

Solo Sisters: Julie Howard

The first time I meet my sister, Sula, I've just started secondary school. I'm sitting in the huge music room grandly called *The Choral Space*, fidgeting with my cardigan buttons, my throat tight with fear. I'm trying not to be distracted by the thin voice that warbles from the front of the room. *Oh God, what if I sound like that?* I'm dreading the moment when Mr Crick, the Choir Master will call me out to sing.

Slam! Crash! The door flies open jolting me out of my fear. And there she is - Sula. Face scrunched in confusion, hand clutching a crumpled timetable while her bag hangs limply over her shoulder.

Mr Crick, puce-faced bellows 'Sit down or get out girl.' For a moment I think she's going to leave but she stands up straight, clasps her books to her chest and strides to the empty seat next to me.

Mr Crick shouts 'Next!' and we all slither along the seats. Everyone except Sula, she's caught off balance. Halfway to sitting, she starts to stand, trips and loses her hold on books and bag. I reach out to help but it's too late, they slip through our fingers and land in a clatter that startles the room.

'Leave them!' shouts Mr Crick 'Get out here.'

His thin arms push her roughly beside the first girl, who by now is shaking. He strikes a chord. 'Sing!' he barks. Both girls open their mouths to sing but only Sula's voice rings out. Clear and strong. He looks astounded. 'Again!'

He strikes the next chord, an octave higher. 'Not you. Her!' His long finger stabs at Sula. Unfazed she sings the scale, and the

next and takes a breath ready to continue. 'Enough,' he snaps, 'Soloist... Soprano... Sit over there.'

Girls in oversized tunics that almost graze their ankles, parade before him. He grades each one with a sparse comment, 'flat', 'not bad' or shamefully 'mime.' The rows fill up with altos and sopranos, but as a soloist, Sula sits alone. She ignores Mr Crick and picks at the flaking polish on her stubby fingernails. Inevitably my turn comes. My legs wobble, my gleaming shoes click on the parquet floor. Sula looks up and grins. She even gives me a wink. Shocked I open my mouth and sing.

Extract from novel *Solo Sisters*