

# Sing

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*Shuffle. Thump. Shuffle. Shuffle. Thump.*

My breath runs ragged, my fear threatening to drown me as the sounds draw closer.

*Shuffle. Thump. Pause.*

“I know you're in there you crazy bitch.” My father's gravelly voice is murderous; filled with hatred and evil. I remember a time when he used to use it as a monster voice. Back when he told me stories as a child. Back when things were good.

I swallow roughly, rubbing my sweaty palms along my jeans as quietly as possible. *He doesn't know I'm in here.* The thought is the only thing keeping me sane. *He's only guessing. He doesn't know I'm here. He doesn't. He—.*

His hand comes down on the door once. Twice. Harder and harder until he is hammering on it, threatening to knock it off its feeble hinges.

“*GET OUT OF THERE YOU FILTHY INGRATEFUL BRAT!*” His words hurt more than his blows. Tonight is bad. Tonight I will be leaving with both physical and emotional bruises.

If I leave at all.

The door flings open. Everything after that happens in flashes.

*Flash.*

My father's ruddy face, twisted in a drunken rage.

*Flash.*

His cane coming down with a sickening *crack!* on my leg.

*Flash.*

My hair being pulled from its follicles as he drags me down the hall, out of the closet.

*Flash.*

Fire and numbness where his fists collide with my flesh.

*Flash.*

Black edges in my vision.

*Flash.*

My father opening his belt.

*Flash.*

Nothing.

~

The first thing I register is aching. All over me. Inside of me. Aching everywhere.

I stagger and hobble to the bathroom, trying my best not to wake my father. He is passed out on the carpet, cane and glasses askew, his pants around his ankles. I step gently around him, holding my breath.

I dread the bathroom, the mirror, the harsh lights. They show my impurities, the things I must cover up. They show black circles under my eyes. Bruises on my arms and legs. Scars on my body from previous beatings.

There would be much worse to see if they showed you the inside.

My makeup case sits on the counter. The only thing that still lets me come to school without looking like a zombie. I've become a master at concealing bruises and scrapes. I've been doing it since the seventh grade.

The smell of blush and powder are salvation from my father's alcoholic stench. They wash away Jack Daniel's and Bud Light, letting my mind wander as I flourish and twist the brushes. After a few

minutes, my face is beautiful once again.

I smile, pulling up the sad corners of my mouth and forcing them to be happy. Forcing myself to be happy. Happy, happy, all the time. Never sad. Survival of the happiest. The externally happy, at least.

My smiles fades, and I leave the bathroom because I can't take any more of the mirror.

I slip into my room, plucking my book bag from the closet. I stuff some clothes, twenty dollars from my wallet, and my homework inside. Tonight is a shelter night. Well, I *hope* tonight is a shelter night. November gets busier as the temperature drops. I slip an extra sweater into my bag.

My apartment is as ruddy as my dad's face. Dirty dishes cluttering the sink and counter, beer bottles lining the walls, not the ideal place for anybody to grow up. But I turned out as well as I could considering the circumstances.

I lock the door behind me, slipping a cigarette out of my back pocket and lighting it.

I did say as well as I could. Habits form. They're not a problem.

The walk to the shelter is a rough twenty kilometres away. Nearer to the center of town. I'd pop in and out, loitering as long as I could until they asked me to leave. After that, I'd wander until I found a corner to hole up in until dawn.

My injured leg impedes my progress, but after two hours I hobble up the steps of the shelter. I knock and step in. There are gentle "hey"s and "welcome back"s from most of the patrons. I'm a regular. Every couple of weeks I show up, fresh bruises revealing my reason for stopping by. I walk over and drop down beside Lohan, one of my few friends outside of the shelter. He puts an arm around me. It's comforting, even though the bruises on my back twinge in protest.

"Dad?" He asks, his eyes full of concern. I nod, and he lets out a whoosh of air through his nose. "How bad?" I can hear how tense his voice is.

"Stage five." I whisper. We have a code worked out, to classify my father's rages like hurricanes. Five is the worst of the worst.

Lohan is furious. He chokes a little, unable to form words. Finally, he settles on: "Dammit, Wyn.

Dammit, dammit, dammit.”

He pulls me into the protective circle of his arms, and tucks my head under his chin. I let a few tears leak onto his windbreaker, the first of many, clutching his jacket while I regain my composure. We stay like that a while, Lohan holding me, rocking gently, and me breathing—just in and out. In and out.

“What are you going to do?” He mumbles after a minute, pulling me back so that he can search my eyes.

“Same thing I always do.” I don't even bother to plaster on a smile for him, he will see through it. He knows me too well. “Camp out for a day or two, check in on him and make sure he hasn't burned the place down.”

“You know you could. . .” Lohan trails off. He knows he can't sway me, but his blue eyes still hold a glimmer of hope.

“No.” I say firmly, “I can't move in with you. Your mom is stressed enough as it is, and I can't just drop my father. He needs me.” I lace my fingers with his and squeeze. “You know that, Lo.”

His eyes turn mournful, like a spanked puppy's.

“I do.” He whispers “I just wish I didn't.”

“Wynifrid?” One of the volunteers, Marsha, crouches next to me, holding out a cup of steaming tea. “I'm sorry to see you here tonight. I really hoped October would be the last of you.”

I take the tea. “Thanks, Marsh. I hoped that, too. He was getting better though. But tonight he just. . .lost it. I'm not sure why.”

Marsha nods, “Just remember it's not your fault.”

“I will.” I sip the tea, and Marsha walks away to talk to a new visitor. Get his story.

I finish my tea as slow as possible, savouring the warmth of the liquid and Lohan's presence beside me. It soothes my raw nerves and I can eventually drift off. Seemingly minutes later, Marsha wakes me up and I, along with everybody else who has spent the night at the shelter, have to leave.

“Remember that our doors are always open.” She tells me. “Good luck.”

It's barely dawn, and myself and Lohan drop into the nearest Tim Horton's, scarfing down bagels and more tea. I change in the bathroom, brush my hair out, and scrub my teeth with a finger. We catch the nearest bus to the school and wait on the steps until eight.

School is as normal as ever. My limp improved overnight and I can walk mostly natural to and from my classes. I catch Lohan watching me occasionally, but I brush it off. I can't leave my dad. He would perish without me. And I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I let that happen. Lohan has to understand that. I have no choice.

Today is wednesday. Choir day. My favourite day of the week. Choir is my only real escape from my dad. Running away only lasted until I had to come home. Smoking only lasted until my cigarette burnt out. But I could sing all my life if I wanted to. The choir director, Ms. Loveless, greets me warmly when I enter the choral room.

“I'm glad to see my most improved soprano.” She says “I was worried when you didn't show up last week.”

“Oh,” I smile awkwardly. “My dad wasn't feeling well, and he called the school asking if I could be excused to take care of him. He's much better now.” The lie feels like a rock in my stomach. My father had called me home that day, but not because he was sick. When I got home he locked me in my room for six hours. The only reason that I got out was because the tenant of the neighbouring apartment heard me banging on the walls and went to check on me.

“That's good to hear.” Ms. Loveless smiles. “I'm glad you're back. Now, take your seat please. We've got some fresh meat.”

I smile sincerely for the first time in days. New choir members. It's always a treat to see more people interested in music.

My eyes scan the room for the new faces. Two sopranos, blonde and brunette, and one tenor who isn't bad looking. I situate myself next to the new girls and introduce myself, telling them about

how awesome the choir is.

“We don't just sing choral songs and perform in churches.” I tell them, the two girls are engrossed with my words as I begin my description of the show we put off every year. “It's crazy.” I say “The gym is always packed.”

The blonde, Sophia, is totally hooked “Oh my gosh, this sounds fantastic!” she exclaims, clutching the hand of the brunette, Lydia, who is just as enthusiastic. “I'm so glad we got into this!”

I smile at her. “You're going to love it.”

“Ahem!” Ms. Loveless quiets the room quickly, “Alright, people! This is not exactly the most common happening because we get most of our new additions in September, but we have three newbies today! Please stand Ms. Lydia Holt, Ms. Sophia Franco, and Mr. Austin Tills! Welcome to the family!”

The three new people stand and the rest of the choir erupts in welcoming applause and cheers. Lydia and Austin smile nervously, but Sophia is beaming. She will probably pull ahead because of that. I hope that she pulls the other two ahead with her.

Choir passes in a blur, the two hours relaxing my brain and letting all of my worries drift away as I sing. I work my voice, pushing it to do its best possible. As I'm leaving the room, Austin pulls me short.

“You're great.” He says. “Your voice, I mean.”

That compliment feels really good coming from both a newbie and a guy. I smile and blush. “Thanks. I'm surprised you could hear it over the other tenors.”

Austin smiles back. “They're not *that* loud.” he says as we walk out of the choral room.

“Are you sure? Maybe you just can't hear them over yourself.”

Austin nods “That's probably it.”

I laugh and glance at my watch. 4:45. I should get home to dad soon.

“Well,” I say, and hitch my bag higher on my shoulder, “I've got to get going so I'll talk to you later.”

“Okay.” Austin says, and waves as I walk out of the door.

Not bad looking at all.

I have a spring in my step the whole walk home. I don't really notice my surroundings until I've unlocked the door to my apartment. My dad's voice grumbles from inside.

“Decided to come home, you worthless runaway?”

My smile drops and I consider bolting, but there's no point. I have to come back, I only packed for one night, plus, my house is falling apart at the seams.

I take a deep breath and step over the threshold.

A beer bottle comes zooming at my head and I duck to avoid it. The bottle hits the door and shatters. Panic settles into my bones.

My father starts to mumble angrily. “Stupid bitch. . .just like her mother. . .doesn't know to follow. . .back in line. . .” His voice grows louder as he works himself into a fit.

He heaves up from his arm chair, cane in one hand, and a second bottle in the other. This is a new tactic. He's never come at me with glass before. I know I'm in trouble, and I can't afford to stay any longer, but I can't leave without my stuff. I'll perish.

My father swings, and I narrowly miss the second bottle. It's too dangerous. I open the door and run as fast as my legs can carry me. Away from my house, from my father. He screams curses at me the whole way down.

I'm sobbing by the time I arrive at Lohan's house. I pound on the doorbell, then the door, begging for him to be home.

It seems like an eternity has passed before the door opens a crack.

“Hello?” It's Lohan.

I push the door open and collapse into his arms. He staggers. “Wyn!” He exclaims, and leads me

to the couch in his front room.

I'm in near hysterics, moaning and sobbing and writhing on his couch. Lohan crouches by my head, stroking my hair as I let out my tears. When I finally lay, panting, my face drying, he picks me up gently and sits back on the couch with me in his lap. I don't think I've been in anyone's lap since Santa Claus at the mall back when I was twelve. It's been a good five years since then.

“Shh, shh.” Lohan soothes. I'm shivering. Fine tremors rocking my body. Or maybe that's Lohan rocking. I'm not sure.

“What did he do?”

My eyes squeeze shut, fighting back tears. “Bottles.” My voice chokes on the word.

Lohan's arms tighten.

“That bastard.” He says. I nod furiously.

“Don't go back.” He pleads. “Please don't go back to that.”

“My wallet. . .” I protest feebly. All of my money is in it. I have nothing in the bank.

“I'll get it for you.” Lohan promises. “Don't worry. Just say you'll stay here.”

I consider it for a second, then nod shakily. “Okay.”

He breathes a sigh of relief, leaning his head against mine.

“Thank you.” I don't know who says it.

Lohan tucks me into his bed to rest, then waits downstairs until his mom comes home. Hours later, the sound of Mrs. White's car pulling into the driveway tugs me out of my sleep, and I walk downstairs groggily to meet Lohan's mom face on. Mrs. White has only met me once before, at a distant birthday party for Lohan. Back when Mr. White was still alive, so I don't know if she'll recognize me or not. I can barely remember her face.

It seemed almost too good to be true when Lohan said I could stay. There had to be a catch somewhere. And here it was:



Mrs. White's stress factor. You can tell the moment she walks through the door that it's been a bad day. She looks as though she's been rubbed the wrong way too many times.

"Mom?" Lohan asks quietly.

"What?" Her reply is gruff and pissed and I know from that one word that the conversation is not going to end well.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Mom." Lohan says. He takes off her jacket and tries to massage her shoulders, anything to get the tension out of them before she sees me. "Just a little one."

"Do I look in a fit state to do a favour?" Mrs. White snaps. I cringe. Bad day. Very *very* bad day.

"Sorry, Mom." Lohan says quietly "I didn't realize. Would you like a Tylenol? A glass of water?"

"No, no." Mrs. White waves him off and steps around the curve of the hall, where I am waiting, eager for the verdict.

She immediately bristles. "Lohan," she growls "Why is a *girl* in our house?"

Lohan rounds the corner. "That's what I wanted to ask you about, Mom. You see, her father—"

"Get. Her. Out." Mrs. White's eyes are burning a hole through my head, their fury turned full blast onto me. They look so much like Lohan's. An icy blue, blazing with hidden flame beneath the surface.

"But Mom," Lohan protests.

"Out!" His mother is immovable. "I'll drag her out by the hair if I have to. We don't take in strays, especially not sluts like you." She turns on her son. "Why did you pick up this miserable thing off the street, Lohan? You know better than to interact with hussies."

I cringe her words. I might be a lot of things, an abused, a smoker, a runaway, but I am *not* a slut. I don't sleep around. And the fact that Mrs. White calls me that openly, when she doesn't know a thing about me, sets my blood to a boil.

"Listen here, *Ma'am*." I spit the words into her face, piling every ounce of anger towards my

father behind them. “You do *not* have permission to call me that. I do not sleep around, and you cannot assume anything when you do not know who I am!”

“Wyn!” Lohan is shocked at my words. I don’t usually get angry, but the last day had worn my temper to a thread, which Mrs. White just snapped.

“Get. Out.” Mrs. White looks murderous, but her voice is deathly calm. “Get out of my house.”

“Mom, please—”

“Enough, Lohan. If she doesn't get out my house I will call the police.”

Lohan looks at me, desperation in his eyes. I know it will hurt him, but I can't turn him on his own mother.

“I'll go.” I say. “Thank you, Lohan, for letting me rest while I could. I'll be out of your way. Mrs. White.” I nod in the direction of Lohan's mother, then squeeze between them and walk out the door. I keep my back straight and my head up.

Once I'm outside, I sag, deflated, like an old party balloon. Tears threaten again, but I force them back angrily. I've cried too much in the past few days. I need to be strong. I have no home, I have no family, I don't know how long Lohan will stay—if he stays at all—but I have to be strong.

I cross the street and collapse against a telephone pole. I'm shivering again.

I could get another job. The weekend shifts at Wendy's won't keep me for long if I have to provide for everything. I count the change in all of my pockets. Seven forty-seven. Plus the four dollars emergency bus money in my shoe. I'll be walking from now on.

I take a deep breath and lift my head from the pole. It was resting on a flyer. In the near darkness, a word catches my eye: *auditions*. I can barely pick out the rest of it. *November eighth. . .Arts and Culture Centre. . .Talent. . .Television*. I could audition for that. Whatever that is. It might get me away from St. John's long enough to let something good happen.

I do a mental calculation. Today is November fourth. Four days. Four days until the auditions, which means four days out on the streets. I'll have to survive four days. The shelter is open, but I

couldn't stay there every day. It doesn't work like that. I'm not sure I could stay in school for those four days, either. I wouldn't be able to handle it.

There will not be any constants in my life over the next few days. I'll be a homeless. I won't have any income. I will know cold nights and alleys and change busked off of tourists.

But I can't sing for tourists. I'm not that good of a singer. I have horrible stage fright. I have never sung a solo in my life.

My throat begins to close and my vision narrows. I take deep breaths to avoid hyperventilating. Once my breathing is even, I begin trudging to the shelter once again. There are tears in my eyes, but I have a flicker of positivity lingering in my heart. Things can't get any worse, after all?

Marsha greets me at the door. When she sees me, her face immediately drops.

“Oh, Wynifrid.” Her voice is filled with tears. “We're full. I wish I could take you, but we're full.”

I nod. Sudden tears fight to free themselves from my eyes and I find myself blinking furiously and trying to regulate my breathing. “I understand.” I force out eventually “Good night, Marsha.”

Marsha closes the door, looking sombre, and I cross the street to Gower Street United Church. There is a nook around back that is sheltered from the freezing November wind. I settle into it, wishing some warmth into my bones. I don't let any tears fall. Instead, I sing the softest lines of a song for myself only. They are lyrics from one of the first songs I ever loved.

*“I've been walking in the same way as I did. . .”*

I sing the song for most of the night. Eventually, my body slips into a restless sleep. I wake at dawn, and I keep singing.

I sing on corners, sing on the steps of Rocket Bakery and The Celtic Hearth. I get enough change for lunch, and continue singing. I sing until the stores close and the drunks have started wandering down from George Street. I sing until my nerves and throat are raw. I sing until I collapse in

a free corner at the shelter. I sing in my sleep.

And I do more or less the same thing for the next three days.

I get more change on some days and less on others. Sometimes I have enough to splurge on a custard cone at the Candy Bouquet. But I always set some aside. For that bus ticket. For that ride to the Arts and Culture Centre that just might change my life.

I got to read the whole poster after. It was about an audition for a second, surprise series of Canada's Got Talent. They're choosing twenty people to be sent to Toronto for the real auditions. All I have to do is be one of those twenty.

The eighth rolls around painfully slow, but I have enough money for the bus. I finally have enough for something. My final two cigarettes are stashed in my back pocket. One for before the auditions, and one for after.

My stomach is a ball of nerves while riding the bus. Trees and buildings pass in a blur. Too soon, the bus stops and I have to get off and walk to the Arts and Culture Centre. I smoke my first cigarette on the walk.

When I get inside, I fish out one of my final dimes and call Lohan on a payphone.

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*Ring.*

*"Please leave a message at the tone."*

"I don't know if you'll get this in time or not, Lohan, but it's Wyn. I'm auditioning for something and whether I get the part or not, this is a goodbye for me. I'm going to drop out of school if I don't get it. I need a job. And I'm going to Ontario if I do. Because I will be auditioning for a television show. What I'm trying to say is that I'm at the Arts and Culture Centre if you're looking for me."

I hang up after that. I have nothing more to say.

There is a line further inside. I join the queue and eventually get a number. 251. Twenty will be picked of over two-hundred and fifty-one. I sing my song over and over, blocking out the other people around me until it is my turn. I am led around backstage, people calling me by two-fifty-one instead of Wyn. I don't really notice. I am singing.

I step onto the stage, the glare of stage lights warming my flesh and blinding me. I blink a few times until my eyes focus. Before me are three people. Two men. One woman. One old. Two younger. All looking tired and vaguely bored after seeing two-hundred and fifty other acts before me.

“Name?” One of the men asks. His voice has a slightly nasal quality.

I notice a microphone further forward on the stage and walk up to it.

“Wynifrid, Wyn, Michaels.” My voice is a little shaky.

The first adjudicator writes my name. He takes longer on the first so I know he has written Wynifrid instead of Wyn.

“And what will you be doing?”

This is it. The point of no return. I swallow hard.

My voice is surprisingly even, “I will be singing Hometown Glory by Adele.”

The first adjudicator nods, while the second man settles more comfortably in his chair and the third barely conceals an eye roll.

I must look pathetic on the stage. I showered at the shelter the night before, and I brushed my hair this morning, but I haven't changed my clothes in four days. I'm a pathetic street kid who looks like she has been wearing the same outfit for a week.

My throat closes and I almost stop breathing. I shake myself mentally and swallow plenty of times. The adjudicators are still waiting.

“Well?” The woman asks. “There are other people waiting.”

I open my mouth to sing and a breathy tone spills out into the waiting microphone. A harsh static and empty air streams from the speakers. I struggle with a few bars before I realize that I am

almost too afraid to sing. I can hear my father's voice drifting into my mind. *Stupid. . .useless brat. . .no good. . .no talent. . .nobody. . .*

The adjudicators are unimpressed.

It's all or nothing "Can I try again?" I ask.

"You have already wasted two of your five minutes." The nasally man says "Hurry."

I nod and take a breath to steel myself. I picture myself swinging a bottle at my father. Of rising above him. Forgetting him. I picture Lohan. Of his constant friendship. How he has never let me down. I think of Austin and the possibility with him. I will live to my own name, not my father's.

When my voice leaves my mouth, it is strong and I feel a vocal barrier disintegrating the more I sing. I sing all my anger at my father and my love of Lohan into the heartfelt lyrics of Adele. I sing better than I have ever sung before. I sing and watch the adjudicators' eyes go wide. Never in my whole life have I have ever felt freer.

My voice echoes through the auditorium when I finish, but all I can hear is my heart in my ears.

The response from the adjudicators is almost immediate.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes."

Three yesses.

I've done it. I've made it. It's all falling into place.

I'm frozen onto the stage, my eyes filling and spilling as I give the smallest, but most sincere thank you of my life.

Those judges have no idea how much they just altered my life. They expect me to have been from a normal city, just another of the few magically talented. But they saved me. Threw me a life line in the most desperate of times. This is a new beginning for me. A perfect beginning.

Lohan is backstage waiting for me. It is too much. I run over and launch myself into his arms, sobbing and hiccuping and soaking his shirt. And he holds me. Like he always did. Until I've cried my eyes dry. Until I can catch my breath. And we stay like that, Lohan holding me, rocking gently, and me breathing—just in and out.

In and out.

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“Good luck.” Lohan says to me before I meet with the other nineteen contestants in the airport. His words are warm and his face is smiling and I feel blessed all over again for having such a good friend.

“Thanks.” I hug him as tight as I can while juggling a suitcase and my bag. His eagerness to return the embrace almost makes me not want to leave.

“Would a Ms. Wynifrid Michaels please proceed to the Air Canada check-in?”

I sigh “That's my cue.”

Lohan pulls away and smiles again “I'll be voting for you as many times as I can.” He says.

“I'm not even on the show yet, Lohan.” I sock him softly on the arm, grinning nonetheless.

His eyes are alight with mischief “Then I'll vote for you in my mind until you're on the show.”

“Ms. Wynifrid Michaels to the Air Canada check-in, please.”

I glance in the general direction of the check-in. There is a group of people waiting in line, all of their bags marked with the *Canada's Got Talent* luggage tags. I have the same tags on my bags.

I turn to Lohan “I'll call you as soon as we land in Toronto, okay?”

Lohan nods “I'll be waiting at the phone. Good luck, Wyn. I'm rooting for you.”

I wave to him while I walk over to the rest of the contestants. In the back of my head, I can hear the words of my father, echoing, but, for once, I can tune them out. I'm starting something new and I'm

making a name for myself. He can't influence me now. This is the beginning of the rest of my life, and I'm going to do with it what I like.