

Swing Out Sister

“When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.”

Maya Angelou

September 2019

A part of home exists for me in my university acapella group. Every fall we hold auditions, and today is that day.

In my light pink tie-dye shirt and high waisted jeans, I bike to campus—an entire Qdoba burrito and an extra sandwich hitching a piggyback ride in my backpack to hold me over for the next twelve hours. A gigantic smoothie is nestled in my bike’s water bottle holder and it sports little indents in the styrofoam when I reach the building where we’ll listen to people sing all day.

Writing audition notes feels serious and exciting, as if I’m being paid to write them. But the pay doesn’t come. After sitting in a gigantic ballroom with air conditioning stinging my bare arms, I notice myself putting less pen pressure on paper as the 15th auditionee sings. The light fixtures on the wall start to become interesting and I become less and less confident that people who can hold a pitch exist. I sneakily take another sip of my smoothie that has been hiding under the long rectangle table where we all sit like intimidations, and the next auditionee walks into the room.

She wears light blue denim shorts that are hugging the top of her waist and flaunting cuffs at the bottom. Simple glasses decorate her face and match the high necked black tank top tucked in. Long dark dreads are speckled with red and drape her waistline, a monochrome plaid flannel tied around it all. Her large golden hoop earrings remind me of little halos falling from her, and suddenly she speaks.

“Hello, I’m an alto...”

She probably doesn’t feel as confident as she appears, but that is the magic of her. A bracelet laces itself around her left wrist and her toned arms show me that she can fight. As I listen to her sing up the scale, I do not realize that in a couple months I’ll know that she doesn’t understand why people are so amazed with her toned arms. She’ll tell me, “That’s just how I’m built.”

After singing down the scale, she swallows quickly, clasps her hands, and smiles.

“Do you mind if I quickly grab my water bottle outside the door?” she asks. *Personable, honest, unapologetic*, I write in my notes. I observe her skip back in with a magenta water bottle, but I do not realize that in a couple months I’ll know that her favorite water bottle is actually the teal one she calls Sonny. She unscrews the magenta lid and clinks it against the opening of the stainless steel.

“Do you need a starting pitch?” my music director asks. The girl shakes her head while sipping the water.

“No ma’am.”

Personality. Comfortable with us. The bottle now sits at her feet like a small child looking up ready to watch her sing.

Forgetting the cold air stinging my arms, she scats and hums, snapping her fingers and swaying with her song. She is demanding our attention, and she is *good*. *This is music*, I write. For the first time that day, I don't feel like the intimidating auditioner that we definitely look like all lined up against the wall. I feel like I'm hanging out with her, us cooking food as she starts to sing out loud even for the pasta to hear. I look up from my notes. A smile is plastered on her face.

"What's your favorite chocolate or candy?" we ask her before she leaves.

"I-I like Reese's, the pieces or the cups, preferably the cups though."

I sketch out three stars next to her name, the highest grade I give an auditionee.

Reese's, I write.

swing out, *v.* to make a big sweeping gesture or movement

October 2019

The sky was gloomy, cold, and full of falling drizzle as I walked to one of many night rehearsals. The new members made our sound full and our energy infectious, and that night we were to hold auditions for a solo I felt I had a good chance for.

The previous night I had my first panic attack for unrelated reasons, setting me up to feel out of body and still in healing as I walked through the rain. I finally knew what anxiety felt like, feeling very different from the healthy stress of auditions I had perfected before and performances for solos I'd won. Umbrella in hand, I cleared my throat, my voice barely warmed up and my usual energy foreign to me.

I walk into the classroom that members have already begun to fill, an unfamiliar space in comparison to the music building where we usually convene. I feel anxious still, tingles rising to the crown of my head as I sit down and fasten the velcro around my black umbrella. My thighs are damp after wiping my rainwater covered hands dry.

The minutes pass like seconds, and soon everyone is standing up around me to warm up as the clock strikes 7pm. So I stand, my left hand lightly gracing the tabletop to steady myself in replacement for a warm shoulder I wish I had. My table and I are tucked near the back of the room, but as I join in singing scales under my breath, I change my mind and slowly walk to the table in the front where three peers sit. I had felt drawn and closer to them recently, friends in the making—and in that moment I needed a semblance of comfort. As our warmup trails off, I sit. There's a teal water bottle on the table.

"Are you nervous?" I hear her ask on my left. I look up from the hands I wring in my lap.

"Not really, more so generally anxious. I didn't have a good past 24 hours." Auditions begin with one of our bass singers at the front of the room and I look down again to my fingers typing short notes on my phone.

Gaze still in my lap, I hear, "Who's next?"

It's quiet—the kind of quiet where seconds pass at twice normal speed and everyone wonders who will be the first to say *I guess I'll go*.

I hear myself speak.

"I guess I'll go."

My peers are scattered in front of me, some heads nodded down to the notes on their phones, some with elbow on table and chin in their hand. I feel like I'm in the wrong place. The backing track plays and I'm singing.

Time to check the lyrics scribbled on my hands, I think to myself four measures in. I wish I wasn't this unprepared. This would be a moment I typically shine in. I hate this room. This building reminds me of the classes I took here last year. That was the worst year. It feels so odd to be standing here knowing that the girl I just fell through with is watching me right now. But I don't know if she is, because I'm not looking at her. What do I even look like right now? Can they tell I'm not feeling good? Probably not, because I'm doing my best and not letting it show on my face. Or is it showing? The high note is coming up in two measures, so I think I need to close my eyes for this. Jesus, I feel like I'm spiraling.

Light clapping suddenly is filling the room. Head in my hands, I groan and walk back towards my seat. I see nobody around me nor do I care, the feeling of crying rising in my throat with no desire to hide it. I don't feel sad about the audition, but rather my brain having a field day in my newfound anxiety. Lifting my face from my hands, I notice that I'm turned around and walking to the door, plummeting alone through a tunnel. Control is beyond me.

"I'm sorry, I'm not okay right now," I hear myself explain to the shocked stares. Black fills my vision as time moves in slow motion and the door is yet to be reached. A flashback of me leaving my ex's car after an emotional day fills my black vision like an old TV being turned on. We're parking in her driveway and I'm running down the stairs, past her family's garden and into the basement back door to cry.

"I'm sorry, I'm not okay right now," I had told her.

When I grab the classroom doorknob, the flashback dissolves and suddenly I see everyone in the room. All their gazes are on me and elbows are off the table. They are silent and stunned.

"Wait, are you okay?" I hear my music director ask. She's sitting at the podium with the backing track control still in her hand. I stare and my cold hands begin to shake. I don't know what to do with them. I don't know if I'm crying, but I hear my voice again.

"I don't know. I think I'm having a panic attack again."

The stunned silence remains. I muster all my strength and pull on the doorknob, backing myself out of the room, heavy door weighing on my shoulders. My lips open to speak again.

"Can someone come with me?"

The cold white stone of the wall right outside the door presses against my back as I slide down and down with shaking hands on my face and tingling up and down my arms and down and up I

suddenly go in somebody's arms. I am being held against a chest, and the physical touch feels wrong when my body is plummeting down a rabbit hole instead.

"Repeat these numbers after me," someone says. I cannot locate whether the voice comes from the rabbit hole or the warm body holding me up.

My frantic breathing fogs my palms against my face and I open a few fingers to look. Two other girls complete the circle around me and only now I notice they are rubbing my left arm while that same somebody holds the rest of me. I keep hearing numbers, so I repeat them.

"Twenty three... forty six... thirty one..."

The minutes pass like hours.

The rabbit hole disappears and I open my fingers in an exhausted sigh to look again. Salt water streaks my vision. Cold white tile lays under my white sneakers and the shoes of the three girls around me. To my right, falling along the arms holding me up, perfect long dark dreads speckled with red.

swing out, *n.* a two-part movement
allowing two dancers to rotate around each other
in a linear fashion sharing one source of energy on a line

February 2020

"I don't know why we've never properly hung out before!" she says while flipping a spoon in her hand and spinning salt into the water on the stove. Music blasts from the speaker on the counter, speaker nestled amongst cut up sausage, opened seasoning bottles, and a big bottle of Port wine. The night rehearsal that we left together twenty minutes before melts behind us.

I'm amazed with the ease to which we exist with each other making pasta, sharing energy in the volume engulfing us. Childlike smile plastered on my face, I can't help but ask, "Are you sure music this loud is okay in your building?!"

"It's normal here! I swear to you."

While she stirs the pasta and sings, I take another sip of Port and then grab the dog toys off the floor. They're the kind of pigs that snort when you squeeze them, so I squeeze them to the beat of the trap song. We guffaw at that. She doesn't even have a dog.

Spinning and goof-singing and whooping in the kitchen, she scurries back over to the pot of boiling water.

"I can roll my tongue!" she gleefully yells for the whole building to hear.

Pasta and wine in our bellies, we sit in her dark bedroom, two growing best friends under glowing blue light bulbs. Sitting on the corner of her bed, I pick up the lonely guitar by her vinyl

records and start strumming songs by ear. Soon we find three long videos on her phone of us making music together, forgetting we also sing together in acapella. But this moment is just for us.

I hop off the bed and put the guitar back with its brother vinyls. The speaker from the counter has followed us upstairs and silently sits next to the incense burning on the dresser. Her windows are propped open, blinds hugging the ceiling, while her crystals catch moonlight on the windowsill. She and I are one in the sharing of time. *So this is friendship*, I think to myself. When she leans back in her desk chair lighting a bowl to smoke in the new silence, I have an idea.

"Let's dance."

"Are you absolutely sure this loud music is okay in your building?!" I ask again, amazed, free. Me by the window and her on the other side of her bed near the door, we are dancing to Swing Out Sister as if we've flung ourselves into the 80's. Bohemian kimono draped over her shoulders, she switches out the blue light bulbs for neon green, new bright light catching on our smiling faces. We rotate around the room like two planets in a colorful 80's orbit, sharing the same energy in the same moment. Swing Out Sister sings.

*Don't stop to ask
And now you've found a break to make it last
You've got to find a way
Say what you want to say
Breakout*

May 2020

We're video calling while we exist in different rooms, different cities, a global pandemic separating us. She sits on the floor in front of her mirror, brushing on makeup in the same room we once danced and sang in, now packed up and empty. Purples and golds and yellows jump from the bottles on the floor to her eyelids and sparkle with the red in her dreads. The sun catches with her glittery lids, sun flowing through the windows that once flowed with music too loud in the dark. Suddenly I remember the three stars I sketched next to her name. I think to myself, *and now she feels like a sister to me*.

"You remind me of something I've read," I tell her in the screen, "It said that girls who do their makeup on the floor in front of a full length mirror know how to fight."