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Invisible Girl

When I was little, I loved to play hide-and-seek – even in our small terraced house I found hiding places everywhere. I hid in wardrobes, in cupboards, under the bed; I stood for hours behind the faded green curtains with just my feet sticking out, hardly daring to breathe.

My favourite hiding place was the cupboard under the stairs, behind the vacuum cleaner and the box of spray cleaners and the furniture polish that smelt like marzipan. I built a nest there, with a lumpy pillow and a blanket, making a chocolate-chip cookie last for an hour as I relaxed and let my mind drift.



I'd dream that I was up on stage singing, or dressed in tulle and pointe shoes, twirling my way through *Swan Lake*. I had a dozen different daydreams to suit my mood, and I could vanish into one whenever I wanted.

It was how I coped with the shouting.

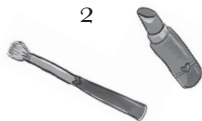
Later Mum would cuddle me, tell me not to be scared. 'It doesn't mean anything,' she'd say, tucking me in at night. 'I haven't been feeling well and your dad's a bit stressed, but it'll pass. Just ignore it, pet!'

But I couldn't ignore it. Whenever things got bad, I could smell trouble in the air, feel the ground beneath my feet begin to slip. I'd ask Mum if we could play hide-and-seek.

'Oh, go on then,' she'd say, rolling her eyes, and I'd hear her counting slowly to a hundred as I ran to hide. I always felt safer burrowed away out of sight, lost in my dreams.

It didn't bother me that I might be waiting a couple of hours for Mum to remember I was hiding and come to find me. It didn't matter . . . I was safe.

It was just a bad patch, Mum said, the kind lots of couples have – but there were two years of uncertainty, of horrible rows and stony silences, of broken plates and dinners burned and cold and tipped into the bin. I found out much



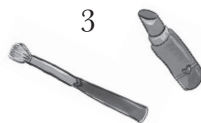
later that Mum had been struggling after a miscarriage and that Dad had been trying to survive on a zero-hours contract. If Mum hadn't lost the baby, I'd have a little brother or sister now, but instead there was always something missing in our family, a ragged gap I couldn't even begin to fill.

Two years of hiding and wanting to vanish . . . and then everything changed.

I started school, Dad got a better job and Mum started working part-time in the beauty department of a big store in town.

'It'll be make or break,' she warned us, and for a while it looked like it might be the latter. Dad would come home tired and get annoyed because the house was untidy and there was no tea on the table. Mum would say she only had one pair of hands, that she was sorry if the house was a mess but life was never perfect.

I remember thinking that maybe she was wrong, that things could be perfect if you tried hard enough to make them that way. I remember thinking that Mum deserved that, and I wondered if it might be possible if I just tried hard enough. The next day I washed all the mugs and



dishes in the sink, tidied my room and made Dad a cup of tea when he got in from work.

‘You’re a star, Sasha,’ he said.

That was all I needed to start believing that perfection really was possible.

The rows began to ease up, and I convinced myself it was because I was trying so hard. The anger and resentment that had once crackled in the air between Mum and Dad faded away into silence, and they started smiling, laughing, hugging again.

I tried harder. I was helpful, cheerful, reliable. I brought home good school reports, never argued, got into the habit of setting the table, folding the washing, helping with the cooking.

‘You’re growing up,’ Mum said. ‘It doesn’t seem so very long ago that I couldn’t open a wardrobe without finding you sitting cross-legged among the coats and dresses, when you used to hide behind curtains with your feet sticking out at the bottom and think nobody could see you . . .’

I didn’t tell her that wearing a good-girl mask was the best way of all to stay invisible.

I started secondary school, made friends, kept the mask in place. I wasn’t super smart and I wasn’t hopeless either,



just somewhere in the middle, but I always tried my best at everything. The teachers liked me, but not all the kids did.

The school bully, Sharleen Scott, labelled me 'Little Miss Perfect'. She was almost right, in an ironic kind of way, and also very, very wrong.

Underneath the try-hard exterior, I was a long way from perfect. Playing with my mum's make-up kit and singing into my hairbrush in front of the mirror were my only real skills. I had a morning make-up ritual using the samples Mum brought home from work. It was calming to brush on foundation and highlighter, as if I was painting on a second skin. I liked looking in the mirror and seeing a braver, brighter version of myself smile back.

I was an average student with a reasonable voice, a big imagination and a desperate need to please, but that's not what other people saw. They saw a girl who looked like she could take on the world, when actually I was hiding away from it. Ironic, huh?

Then a boy named Marley Hayes nagged me into auditioning for a band called the Lost & Found, and I ended up being their lead singer, which is kind of crazy. We've had some success, played a big festival, even been on TV.



I guess you could say it was all a dream come true. The trouble is, dreams aren't always the way you think they'll be. I like to sing, but I don't like being in the spotlight and I hate knowing that the band's success – or lack of it – hinges on me. What started off as performance nerves has evolved into the kind of anxiety that eats away at my confidence and keeps me awake at night. So yeah . . . now you know what's going on beneath the surface, and why I'm really not Little Miss Perfect. At all.

I may be the lead singer of the Lost & Found, but lately that feels more of a nightmare than a dream. I'm just bluffing my way through, hoping nobody spots that it's all smoke and mirrors.

I learned a long time ago that you can hide all kinds of stuff beneath a smile, an impression of careless confidence. Hopes, dreams, anxieties, fears . . . all those things stay safely hidden away when you know how to wear a bright, shiny mask over the top. I've had years of practice at hiding.

I am fourteen years old now and I have a theory.

I think that if you hide yourself well enough, and stay hidden, eventually you start to disappear for real . . .



SashaSometimes



273 likes

SashaSometimes So the Lost & Found made it to the TV news last night . . . how cool?

#Lost&Found #TVNews #CharityGig #TeenBand

littlejen You were so good! Tell Marley I love him!

MillfordGirl1 My favourite band!

JBSings I'd love to be like you, Sasha. Do you get nervous on stage?

SashaSometimes Oh my gosh, all the time! It's natural, though. That adrenaline can fuel a whole performance!

JBSings #MyHero



2

The Price of Fame

‘Can I have your autograph?’ the Year Seven boy at the bus stop asks. ‘Saw you on TV last night – can you sign this?’

I smile and scribble my name on his homework jotter.

‘You’re my favourite,’ he blurts. ‘Out of anyone in the Lost & Found. I’m your number-one fan!’

He whips out a smartphone and snaps a quick selfie with me, then blushes a deep shade of crimson and lopes back to his mates.

I shake my head and smile, because I remember how it feels to be eleven years old and crushing on someone. In my case it was Harry Styles from One Direction, and if

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he'd ever signed the cover of my homework jotter I think I'd have fainted clean away with the shock.

The Lost & Found are not in that league yet, but still, I don't think I will ever get used to signing autographs. It's only really our lead guitarist Marley Hayes who gets a kick from it; he's crazy ambitious. Although the Lost & Found is a team, Marley is the driving force behind it. When I'm listening to his pep talks I almost believe that we can make the big time. Almost.

The bus appears at last and I head upstairs, where Romy's saved me a seat. She's my best friend, and she also plays violin and sings backing vocals with the band.

'See our bit on the local TV news last night?' she asks as I flop down beside her. 'Everyone's talking about it!'

'I just signed an autograph and had my photo taken by a fan,' I tell her. 'The price of fame!'

'Rather you than me,' Romy says. 'I'm glad I'm more of a background kind of person. Although even if I was lead singer, nobody'd want my picture!'

I nudge her sharply. 'Don't run yourself down, Romy! You're great! You just need to believe in yourself!'



Like me, Romy likes to keep things hidden, but she hasn't quite perfected the art of acting carelessly confident the way I have. Her anxiety shows, and that marks her out as vulnerable in a place like Millford Park Academy.

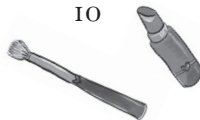
Romy pulls a face, laughing. A bunch of Year Seven girls shout over that we were brilliant on TV last night, and a Year Eleven boy called Matt Brennan wanders down from the back of the bus, dropping into the seat in front of us.

'Hey,' he says, pushing back an artfully tousled quiff and treating me to the kind of smile rarely seen outside a toothpaste advert. 'My name's Matt. I help edit *Scribbler* – you know, the school magazine. You're Sasha Kaminski, right? You're in that band, the Lost & Found, aren't you?'

'I'm the lead singer,' I say. 'Romy here plays violin and sings backing vocals . . .'

His eyes slide to Romy and then back to me again. 'Cool,' he says, and I find myself dazzled by his hazel eyes as well as the toothpaste-ad smile. 'So, yeah . . . I follow your Instagram, actually. It's cool. I wondered if I could interview you for the school mag? Get a scoop on what you're doing before you hit the big time?'

'Oh – we'd love that, wouldn't we, Romy?' I say.



‘I was thinking more just you,’ Matt says. ‘And Marley Hayes, maybe. I know there are lots of you in the band, but I wanna focus on you and Marley, to begin with at least.’

I blink. I want to tell him about Lexie, who started the band in the first place. I want to tell him about Sami, whose artwork caused such a stir at the gallery the night before last, and how his awesome story would make a better magazine feature than anything me and Marley might have to say. I want to say that we’re all equals, that Lee, George, Romy, Happi, Bex, Dylan and even Jake are just as important as anyone else, but in the end I don’t. I allow myself to be dazzled by the smile, the eyes, the quiff.

‘That’d be cool,’ I say, and Matt grins and taps my mobile number into his phone before wandering back to his mates. It’s Romy’s turn to dig me in the ribs now.

‘He likes you!’ she whispers. ‘I could tell! And you like him!’

‘Nah, he’s way out of my league,’ I say.

‘I don’t see why,’ she says. ‘He might think he’s Mr Popular, but actually he’s just a boy with a hipster quiff and plenty of confidence. You’re out of *his* league, I reckon! Besides, a girl can dream, right?’



I laugh, because I know Romy's right . . . Matt Brennan will be sneaking into quite a few of my daydreams from now on.

The bus pulls to a halt outside Millford Park Academy and Romy and I file down the stairs. Someone pulls at the sleeve of my blazer, and I turn to see school bully Sharleen Scott.

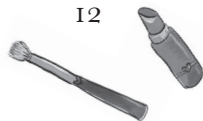
'Saw you on telly last night,' she says, so close I can smell the mixture of spearmint chewing gum and stale nicotine on her breath. 'Think you're quite something, don't you, Little Miss Perfect? Thing is, I see through the act. You're way out of your depth, Sasha. Why not just admit it?'

This feels too close to home, and for a moment I can't think of a smart reply . . . or any reply at all.

'Ignore her,' Romy says, trying to steer me away. 'She's just jealous!'

'Of you two? Don't make me laugh!' Sharleen snarls, turning her attention to Romy now. 'It's a shame TV makes everyone look bigger than they really are . . . a bit embarrassing, really. I don't know how you can stand up there, Romy, when you know everyone's laughing at you!'

My whole body flushes with anger, more on Romy's behalf than my own. I should feel sorry for Sharleen – I



know her spite stems from envy, from wanting to be part of the Lost & Found, but it's hard to be sympathetic. She gets a kick from hurting people, and she knows Romy is insecure about her looks.

I shake her hand off my arm and turn to face her, prickling with indignation.

'Just listen, Sharleen . . .'

And that's when it happens. I disappear.

Black hole, secret hiding place, silence.

I only know I've done it afterwards, when Sharleen is laughing and waving her hands about in front of my face, and Romy is asking if I'm OK.

I blink, pull in a deep breath and try to work out what I've missed.

'You're mad, you,' Sharleen says. "'*Just listen*" . . . listen to what? The sound of freakin' silence?'

Romy hooks an arm through mine and drags me away, but I can still hear Sharleen jeering behind me.

'There's something wrong with you, you weirdo!' she crows, and although I tilt my chin up and pretend not to care, deep down I know she's right.

Hey Sasha, Matt here. Good to talk to you earlier and cool that you're happy to do something for the school mag. I was thinking we could give it the centre spread with lots of colour photos and use one for the cover too! #excited

Hi Matt – sounds great! We've got band practice after school – I'll tell the others & we can make a plan! Sasha x

OK! Could do something this weekend maybe? Get it sorted before half-term? I'd really like to see how the whole thing works, talk to you and Marley about how you see things going, that kind of stuff.

I'll ask Marley if you can come and watch our practice on Saturday. You can take some pictures and then do the interview bits? Sasha x

Perfect. Thanks for this, Sasha. Let me know what Marley says!