

## Rehearsal

by Sandy Steinman

"Do it again." said her mother

"Class 5B2..."

"No. No. No. Louder. You aren't projecting."

"Class 5B2..."

"I still can't hear you."

"Listen to me, Roberta", Mother pounded her tight little fists on the kitchen table, "stop aggravating me." Squinting, she glanced at her watch. "Time is running out. It's Tuesday already and on Friday you'll be standing on the stage in front of the whole school." Her left eyelid twitched. "Everyone will have their eyes on you." She walked over to the stove, high narrow heels clicking across the linoleum, lit a cigarette with a large wooden match from the stove. "Your first time in a school play, first time in your life you're in something."

That's not true, the girl said to herself, what about the fifth grade spelling bee last month? I won it; didn't I? She remained silent.

Mother puffed her cigarette. She removed a tobacco speck from her tongue. "They'll all be watching: teachers, parents, students, the principal," her eyes suddenly brightened, "Why, it's like a debut."

Roberta stared down solemnly at the skinny trail of baby ants crossing the kitchen heading for the refrigerator. She scratched her elbow, spelled debut in her head. D-E-B-U-T, debut.

What's a debut? She wondered.

"Why are you looking at the floor?" Mother called out. "Will you please pay attention and look at me." Roberta looked up into her mother's eyes.

"Now, pretend you're on the stage. Stand up straight. Smile at the audience and speak loud." Mother yelled 'loud.' "Please push your hair out of your eyes." Her tone softened

"O.K. Again."

"Class 5B2 presents..."

Thank Goodness the school play was Friday, just a few more days. Mother had insisted they practice every day for at least one hour.

Roberta was not exactly in the play.

She'd told Mother; "Look," she'd said, "I'm only the presenter. 'Class 5B2 presents.' I'm not an actress in the play. Only twenty-three words. Ask Miss Heymont."

Miss Heymont had told her she was to introduce the play. "That's a very important part, dear," she'd said. She'd chosen Roberta because she was dignified and serious. "It'll set the right mood," she'd said. Before the play started, Roberta was to go to the podium and when everyone quieted, she was to smile wide and do the introduction and then return to her seat.

"The whole school, Roberta". Mother's sighed. Her voice was breathy, the way it sounded when she got all riled up, so you would know not to interrupt or contradict or say even one word.

"All the teachers, everyone's mother..."

Mother was an aspiring actress herself and believed all roles were equally important. "It is crucial to perform as perfectly as you can, Roberta." Better to go along with her; you never know what she'll do if she really gets mad.

In the tiny Brooklyn apartment on Newkirk Avenue, Mother, Father, Roberta and her brother, Stuart shared the one dark bedroom. Stuart, six years old, slept in a baby crib, still sucked his thumb, still wet the bed, even on the nights Father remembered to walk him to the bathroom at midnight.

Roberta slept in a narrow junior bed with side rails. Just above her headboard was the room's one window which faced Newkirk Avenue traffic and Washington High School. She felt lucky to have the window. In pale early morning light, she'd sit on her knees on the mattress, lift the venetian blind slats just a little and peek at the high school kids across the street heading up the wide school stairway. She watched them toss their cigarettes before entering the heavy doors.

They'd not lived on Newkirk Ave. very long, a year maybe, since her father came back. He'd been away for 5 years. "Away" meant "in prison." After he came back, they'd moved here. She'd been worrying he'd leave again and it made her afraid to tell him anything except good things, like winning the spelling bee. Spelling was her best subject.

Her mother had been "away" too. Not prison, though. Not one of her aunts seemed to know where she'd had been.

Roberta wasn't allowed to tell anybody about prison. "It's important to keep it a secret, dear," whispered Aunt Ada in her deep, breathy voice. "Don't ever tell anybody. Besides, you aren't even supposed to know where your daddy was."

But how could she not know? Was Aunt Ada joking? It was Aunt Ada herself, along with Uncle Herb who drove her Mother to Ossining that one time for a visit.

Maybe they thought she was stupid? It wasn't until that day that she knew where "away" was. Until that day she hadn't seen neither Mother or Father for two years, not since she was in kindergarten.

Uncle Herb had come to get her early the morning of the visit. Mrs Butler had rushed her through breakfast oatmeal and had briskly braided her wispy hair, first scrubbing her ears raw. At the noisy breakfast table, the five other boarding children called out, "Where's Roberta going? Isn't Stuart going too? Is Roberta coming back?" Stuart began to wail.

"You mind your businesses." grumbled Mrs. Butler in her thick German accent. She pulled the braid too tight, but Roberta didn't even wince because she worried Mrs. Butler would cut her braids off, as she sometimes threatened. "Stop wiggling," Her tone was gruff. "I don't want them to think I sent you out all wrinkled."

Roberta and Stuart shared the long low-ceilinged third floor bedroom with the five other children at the Butler's boarding house.

That didn't count Dorothy, the Butler's daughter. All seven of the boarding children, especially Roberta, were awestruck by Dorothy's pale blond curly hair and patent leather shoes with taps. Roberta wished she had curly hair. Dorothy was the same age but wasn't allowed to play with the boarding children.

Stuart couldn't go with them to visit Father that day. "He's too young to go to Sing Sing," said Uncle Herb. "He is only four; you have to be at least seven."

"What's a Sing Sing?" asked Roberta as they walked down the path to the car.

"There's your Mother, Roberta." Uncle Herb pointed to his car. Mother was sitting stiffly in the back seat. "Go give her a kiss."

Roberta was afraid to kiss Mother. She clung to Uncle Herbs coat sleeve. You never knew what would get Mother angry. And she knew better than to ask her anything, like where had she'd been. That was sure to set her off. Besides, it was foolish to ask her anything because she never answered.

She remembered when her kindergarten teacher gave her a note to bring home to Mother. It was just before Father went away. The note said "Roberta talks in class." She thought Mother would be proud that she could read the note and that she talked in class.

Mother read the note, sucked in her chest, a high whistling sigh coming from somewhere in her throat, and flung her small hand at Roberta's face so hard she knocked her down. She was bewildered, scared out of her breath until speak until the gulps and grunts quieted.

A short while after, Father went away. When she asked Mother "Where's Daddy?" Mother

stared at her stonily.

A few weeks later, Mother and Aunt Ada brought her and Stuart to the Butlers. Mr. Butler smiled too broadly at her. His teeth were the color of Gulden's Mustard. Roberta forced a smile back.

Later that day, while Mr. Butler took them to play on the backyard swings, Mother and Aunt Ada slipped away without saying good bye.

It was then Roberta stopped talking altogether in school.

She often lay awake in the boarding children's dormitory at the Butler's, urine smell burning her nostrils and asked herself questions.

"Where's your father, Roberta?"

"Away."

"Where's your mother, Roberta?"

"I don't know."

Years later, when they were all together again in the tiny apartment, in the dark bedroom the four of them shared, she was still asking herself, "Roberta, where was your Mother when your Father was away?"

"Don't ask me, Roberta," she answered herself, "because I don't know, and don't ask Mother because she doesn't answer questions."

It was cold and windy that day when they arrived at the big prison building. A man at the gate made her hand over the chewing gum in her mouth. "We don't allow no gum." He wrapped it in a small piece of newspaper and put it in his pocket.

They entered a high-ceilinged waiting room where about a hundred silent people sat reading or dozing on long faded couches. Roberta sat close to Uncle Herb and examined the scabs on her knees.

Then, two guards in gray uniforms brought Father into the room. Roberta bolted to her feet. Father had a funny look on his face.

He looked different; thinner, still wavy red hair, tall, freckled, with one shoulder carried higher than the other.

Roberta ran to hug him. Father began to cry.

Later, Father showed her a beautiful inlaid chest he was making. Roberta pretended she didn't know it was prison.

She'd often pretended she didn't know things. "Oh? Really? Is that so?" Sometimes she made things up, telling the other children she was adopted. Sometimes she even believed her

own lies but she didn't tell anybody Father's secret.

On the night before the performance Mother brings a large white box into the bedroom. "Surprise! It's a present for you." She places it on Roberta's bed. Roberta is mystified. Presents, except for on birthdays and Christmas are rare. It's a white middy blouse with puffed sleeves.

"To make your shoulders look broader." Mother whispers conspiratorially. "You've got your father's narrow shoulders."

And a new bright red tie.

"A perfect shade for sallow skin. Your grandmother's skin. When you're older, I'll buy you rouge for everyday." She touches her daughter's cheek with uncommon tenderness. "But you'll wear some rouge tomorrow because it's special to be in a performance."

Roberta can't sleep. She keeps dropping off, awakening a moment later, gulping air. What if she forgets her words in front of the whole school, everyone of them staring at her, the girls, all in middy blouses, hers the only one with puffed sleeves?

She tiptoes out of bed and runs into the bathroom. She closes the door, locks it, and stands at the mirror. She begins to rehearse her part.

"Class 5B2," she smiles tentatively into the mirror, pauses. "Class 5B2," she smiles again, this time broadly. There's knocking at the door.

"Roberta," her father calls, "You all right?"

"I'm fine, Daddy," Roberta notices her small, even white teeth are like Mother's. Her high cheekbones, straight brown hair, her smile...

She wishes Mother smiled more.

She smiles, whispers to the mirror, "Maybe I'll be an actress too."

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