

Stella Tells the Truth (Mostly)

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Choir Thursday, 28 Days til Christmas

“Do re mi fa so la ti do,” I sing. It feels like my voice is kind of hoarse today, and not anywhere near as nice and clear as I want it to be. I stealthily glance around the room to see if the others are making faces at me, like they’re trying to say “your voice is *sooo* bad” or something. But nobody is.

My gaze meets Isaac’s. He’s not making a face; he’s smiling at me, even. He’s sort of the easiest to spot in such a big group because his hair has gotten really big lately. Mom says he looks like someone named Jimi Hendrix who was super good at the guitar and singing but who isn’t alive anymore. It actually kind of works that Isaac looks like him since he also plays the guitar and has a super good voice, too. Mom’s shown me some videos of that Hendrix guy, and I’m positive that Isaac will be just as good as him someday.

We have choir practice every Thursday at the community center. It’s a mixed choir, or at least that’s what Claudia, our conductor, calls it. We’re a mix of all kinds of people from different grades and schools.

Claudia plays the next chord on the piano. Everyone takes a breath and gets started on another round of do re mi. This time, my voice is a little clearer, luckily. But I wish Rania were here. Her aunt picked her up after school. I guess her aunt didn’t think it was all that important for Rania to come to choir today since she won’t be in the Christmas concert anyway. She’ll be in Pakistan then.

When Rania is with her aunt Meera, they always do fun stuff that costs a lot. Today they were going to a museum first, then to eat at a fancy restaurant. Maybe they’re eating something really tasty right now?

My stomach starts growling. That’s not that weird, though, since I haven’t had dinner. Mom has started going to this group every Thursday where people who are in a lot of pain meet up

to try to be in less pain. She calls it her “pain group.” But that means I don’t get dinner before choir, and I forgot to eat after school today.

It feels like I have fog in my head and rain in my legs. I wish I were with Rania right now instead of being here. I’ve never eaten at a restaurant, but for my birthday, Rania, Samir, and I went to the movies, then afterward we got falafel from a little truck with Palestinian flags painted all over it. It was kind of like being at a restaurant, except we just sat on a bench in the park and ate.

But since Rania and her dad live in my apartment building and Rania and I are best friends, I eat dinner at their place a lot, and that’s actually almost like eating at a restaurant (I think), just cheaper (I know)! They always light candles and set the table with nice napkins, and there’s always soft, calming music streaming from the speakers. Samir makes the best daal in the world. I can almost smell the scent of daal right now.

“Okay, guys, let’s do some stretching,” Claudia says.

We stretch our arms up into the air, then we have to make mumbling sounds while we shake and sort of fold over at the waist.

As I’m straightening back up, I crash into Isaac.

“Ow,” we say at the same time.

I clutch my head and pretend it hurts more than it really does, because I suddenly get super dizzy and topple over.

Claudia rushes over.

“Are you okay, Stella?”

She takes my arm and guides me over to a chair, then asks me if I’m okay again.

I nod.

“Do you want some water?” she asks, wrinkling her forehead.

Before I can even reply, Isaac is standing in front of me with my water bottle.

“Here,” he says.

I look up. Is he okay? Did he hurt his head?

I take a giant drink of water, hoping it’ll drown out the sound of my stomach, which is currently growling *insanely* loudly. I got dizzy because I was so hungry, not because Isaac and I bumped heads. How embarrassing!

Claudia says I can stay sitting down while we rehearse. I’m feeling better, but there’s still something off with my voice; it keeps breaking and cracking. Has it always sounded like

this, I just haven't noticed it before? If that's the case, I'm going to need to find another hobby ASAP.

Snack Break

During the break between the first and second half of rehearsal, Isaac comes over to the table where I'm sitting.

"Cool shirt," I say.

"Thanks!" he replies, and does a little spin. "I found it at the secondhand store the other day. My moms say I look just like Jimi Hendrix, but I don't really know... Do you know who that is?"

I start laughing.

"Yeah! My mom said the same thing, actually. She showed me a video. I think you guys look a lot alike!"

"Imagine being *that* good at singing and playing the guitar," Isaac says, staring out into the distance in a way that makes me look in the same direction. I imagine him standing onstage in front of thousands of people, playing so well that everyone is jumping for joy and shouting and wanting more.

He starts digging through his backpack and eventually pulls out a big thermos.

"Mom Kadra made daal for dinner today," he says, smiling as he opens the lid.

So I wasn't just imagining things! I can recognize a good daal from miles away.

I try not to look at his food. The smell alone makes my mouth water.

"Doesn't Mom Edith usually make dinner?" I ask, trying to distract myself.

"Yeah," Isaac says, "But daal is Mom Kadra's specialty. Want a taste?"

"No, it's fine," I reply, even though what I really want to do is shout, *yes, yes, yes, give it all to me!!!*

Isaac pours a little of the turmeric-yellow lentil stew into the thermos cup and hands it to me, then holds out a spoon and a fork.

"Spoon or fork?"

"Spoon," I say, and try to wait until he's started eating from the big thermos before I dig in.

We talk about a test we're having at school while we eat, but I don't really know what I say because all I can think about is eating as slowly as possible so it doesn't look like I didn't get that much. I didn't get enough, but I don't want Isaac to feel bad or anything because I finish before him.

"Super yummy!" I exclaim. Isaac's moms are almost as good at cooking as my mom.

I'm bummed out when I get to the bottom of the cup, but try to smile as big as I can when I say, "Tell Mom Kadra hi and thanks for the food."

"Want some more?" Isaac asks, holding out the thermos.

"Don't you want it?" I reply.

"I can't finish all this," he says, and fills my cup before I even have the chance to protest.

I want to hug him. Isaac's the best.

I eat a lot faster this time. Oh, it's so good! The big, squawking baby bird in my belly will be curling up, folding one wing over its body, and falling asleep in no time.

"Alright, let's get started again," Claudia says, clapping her hands.

I scrape the bottom of the cup as best I can before jumping up and taking my place. Now I don't need to sit on any chair anymore since the fog in my head is gone. And my voice is also much, much better than before the break.

A Secret Note

Rania and I normally go to the library after choir and hang out there until we get so hungry we have to go home. But today I don't really want to, not when Rania is gone.

"Wanna go to the library?"

I turn around. Isaac is behind me, standing there with his big hair and smiling the biggest smile. When I think about it, Rania and I aren't the only ones who normally hang out at the library. Isaac and lots of the others from choir do, too. There are such nice, comfy chairs there, and they have so many books. Once, I asked if they could get me a book about a crazy cupcake, and two weeks later, I was standing there with the book in my hand. It was a kind of bet I had with Isaac to check if it would be possible. I don't even think the book was that good. But I won the bet.

We head in together, Isaac and I, but it still feels empty next to me. This is how it normally is when Rania and I are together: if I go to the right, Rania goes to the right. If she

goes to the left, I go to the left. That's just how it is. But now it's like I'm missing a body part.

Isaac starts chatting with a group of people I don't know as soon as we get inside. He plops down on the sofa and says something that makes everyone laugh. He's nice to everyone except the mean kids—he can actually be pretty stern with them. That's just how tough Isaac is. It seems like he isn't scared of anything at all. He's not even afraid of messing up or saying exactly what he thinks. I hide behind a bookshelf and move slowly, backward, all the way down to the basement. That's where the grown-up books are. I get an idea and ask a librarian what the least borrowed book is.

The librarian gives me a list of several books that haven't been checked out in years, and I go over to the shelves and find the first one on the list. It looks pretty boring. The book is brown, and there isn't a single picture in it, not even on the cover! Inside, it has teeny-tiny letters and not a single space to rest your eyes on. I feel a little sorry for the book, but I don't want to read it.

I find the next one on the list. There's a car that looks like it's coming out of the cover at full speed. I start flipping through it without reading when suddenly, a note falls out. It's probably just one of those old cards with due dates and stuff on it, I think as I lean down and pick it up. My heart starts pounding when I see something is written on the note. The letters look a little old-fashioned, like that kind of really pretty cursive: "If you find this note, you are truly special. By the way, I think you're special whether you find the note or not."

I look around. Did someone here write this? A man with glasses at the end of his nose is reading the newspaper in a corner. Three older girls with laptops are sitting in a room with glass windows. I look down at the note again.

It looks pretty old, or it's a little yellowed around the edges, at least. It's impossible to say whether it was written by a boy or a girl. But who? And why? And how long ago was it actually written?

I pull a pencil out of my backpack and quickly write: "You're special, too."

Then I put the note back in the book but leave it so it sticks out of the top a little bit, and set the book back on the shelf. Next Thursday, I'll see if I've gotten a reply.

A Shooting Star in My Brain

I'm lying in bed, warm and full. The lamp on my nightstand casts a soft light. I'm tired, but not sleepy-tired. I think about what Mom said in the bathroom—that there will always be someone who's gone through the same thing, no matter what. But that doesn't help *me* right now, even though it's a nice thought. I need something more.

It's weird. Everyone says you don't remember anything before you're four or five years old. But I was either really slow at learning to count or I have a really good memory, because I definitely remember counting Mom and me. One, two. It took a long time before I got past two. There are so many people who have three. Or more. Rania just has her dad, but not really, because she also has so many aunts and uncles and cousins and grandparents that I've stopped counting.

Another thing I remember is that I said things like, "When I'm a big sister, I'll..." That was before I knew how babies are made. I stopped saying that the day I understood this. But I never stopped dreaming about it. Here, in my room, we could've had a bunk bed. I could've taken the top bunk if my little sister was scared of heights. Or if I'd had a big brother, he could've taken the top, because I'm actually a little bit scared of heights myself.

My room is big enough for two kids. There's even space in the closet and everything. And we could've had two desks next to each other by the window, at least if we'd moved the bunk bed to the other side of the room. My room's actually pretty big.

Why do I need such a big room? I definitely don't need so much space. There'd actually be space for a whole grown-up here too, if I wasn't there.

Suddenly, a thought streaks through my head like a shooting star. I don't need to live in my room at all! Someone else can live here. Someone who can unlock the door when I have to go to the bathroom.

Room for Rent, 27 Days til Christmas

"I need your help with something," I say to Rania as we totter over the icy path in the woods. She goes first, and I follow. It's bare in some places, but super slippery in others.

“Yeah, of course! What?” she replies without turning around.

It’s important to keep your eyes fixed to the ground all the time here. It’s getting lighter now, but it’s still just as slippery.

I start telling her about what happened last night. When I get to the part about peeing, I stop.

“But what happened? Did your mom come home?” Rania asks just before she slips and has to grab a branch so she doesn’t land right on her butt.

“Yeah,” I say, grabbing a branch to steady myself, too. “She came home.”

I hesitate. Should I tell her that I peed my pants? My cheeks get hot just at the thought of telling her. But she’s my best friend. If she could see my face right now, she’d definitely be able to tell I was hiding something.

“But just a little too late?”

What in the world? How could she know that?

She stops and turns around to look at me.

“I peed my pants in a taxi in Pakistan last year.”

Oh, Rania is the *best*!

“Wow, that’s actually a lot worse,” I reply.

“Well, that depends on where your pee ended up,” she says.

“In my underwear and pants.”

“Not your shoes?”

“Not my shoes,” I reply.

“Then my taxi-pee was worse,” she says.

“I agree,” I reply.

We keep walking, and pretty soon we reach the edge of the woods.

“But it could’ve been worse!” she exclaims all of a sudden.

I know where she’s going with this.

“It could’ve been poop!” we say at the same time, then laugh so hard it echoes between the trees.

“So what did you need my help with?” Rania asks as we cross the parking lot toward the schoolyard.

I’d totally forgotten about that! Rania is so good at making you forget whatever’s bothering you. Or, you don’t exactly forget it, but what’s bothering you feels a little less difficult to handle.

“I’m thinking of renting out my room,” I say decisively.

“What? To who?”

“My question exactly,” I reply. “I don’t know who. I have to make a poster and hang it up at the store, and that’s what I need help with.”

“But why?”

She looks at me, wrinkling her forehead.

“Because...”

I brace myself.

“Because I want to have more people in the house. And I think Mom would like the extra money.”

“But where will you sleep?” Rania asks as if I haven’t already thought of a solution.

“I’ll sleep in the living room, of course! Mom will totally be able to build one of those divider walls, and the sofa is already a sofa bed. It’ll be like camping every day!”

Rania looks a little skeptical, but I think she actually wants to be as enthusiastic as I am. I can at least see that she’s thinking.

“I have all the colored pens we need for the poster,” she says eventually, slipping her arm through mine.

We go to the store after school to hang up the poster we made. We used a black marker for the heading, then decorated all the letters with rainbow colors so the poster would be extra visible. “ROOM FOR RENT IN SHARED APARTMENT,” it says. The “shared apartment” bit is just to get people’s attention. It sort of sounds a little cooler and more grown-up than “room for rent in an apartment where you have to live with a broke, slightly crazy and pretty sick mom and her daughter, who’s also broke, and you’ll be living in the kid’s room, by the way. The kid wants more people in the house, which is why she’d rather sleep in the living room. It’s going to be great as long as you aren’t a crazy person who eats kids for breakfast.”

Beneath the heading on the poster, we wrote: “If you’re looking for a room in an apartment with two other people, look no further. Living room, kitchen, and bathroom are shared with the two others. They enjoy both socializing and having time to themselves. It’s a positive if you’re the same way. We can’t be together all the time, but we can’t not be together all the time either. The apartment is in a super nice building with the best neighbors in the world.”

I’m the one who came up with the thing about the best neighbors. But it’s true anyway; Rania, Fido, and Hillevi are the best! At the bottom of the poster, we made little tear-off notes with Hillevi’s phone number because I don’t have a phone yet—and because I

don't want Mom to get calls from people who want to rent the room without me having found the right moment to tell her I'm renting out my room.

Out of the Blue

"What if someone calls Hillevi while we're on our way home?" I say, picking up the pace even though it's super foggy and treacherous to walk so quickly on the icy sidewalk.

At first, Hillevi said no to us putting her number on the poster, but I can be *very* convincing. Especially because I know that Hillevi sometimes can't be bothered recycling, and I reminded her of that. She probably wouldn't want everyone in the building knowing she sometimes puts cans and cardboard in the regular garbage, I hinted. So she said yes. But with reservations. She said that I at least have to tell Mom about everything, and as soon as possible. I haven't really thought about what this all *actually* means before right this second. I mean, pretty soon my room won't be my room anymore! The window facing the backyard, the bookshelf, the desk. It won't be mine anymore, it'll be someone else's. But I do need my desk for homework and stuff, so that will need to be moved out into the living room, to my new sleeping place, to the *sleep lounge*, which is what I'm going to start calling it. And the books in my bookshelf will need to be moved to Mom's bookshelf in the living room. That's just how it'll have to be.

We keep walking, into the woods, moving a bit more slowly now. We haven't said anything for a while when the afternoon sun suddenly breaks through the cloud cover, sending its sunbeams through the treetops. The fog starts letting up at the same time, and it looks like we're in the middle of a fairytale forest. It wouldn't surprise me if we ran into a troll or a wood nymph behind a tree. I stand right under one of the sunbeams so Rania can see me light up. I want her to feel like I help brighten up her life.

"I'm leaving pretty soon, you know!" Rania says, sort of out of the blue, not even noticing the light I'm trying to show her.

I've tried not to think about how Rania's going to Pakistan for Christmas, about how she'll be gone for almost a whole month. But now she throws it right in my face, and the look on *her* face seems like she wants me to be super excited for her. I'm not. I step out of the sunbeam.

I imagine Rania and her cousins walking around town or along a river and just chatting and chatting and chatting and laughing and then chatting some more, and Rania isn't thinking about me at all because she has a thousand other things to think about. It makes me feel all weird and cold inside.

This is how Christmas usually is: Mom and me, Hillevi and Fido, Rania and Samir are all together without making much out of the fact that it's Christmas. We meet on Christmas Eve, eat, sing a little, maybe someone tells stories, and Rania and I always get a few gifts, but it's not exactly jam-packed under the Christmas tree or anything like that.

We also never have a Christmas tree because they cost too much. And we don't go out to the woods and chop one down ourselves, either. We're always taking cuttings from the woods to plant in the backyard or on my grandparents' graves, but when it comes to Christmas trees, that's where Mom draws the line. And I'm actually okay about that. I want all the trees in the woods to grow as big as possible so birds and other little animals can live there. But we do always decorate with homemade Christmas decorations that I made in preschool and at school. It's usually pretty nice. It's usually enough.

On Christmas Day, we go to the steep hill behind the preschool and go sledding with the disc sled that's always hanging outside one of the buildings. I've asked for a snow racer every single year for as long as I can remember, but Mom's never been able to afford one. And that's not the kind of thing you can borrow for free at the community gear libraries. You can borrow all kinds of other things—skis and skates and all that. But not snow racers, which is the only thing I want every winter. I've always had to settle for the disc sled. It's fun, just not *as* fun.

Fido and Hillevi also come to the sledding hill on Christmas Day. People from our building and around the neighborhood, too. We make campfires and grill hot dogs. The rest of Christmas break passes without much happening—we sled and take walks and watch TV and eat food from dumpster diving or from our foraging trips in the summer and fall. That's Christmas. That's how Christmas usually is. That's how Christmas will always be. But that's not how it will be this year, because not even Fido or Hillevi will be at home since Hillevi became grandmother to a teeny tiny screamer of a baby on Wednesday and she'll be in Drøbak with her family all Christmas.

Will Mom and I be the only ones at the sledding hill this year? Will she and I be sitting there on Christmas Eve, eating all alone? I don't know what Mom is thinking, but I'm nervous she'll suddenly decide to do something extra, something special, since it's just her

and me this year. I don't want that. She can get really bad migraines if she's tired or stressed. I'm the one who has to find more people to celebrate Christmas with, and I'm going to. I *have* to.

I feel like I'm going to start crying and cut off on the path that leads to the secret viewpoint that obviously isn't *actually* secret since everyone can see it, and anyone who wants to can go there and look out at the ocean. But it's still our place, Rania's and mine. And it's a secret that we come here all the time to be by ourselves without the grown-ups hovering over us like wet dishcloths, nagging us about whether we've done our homework or emptied our lunchbox or that sort of thing. Here, it's just us, some birds—mostly crows at this time of year—and the occasional squirrel or two.

We usually sit here and just stare out at the ocean, at the ferries going between the islands and at the other boats floating around out there. I want to bring her here as much as I can before she leaves so she doesn't forget that we have our own special place. So she remembers me while she's gone and misses me and realizes that next Christmas, going to Pakistan won't be an option. It's three o'clock, and the sky is already pink. It's so beautiful it could almost make you cry.

We sit down on our backpacks so our butts don't get cold. I pull my legs toward my chest, wrap my arms around my legs, and lean my head against my knees. Rania does the same. And we just sit that way without saying anything.

We have the most beautiful sunsets here. Definitely more beautiful than in Pakistan. And the ones we have here are totally free. You don't even need a bike to come here.

"Pretty, right?" I ask after a while.

"Prettiest in the world," Rania says with a smile.

English sample translation by [Olivia Lasky](#) © 2026