

Prelude

Miley

This is it. I take a deep breath and push the caravan door open. Mum is standing at the sink. There's a funny smell, which I hope is not dinner. 'Mum,' I say.

'Miley,' she replies.

'Can I go to Grade Six Music Camp?' I ask bluntly because Mum likes people to get to the point.

She keeps chopping carrots. She's fast and all the pieces end up the exact same size. Mum trained to be a chef at one of the top restaurants in Melbourne before she had me.

'Why do you want to go to Music Camp?' asks Mum.

'Because I love music.'

'Okay. But don't you have to play a proper instrument?' Mum asks, banging a clove of garlic with the back of her knife.

'I play treble recorder,' I remind her.

'Are recorders allowed at Music Camp?'

Here we go again. Why are people like this? I take

another deep breath before I reply. 'Yes. Miss Lin specifically invited me.'

'Are other kids from school going?'

Mum is asking lots of questions to stall for time, but at least she's considering it. She hasn't just said no.

'Sandy will probably go,' I tell her. Sandy plays trumpet in the district brass band like their dad and their dad's dad.

'Anjali and Greta?' asks Mum.

'Nah, they aren't interested.'

'They're more horsey girls, aren't they?' says Mum.

I nod. My friends looked at me like I'd grown a third and fourth ear when I suggested we could all play recorder at Music Camp.

Mum squats to look in a cupboard, then stands up holding a green potato covered in sprouts. 'Well, that explains the stink,' she says.

'Music Camp?' I say, passing the brochure to her. It explains that Music Camp is for regional students in their final year of primary school. Held in July, the camp is a week of intensive music lessons with expert teachers at a riverside cabin-accommodation resort.

Mum peers at the brochure and then whistles. 'It's expensive, sweetheart.'

'But it's for five whole days,' I reason with her, taking the brochure back. 'Per day it's actually cheaper than Halls Gap camp.'

'We couldn't afford Halls Gap camp, remember?'

I remember. I only got to go because Mum volunteered

to cook. It was kind of embarrassing having my mum on camp, but everyone liked her self-saucing pudding and I got to try abseiling.

Mum points at the mounded compost bin. 'Do you want to take that out?'

I don't want to, but I do want Mum in a good mood. I pick up the bucket and walk outside to the communal bins. The potato smells awful. If I had to choose between being stuck in a bucket with a rotten potato or dog poo it would be a hard decision.

As per usual, Gary is sitting under the awning of his permanent annexe. He has the newspaper on his lap, but he's not reading. Mum says we should respect Gary because he's lived in the caravan park for twenty years and we are newbies. Blow-ins, Gary calls us, but it's more like flow-ins because our house and all our stuff got wrecked in the flood last year. We're only here until the insurance company agrees to pay the claim and we can get a new place.

'You gonna play that whistle again today?' Gary asks.

'It's a treble recorder, Gary.'

'Whatever you call it. Just keep it down during *Home and Away*.'

'Okay, Gary,' I say, because that is easier. I have tried explaining to Gary that the recorder is a serious musical instrument, but some people just don't want to learn. Unfortunately, Gary's attitude is very common. People look down on recorders and treat them like a joke or a toy or a health hazard.

I mean, I get it. They hear a class of kids playing Pachelbel's 'Canon' on plastic descant recorders and it sounds like ferrets fighting in a cave, so they assume it's the recorders' fault. But really, the problem is forcing kids with no musical training to play high-pitched instruments. If the government spent more money on music education and equipment then recorder ensembles would sound better. Recorders *can* sound as good as any other instrument. And way better than the flute. My music teacher, Miss Lin, taught me that. I have learnt a lot from her, even if I didn't want to at first.

Last year our school had a big campaign to start a proper music program. We sold mangoes for fundraising and the principal applied for a grant. We even picked which instruments we wanted to play. I was going to learn the clarinet. I liked the look of the complicated silver buttons, which I now realise was superficial. But then the flood washed away the classrooms and the school had to spend the mango money on portables. So instead of new instruments we got Miss Lin. She drives all the way from Melbourne to our school once a week to teach recorder.

When the lessons started, I kept leaving my recorder at home on purpose. For the first couple of weeks, Miss Lin let me practise the fingering on a ruler. But then she brought spare recorders. She kept them in a bucket of water and detergent, which was supposed to sanitise them, but I doubt it. I had to reach in and grab a slimy

recorder, then dry it off with paper towel. Soapy water dripped out of the recorder for the rest of the lesson and it tasted horrible.

I complained, but Miss Lin said, 'If you remembered your recorder, Miley, you wouldn't have this problem.'

The next week I remembered my recorder. But I still didn't play. I held it to my lips and moved my fingers without making a sound. It was like the ruler all over again. I thought I was a really good actor until Miss Lin made me stay behind after class.

'I don't get it, Miley,' she said. 'What's your problem with the recorder?'

Was she serious? 'It's a recorder,' I said. 'It's not exactly a proper instrument. Like we were promised.'

Miss Lin kept her cool. 'So what is a recorder then? If it's not a musical instrument.'

'It's more like a toy.' Looking back, I can't believe I was so ignorant.

Miss Lin turned to her laptop and started typing. I waited nervously, thinking she was writing a note on my record. I did not want Mum to get called in for a meeting. Not on top of everything else.

'Watch this,' said Miss Lin, turning the screen towards me. The video showed an audience in red-velvet theatre seats. Above them hung a glittering chandelier. On the stage, musicians dressed in black were seated in a semicircle. Each of them held an instrument. Some were enormous, taller than the person holding them. Another one looked as small as a toothbrush.

‘What are those?’ I asked.

‘Recorders,’ said Miss Lin.

Then they played. The music was complicated and seemed to go in circles. It made me feel like dancing, but also like I couldn’t stop watching.

When the clip ended, Miss Lin said, ‘So, do you reckon recorders are proper instruments?’

I shrugged.

Miss Lin raised her eyebrows.

‘Okay, okay,’ I said. ‘That was pretty good.’

‘Only pretty good?’

‘All right, they were very good.’

Miss Lin pulled on her necklace like she always does when she’s excited. She told me that people who play recorder are serious, proper musicians. People study the recorder for years at university and the best recorder ensembles play in the world’s great concert halls. Just like in the video. Concert-grade recorders cost *thousands* of dollars. They can be worth as much as an oboe or flute. Not like the plastic recorders we use in class. They are worth twenty dollars and I know for a fact the school will give you one if your parents can’t afford it. Miss Lin said it was only ignorance and snobbery that made people look down their noses at recorders. Recorders are so cheap that anyone can afford to play and that means some people think they aren’t proper instruments. I hate that sort of thing. Like when people tease kids who have second-hand shoes.

That night, I went home and practised the recorder

for the first time. I learnt all the finger positions. Mum got a shock when she came home from her shift.

‘That doesn’t sound too bad,’ she said, standing next to my bunk.

‘Why should it sound bad?’

‘Well, it’s a recorder ...’

In that moment I realised how deep recorder discrimination runs. And I decided to change that. I practised five times a week for six whole months. Now I can play most of ‘Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’ as long as I’m not too hungry. I also researched the history of recorders so I can blast people with recorder facts to change hearts and minds. Music Camp is the next step in my plan. It’s an opportunity to showcase the recorder to the music community and educate people about its history.

I hope Mum is reflecting and making the right decision in the caravan. She’s not musical herself, but she knows what it’s like to have a dream. She wants to have her own restaurant one day. I tip the scraps into the compost, then rinse the bin at the outside tap. It makes a disgusting slimy soup, which I pour onto a nearby bush.

When I return to the caravan with the empty bin, Mum is still busily chopping. ‘Thanks for that,’ she says, without looking up.

‘So can I go to Music Camp?’ I ask.

Mum sighs and puts down the knife. ‘I haven’t been

getting as many shifts since the new menu.’ Mum works in the kitchen at the nursing home. Recently they started using more frozen food and they haven’t needed her to chop as much. ‘We just can’t afford it,’ she says.

I don’t bother to argue. Once Mum says that, there’s no point.

‘Do you want a hug?’ she asks.

‘Nah,’ I say. I go through to my bunk bed and grab my recorder. I practise a few scales, then open my music folder on my pillow to ‘Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’. I run through it slowly then try it at full tempo. The clock on the wall opposite my bunk says it’s nearly seven. I’d better stop or Gary will bang on the door again. Sometimes I think the only time he leaves his chair is to complain about me making noise.

I lie on my bed, staring at the sloping ceiling above me, an ache in my chest. I’ve let Miss Lin down. And the recorder. There’s a soft scratching noise on the fabric partition – Mum’s way of knocking. ‘Come in,’ I say.

Mum pushes back the flap. She’s holding her laptop. ‘I got an email,’ she says, ‘from a Charlotte Lin?’

‘Miss Lin!’ I swing my legs over the side of the bunk.

‘It’s about Music Camp,’ Mum says. ‘She says something about a Vitaside scholarship. She’d be happy to put in an application for you.’

‘Really? She thinks I’m good enough for a scholarship?’

‘She reckons you’d definitely get one. It should cover the cost of camp.’

‘So I can go?!’

‘If you get a scholarship.’

I throw myself at Mum and hug her, nearly knocking the laptop out of her hands.

‘Careful! The screen’s nearly busted, remember!’

Mum goes back to finish making tea, and I pick up the recorder again, inspired for one last speed-run of ‘Arrival of the Queen of Sheba’ whether Gary likes it or not.



Juliet

The room spins as my body falls through the air.

Is this it?

Am I going to DIE?

I’m SO YOUNG!

THIS IS TRAGIC!

My life doesn’t flash before my eyes. Instead, I hear a cacophony of all the music I’ve ever loved crashing around me. I land with a thump on my stomach, but it’s a soft thump. I’ve fallen onto the spare bed; my head rests on something scratchy. I open my eyes and look into the beady eyes of a galah cross-stitched onto a cushion. One of Mother’s many keeping-busy hobbies. Something pokes into my stomach, and I pull out the hardback edition of *Little Women* I was re-reading yesterday. My comfort reading is not so comfortable now. This is why

Mother implores me not to stand on the office chair to reach the top cupboard.

On the bedside table is the photo of my parents' wedding day. Mother wears a short pale-blue dress and has daisies in her hair. She holds hands with Dad, who's wearing a suit and a peacock-blue waistcoat. Behind them stands the ghostly white trunk of a gum tree and a flowering wattle. It could be an idyllic rural scene, but I know they were married at the Royal Botanic Gardens in Melbourne.

I roll onto my back, slide my feet to the floor and stand slowly, checking for injuries. I seem to have survived unscathed. I scoot the office chair back to the desk and fetch the stepladder from the cupboard instead. I climb up again to reach my suitcase. Standing on tiptoes, I pull the handle and the suitcase tumbles, narrowly missing my head. Danger is omnipresent.

Back in my bedroom, I dump the suitcase on my bed. I open my top drawer and contemplate what I need for Music Camp tomorrow. It will be five days of *musical adventures next to the majestic Coldon River, culminating in a concert at the world-class Vitaside Concert Hall. A not-to-be-missed experience for rural students to share their musical passion.* That's what the brochure said. Those words convinced me that Music Camp is my destiny.

Not that I consider myself to be a rural student. Most of my life was spent in an inner-city terrace house before grief swept us away to the countryside. I haven't made firm friends in our year of living rurally. The other

students at my school simply aren't very musical, so we have nothing in common. None of my classmates will attend Music Camp, which means I won't know a soul, but I hope to meet other isolated music-lovers there.

I open my top drawer and survey the array of mostly single socks. Mother says I lose socks faster than a machine specifically designed to lose socks. I can only make three pairs from the assortment. Reaching right to the back of the drawer, I find a blue sock with fluffy white sheep. This triggers a memory, and I go to my bookcase, where I find the other matching sock lying on top of my *Chronicles of Narnia* box set. I burst into song, 'And all the people rejoy-oy-oy-oyced!' Dad used to sing this line from Handel's 'Zadok the Priest' when he found a good parking spot. It's also apt for sock pairings.

I'm stuffing underwear into the front compartment of my suitcase when Mother enters and asks in a quiet voice, 'What are you doing, sweetie?'

'Packing for Music Camp, Mother.'

'I wish you'd call me Mum.'

'Mother sounds more dignified.'

'Dignified or pretentious?'

Whether I call her Mother or Mum, she will still be most vexing. I take out a t-shirt with the words *Look out, here's treble* printed underneath a treble clef symbol. I smile but put the shirt back in the drawer. It was a gift from Mother and, although I appreciate her effort to be amusing, I don't think it sets the right tone. Music is serious and I am serious about music.