

Some Kind of Wonderful

At precisely seven twenty-eight I walk into the church, figuring that if I were to arrive any earlier I'd have to make small talk with strangers or people I've not really spoken to in years. I know mingling with others is a huge reason for me taking on this new class (and the hope is that I might learn something about myself through their questions), but I want to just observe today without any pressure being added. They're singing, I'm listening. That's it.

While walking through the huge wooden doors, doors I haven't entered since primary school when we were made to come here for celebrations like the Harvest Festival, I steal a glance at the altar to see a bunch of roughly twenty people standing around in a semi-circle next to a black grand piano. They're visibly waiting for the stragglers to join them while flicking through their sheet music, quietly singing lines to themselves and getting prepared. The stragglers are less focused on what they're about to do and are making the most of seeing their mates. Their bags have been dumped on chairs lining the right hand side of the church behind where the congregation sit when it's particularly heaving, like at Christmas. They look like they're in no rush to get into their formation with the rest of the team. Instead they're perfectly happy

cradling their cups of tea and having a gossip.

I fleetingly wonder where I would fit in here as I nervously slip in on the end of a pew right at the back of the church. Fiddling with a loose piece of thread from the end of my shirt.

I want to be here but I also want to be hidden. I don't want to make eye contact with anyone who might chuck a glance in my direction. Part of me wants to shrink away. Another part of me wants to actually leave. The feeling of being the new girl is intense and unlike anything I've experienced before.

I've been so comfortable with our cosy little life at home for so long that this feels totally wrong. This is not sitting down and hardly talking to my partner while we happily munch on (vanilla-powdered and coconut-oiled) popcorn and watch a Netflix series together. This is out of the house and conversing. I'm still in actual clothes past seven o'clock. I still have make up and a bra on!

I bite the inside of my cheek to steady myself. I want to be here. I really do. I've never been one to suffer with social anxiety in the past, but I know this is the result of Ian and I shutting ourselves away and not venturing out to anywhere other than the gym. I don't know how to talk to people in a social capacity. I've forgotten how to be me.

I didn't realise trying out something new as an adult would be this tough! It's far more overwhelming than doing so as a kid. When I was twelve I'd have been straight up joining in without a care in the world. I don't understand how changing the way we interact with others can

have such a lasting effect on how we might react in social situations, but it makes me angry that I've allowed myself feel this way in a scenario I'd have previously thrived in. But it's the anticipation of the unknown. I don't know what's expected of me, even though I'm meant to be here just to watch.

'You made it!' Jodie says, cutting into my thoughts while sliding in next to me and placing an arm around my back. She's exactly as I remember her. Her blonde hair is still long and down to her waist, and her smile is just as big, warm and inviting. She's wearing a yellow t-shirt with 'Sing it Proud' printed across the front, along with some blue skinny jeans and white ballet pumps – the uniform of the group, although everyone is wearing a different colour.

'I'm so glad you came,' she sings, her hand rubbing along my shoulders.

'Thanks for having me. It looks great,' I say, pursing my lips together sweetly, looking up at the people before me, seeing the individuals rather than the daunting group. The sight is comforting. It's such a collective bunch of men and women of all ages and sizes, all wearing the same happy and content faces Jodie displays. It literally is a case of everyone being welcome. Clearly this makes it less *Pitch Perfect* than I'd hoped, but I'll reserve my judgement for now. I'm sure this lot can give some attitude when the song demands it.

I notice a few other people occupying the pews in front of me who also aren't wearing the Sing it Proud tees, some on their own like me, others are little families or

sitting in couples. They're possibly spectators too, seeing as it's the last rehearsal. Perhaps they're here to see what their loved ones have been getting up to while out of the house on a Wednesday.

'Like I said earlier,' Jodie continues, while still rubbing my shoulders. 'I'm happy for you to sit here and watch so you get the gist of what we do, but really it's all about fun. Song-wise it's a case of anything goes. As you'll see, we can do anything from Bieber to Disney, Little Mix to Stormzy.'

I laugh when she says that as my eye lands on a man who must be in his seventies, who isn't even the oldest in the group. He looks like your average elderly man, although there's something about the way he's standing, looking around the room with a cheeky look on his face, that makes him look like quite a character. That being said, I can't imagine him spitting out some rhymes Stormzy-style.

'Stormzy?' I repeat, wondering how I would even cope with doing something like that, never mind Granddad over there.

'OK, we keep him for the younger lot once a few others have gone home,' she laughs, leaning forward and smacking her thigh as though she's in a pantomime. 'My point is that anything is up for grabs. You hear a song you want us to do then bring it in and let's do it. We even do musical theatre stuff sometimes.'

'It all sounds great,' I say, mustering up a huge smile to hammer home my excitement. It does, but I just want to see them now.

‘Proof’s in the pudding,’ she laughs, getting up. ‘We can catch up some more in the break.’

‘Fab.’

‘OK everyone. Places please,’ she says, clapping her hands together.

The sound booms around the church, the incredibly high ceilings causing an echo. I love churches. I mean, I might not venture into them aside from weddings, christenings and funerals, but I find something calming about them. I don’t think I believe in God specifically. I’d agree that there is a greater being, but I think that’s actually the spirit of the universe rather than one giant man looking down on us and casting judgement and doling out challenges, joy and punishments. I don’t know what that classes me as, but I do know that I like being in here. Knowing that people congregate in this beautiful space and channel such love and devotion through their prayers leaves an atmosphere in the room that’s enchanting. Not enough for me to convert or become devout, but enough for me to respect the sacramental aspect of faith.

The pianist starts playing as the stragglers become silent and join the more eager members of the group. All eyes are on Jodie as focus befalls the assembled group. She leads them through a warm-up, her arms waving around enthusiastically as they go up and down scales.

‘Brilliant,’ she praises, ending their finishing note with a twist of her hands. ‘We’ll end with all the festive numbers, of course. First though, seeing as this is the last session of the year, and we have an audience for once,’ she sings, looking over her shoulder to me and the others

sat in front of me. ‘Let’s kick off with some of favourites.’

A bubble of excited whispers spread through the four rows.

‘Let’s start with Becky’s favourite,’ Jodie instructs.

‘Ooh . . .’ the happy group reply in chorus, the elation building as they flick through their folders to locate the right page. Shuffling their weight from foot to foot, getting comfortable before giving their leader every ounce of their attention.

The piano plays a few notes individually but gives nothing more. Then Jodie’s body bounces in front of them, leading them into the song. ‘Ahhs’ are sung out proudly, and even without the help of violins, I know exactly what the song is.

It’s Elbow’s *One Day Like This*, but not as I’ve ever heard or seen it before. My body sits up a little straighter at hearing the huge sound being created. It’s wholesome, engaging, heartfelt and uplifting – and it’s only the intro. The piano kicks in at the start of the verse as the choir break into the emotional lyrics, all harmonized and brilliant.

I’m smiling, literally grinning at them as they tell me to throw my curtains wide. Being here, watching them, it feels like I’m doing just that. And it’s not perfect. It’s full of quirks, personality and mistakes. I watch one lady, who’s standing on the end in orange, unable to stop grinning as she does her ‘bum, bum, bums’ slightly out of time, an older guy at the back singing with so much gusto he almost falls from the step he’s standing on, and there are questionable notes being sung out left right and centre, but it’s

the feeling. The emotion. It's amazing. Electric.

I'm so happy I came.

How crazy that thirty seconds can make such a difference on how you feel towards something. I take in each warm expression before me, each lyric, ooh and aah, and let it fill me with a feeling of exhilaration.

I want to be here.

Never mind having one day like this a year. Just having one little moment like this, one that gives me hope that new beginnings are here. That's what I need.

Yes, it's a love song, of course it is. But love has many guises, one being self love. It's been rubbish lately. Life has been shit. My soul and heart have been crushed. But being here, watching them, hearing them . . .

I want to be in their team!

As the song comes to an end my body propels forwards in standing as my hands find themselves clapping so hard they almost ache. No one else joins me, and the eyes of the choir are on me as a result.

Surprisingly I don't feel like a total tit while sitting down and getting ready for the next number to start.

I'll be honest, on my way here I told myself that I didn't need to stay for the mulled wine or mince pies. I thought I could nip out beforehand to stop myself feeling awkward for gate-crashing their rehearsal. Yet here I am, with one hand cupping a plastic cup filled with warm festive goodness, while the other shoves a whole pie in my gob.

'I remember you!' says Mr Higgins as he too shoves a whole mince pie in. I recognise him instantly. He used to