

STAGE FRIGHT

I was so nervous, I thought I was going to vomit. I was standing backstage about to audition to an auditorium full of strangers, to 3 celebrity judges, on national TV. In less than ten seconds, millions would know if I was good enough to go to the next stage for a chance to be *UK's Favourite Singer*. I moved around shaking my hands and legs, desperately thinking of anything as a distraction. I tried to think of my vacation last summer in Spain. I tried to picture the deep blue ocean and the waves crashing against the shore. But that just made me nauseous. Two more singers before me. One comes rushing past in tears, totally humiliated with her performance. I stared indiscreetly as she crouched down and sobbed while her boyfriend consoled her. I didn't have the strength to deal with her troubles.

I was twenty but I had sung as long as I could remember. All kids love music, but I wouldn't stop singing no matter where I was. And then, Christina Aguilera, Kelly Clarkson and Jessie J came along and I wanted to sound just like them. I would spend hours copying their every move and imitating every vocal stunt they performed. Usually, that would involve me being delegated to my room so as not to disturb everyone who weren't so enthused. Thing is, I loved to sing but wasn't so sure others wanted to listen. Result – no confidence singing in front of others! And then this happens. What is happening now. This shaking, the tightening of my throat and stomach, basically preventing any air coming out. The voice will tremble and a piece I thought I had mastered will squeak out painfully for the spectators.

But I was determined to overcome it. It was only a mental flaw. I knew I was better than that. I knew I could sing if only I wouldn't fall apart in front of an audience. So here I was, deciding that national TV was the best way to overcome this. What was I thinking?

I was next and peeking through the side of the curtain I could see the faces of the judges contorting with suppressed pain. I didn't think she was too bad. But what did I know? It wasn't too late to back out. I didn't have to put myself through this torture. I mean, it wasn't like I was ever going to be like a *real* singer. I just got into medicine and that was a much better future. And yet, knowing that this fear could control me was frustrating.

The singer on stage headed towards me, her eyes downcast. Another failure. This was it. I could feel the thud of my heart as I waited just inside the curtain to be called. There was no one to support me. I had come alone, had told no one. Leanne was the only one who would have understood, who would have encouraged me. But she couldn't be here.

STAGE FRIGHT by Kathy Petrakis

The compere looked at me as he waved his hand for me to come on stage. I clutched the curtain briefly, contemplating doing a runner before anyone saw my face, but decided to walk on with dignity. At least I would try. I had promised.

Wisely, I hadn't worn high heels, knowing I'd need stability. I forced a smile as he handed me the microphone, avoiding looking at the audience while I tried to suppress the shaking.

"So Christy, what are you singing for us today."

"A Jennifer Hudson song, *I Have Changed*."

"Ooh! That's a tough one."

I forced that smile on as I nodded. *No need to tell me that*. Then he left me there on my own and I could no longer delay facing the judges.

As I turned to face them, the bright lights hit my eyes, temporarily blinding me. I blinked a few times before adjusting.

"Christy, what brings you here?" Mariah Carey, one of the judges asked. *Must respond intelligently*.

"I've always loved singing but never could overcome my stage fright so thought this may be the time." I could hear the quaver at the end of the sentence. *No fricken way am I going to cry*.

"Are you doing this for anyone special?" Will-i-am asked.

I gulped. Could I deal with the truth right now? I could feel tears stinging my eyes but it had to be told.

"My best friend Leanne, died last year. She was the only one who really thought I had something and I promised her," the tears were falling now, "I promised her that the next time there was an audition for a reality TV show like this, I would audition."

The tears were streaming now. I was so embarrassed. "She was meant to be here with me."

The judges nodded. "Wow," Mariah said. "She must have been a special friend."

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I could only nod, sniffing back the tears. She was the light of my life – my confidante, my fan, my friend. I really missed her right now. I never wanted to do this alone. The tears streamed down. Oh God, I was becoming one of *those* contestants.

“Well, when you’re ready,” Usher, the third judge said.

I wiped my nose with my sleeve, forced myself to take some deep breaths. There was a deafening silence in the auditorium as everyone watched me, alone on this massive stage, supposedly able to sing.

I bit my lip and nodded to the technician on the side. I was shaking from my nerves and tense from suppressing the tears. I didn’t want to do this. If I failed now, there would be no turning back. I really needed Leanne – just one smile from her and I knew it would be fine. So I closed my eyes and tried to see her face but that just brought on more tears and the words came out crackled and flat.

I pulled the microphone away from me and looked down. This was not going to work. Damn it Leanne!

I looked back up at the judges.

“I’m sorry, can I start again?”

They nodded and the music started again. I pictured myself in the bedroom with the music blaring and me and Leanne performing to each other. I thought about everything the song was saying and the need for redemption and I searched somewhere inside me for that spot where I felt every word of that song and I sang it. It wasn’t perfect, but I didn’t care, I sang with every bit of my heart. By the chorus, I dared to open my eyes and bring the audience into my pain. Whatever happened, even if I stank, I wanted them to at least know how I felt.

The judges didn’t interrupt and I went straight to the end of the song, belting out the words with every inch of my body till the dramatic end.

I could hear cheers from the audience and loud applause but then they were expected to do that. I held my head high and looked at the judges. Had I finally done it? Had I made it to the next round?

It didn’t matter. I had faced my fear and honoured my friend. Whatever happened next, I wouldn’t be afraid.