on Thursday, guess whose name was right up there at the top, next to that of Billy Crocker, the brash young stowaway who gets to sing ‘It’s De-Lovely’ with beguiling young heiress Hope Harcourt?



Jag's Name, That's Whose

BUT KATE PUT THAT OUT OF HER MIND AS THE *SILVER Arrow* chuffed its way through the forest behind her house. Whatever. Stupid musical. She had way more important things to do.

‘Where are we even going?’ said Tom.

DON'T ASK ME

I'M ONLY THE TRAIN, THAT'S ALL

JUST A GIANT POWERFUL MAGICAL STEAM TRAIN

I WOULDN'T KNOW

ASK 'THE CONDUCTOR'

'We're going to the Rail Yard,' Kate said. 'For your information.'

Tom sat slumped on his stool, radiating a lack of enthusiasm. He'd decided that that stool was his, the one on the right, so he'd written *TOM* on a piece of masking tape in marker pen and stuck it on to the seat.

'Why there?'

'Because we always go to the Rail Yard.'

That was true. They couldn't fit a whole train on the tracks behind their house, just the engine, so whenever they finished a mission they dropped off the extra cars at the Rail Yard before they went home.

'We don't need a whole train just to look for Uncle Herbert.'

'We're not going there to get a train,' Kate said. 'We're going to talk to the dispatcher.'

'Why would the dispatcher know where Uncle Herbert is?'

'Well, it's worth a try.'

‘This is a stupid plan.’

‘*You’re* a stupid plan!’

It wasn’t a very good comeback.

They felt their stomachs drop as the *Silver Arrow* reached the hill in the woods behind their house and plunged down it. They spent the next few minutes in matching irritable silences. Tom’s was presumably because he was wishing he was somewhere else. Kate’s was because Tom was right – it wasn’t a very good plan – but she didn’t know what else to do, and she had to do something.

She didn’t have to dwell on it for very long, because a couple of minutes later they almost died.

Kate knew there were other trains out there riding the rails of the Great Secret Intercontinental Railway. She saw them once in a while, though only ever from far away, cruising along distant parallel tracks or waiting at a station while the *Silver Arrow* blew by them at full steam. She was curious about them, but she never had a chance to stop and meet the people who drove them. It wasn’t like there was a clubhouse or a social night or something where the conductors all got together.

At night the train lights looked cosy and inviting

in the distance. She supposed the *Silver Arrow*'s lights must look cosy and inviting to them, too.

But now Kate saw something distinctly uninviting. She didn't notice it at first, until the *Silver Arrow* started saying:

BLAZE

BLAZE

BLAZING

BLAZER

'What?' Tom said. 'Use actual words!'

But apparently the *Silver Arrow* couldn't even speak because it just printed:



Kate stuck her head out of the window. Dead ahead was a flash of sunlight off metal. Above it hung a puff of steam. There was another train on the same track they were on, a couple of miles away but closing fast. Too fast. Steam trains don't stop on a sixpence.

'Those lunatics,' she whispered. 'What are they doing?'

WE'RE THE ONES WITHOUT A TIMETABLE

WE'RE THE LUNATICS!

Tom went for the brake lever, but Kate put a hand on it.

'No. Full speed.'

'What?!' Tom shouted. 'You're going to kill us! Even faster than we would've died anyway!'

'Just trust me! Shovel! More steam!'

It felt wrong to her too, but sometimes you have to listen to your feelings and other times you have to push them away and do the exact opposite. Like when she'd had that feeling that she should audition for *Anything Goes*. Should've done the opposite! The trick was knowing when to do which one.