

I sat silently behind one of the many tacky looking drama room couches, waiting in boredom for something to do. I was wearing the black clothes covered in painter's tape as I had been instructed to do, though my jeans felt itchy and claustrophobic. I stole a look around the room. Isaac and Layla sat at the table, chatting and doing makeup for the show we would soon put on. It was a comedy play, where the characters are actually actors themselves. The whole of the plot is the characters trying (and failing, might I add) to put on a murder mystery play. Every so often, something on set breaks or the actors mess up, making the play funny and unique. As a freshman I was cast as an ensemble, but after filling in several times for Joane (a girl playing one of the female leads) I was also offered the role of her understudy by the director. I couldn't turn such an offer down, but had no expectations of actually playing a main part. After all, this was the third showing of the play, so my opportunities were quickly diminishing. Just tonight and tomorrow afternoon, then my high school acting career would be over for the year.

Jace and Kyler came into the room, laughing and talking about their days. "Hi Niala!" Jace said when he saw me. "Why are you sitting on the floor instead of the couch"? I looked down, realizing that I was in fact choosing to sit on the rough carpet over the ugly but comparatively comfortable sofas. I shrugged. "I just felt like it". The two of them laughed again. "Ok then", and then they walked away, to sit in some actual chairs. That was my favorite part of being in this play so far. Everyone else in it was so funny and nice, not giving me much judgment for sitting on the floor. I was finally making real friends, three years after moving across the country. Despite my silly choice to sit on the floor, I got up and went to sit near the makeup table with Jace and Kyler. I was bored, and knew full well that they would gladly welcome me to join their interesting conversation. We absentmindedly talked about our thoughts on newly released movies, until Isaac's phone rang. "It's Bethany", he said. "Uh oh", Layla said. "Is she ok"? Her question was answered when Isaac put his phone on speaker, and all we could hear was crying. Layla and Isaac responded to her messy words, but her cries were almost inaudible to me and Jace and Kyler. Though I only picked up on a word here and

there, her reason for calling was obvious: she wouldn't be able to attend the show. After some listening to Bethany on the other end of the phone, Isaac took action. "Ok. we'll go talk to Miss Davis", and with that, he and Layla left the room to go to the auditorium, faces half made up. The problem with Bethany's absence was her part in the play. She had been cast as the main role of Milli, who was very much necessary to the play, and she had no understudy.

I turned back to the other two, who were looking expectantly at me. Before I could ask why, Jace shrugged at me. "Looks like you'll have to fill in for her Niala", he said in a casual manner.

"Will I? I haven't studied her lines", I said, uncertain. I'd been the first selected to fill in for the main cast when people were missing from practices, being the only understudy, but I did that with a script. This was actually the play. Kyler nodded in agreement with Jace. "The show must go on".

"I guess, but the final call is Miss Davis".

"Let's go to the auditorium then", he said, and we were off.

As I walked up the rows of seats, I saw Isaac and Layla talking to Miss Davis, whom I hadn't yet seen that day. Isaac saw me approaching them, and pointed me out. Miss Davis turned in my direction and clapped her hands together with a cheesy smile. *This can't be real. This isn't happening.* "Hi Niala", she said cheerfully.

"Hi Miss Davis", I said, matching her energy.

"Are you excited to be up on stage today"?

"Yes ma'am".

"As Milli"? *This is real, this is happening.* Unsure of myself, I put my hands on my hips, licked my lips and looked around the room. I wasn't gonna pretend to be surprised. I wanted to do it, but I was nervous to say yes and didn't know where to start. "I mean, I can if you want me to", I said, though it came out like a question. Fortunately, she took it as a statement. "Good! We'll have to figure out how to do this", she said, still sounding perky and fun. "I have a script on my table", Jace said from behind me. He played the part of the tech guy, but in the play. Because the premise of the story is a

play going wrong, one of the characters is the tech manager. The ensemble were acting as stagehands, and I pretended to believe that tape was the solution to every problem. At the first dress rehearsal, more and more bright blue painter's tape showed up on set, and Miss Davis loved it, so she let me keep the tape. But now, I had a bigger part to play.

"That's perfect!" Miss Davis said to Jace. "She can follow your script instead of an empty binder". In the play, Milli was the stage manager who had to fill in for the female lead when she passed out mid act one. Instead of an actual script, Bethany used a binder with pieces of blank paper in it, but I'd get a real script. "Thanks Jace", I said. He gave me a thumbs up. "Alright Niala, let's go over the blocking for your part", Layla said, leading me down to the stage. Jace gave me the script in exchange for the blank binder, and we went over and acted out the scenes I was in. "ok, so you know what to do in the preshow, right"? I did. "Good, so that should be easy for you", Layla said.

"Just copy Bethany", added Isaac. As we went through all the scenes of act one, I realised that I actually knew the part pretty well. All I needed to work on was timing. Things got a little more complicated by my practice in act two, where more specific maneuvers were required.

The worst scene was one that I had practiced several times as Sally, Joane's character. In act one, Sally gets knocked out, and the "stagehands" have to get her off stage by picking her up through the window. A small and uncomfortable air mattress with a hole we sealed with duct tape is on the floor for safety reasons, but it doesn't make it less scary. Even worse, when Milli also gets knocked out in act two, she doesn't get gently picked up, but dropped. "Ok Niala, let's go through this scene", Isaac said.

"I'll hit her with the door", Layla volunteered a little too promptly. We laughed. "Just do what you did as Sally in practice", Isaac said. I nod, then go to my position. Walking around from my spot to the door, I read the line in my worst British accent. "Me inspector? How can you-", when Layla opened the door directly in my face, I let out a fake cry, pretending to hit it and pass out. "Good!" Isaac said, looking down at me on the floor. "We're gonna pick you up now, ok? Don't worry, more people will be here when we

actually do the play". But I worried. I worried *a lot*. Isaac and Layla pretended to pick me up as I helped myself off the floor and onto the window sill. "Alright, so all you gotta do is-".

"Fall backwards out of the window?" I finished for him.

"Bingo", he said with a laugh. "Capiche"?

"No, I'm terrified", I said bluntly.

"It's ok, you just gotta control your fall".

"*What?*" I said.

"Let's just try this", Isaac said. I bowed my head and shut my eyes, pretending to be unconscious. Isaac and Layla pretended to hold me up.

"You are responsible for the death of your very own betrothed, Francis. What do you have to say for yourself?" he said his line in a confident accent, lifting up my head. "Ok, so when you hear Joane bust through the secret passage, we drop you. Ready?" Layla asked.

"Ready", I lied. It wasn't a far fall, but a backwards trust fall, nonetheless. They removed their hands and I let myself slip backwards. I fell directly onto the mattress in a heap. "Oh", I said when I was down. "That wasn't bad".

"Great job Niala!" Layla said. "When Bethany does it, she tries to keep her feet sitting in the sill, so try to do that". I nodded, as ready as ever for everything to come.

After blocking practice with Joane, and getting my costuming and makeup done by Layla (Isaac had commented afterward that I looked like a baby Bethany), the show was about to start. As family and friends of the drama club members filed patiently into the auditorium, I pretended to look around the set for problems. The rest of the ensemble got into acting as well. Charlie stood at the stage right door, which was locked. "Milli!" she called to me in character. "What is it?" I asked, coming over.

"The door is broken".

"What do you mean? It was working earlier", I said loud enough for the audience to hear. "Well yeah, but now it's stuck!" she said, pretending to lose patients with me. "Milli, Milli!" Sarah, the girl I'd handed my tape over to said. "We haven't put the mantel up yet".

“Why not? It’s been months!” I said. The nervous tone in my voice was only partly an act. “I don’t don’t know”, she said blandly.

“Ok, I’m going to put up the mantel Charlie. Please try to fix the door”.

“Only if Miles stops pestering about it”, Charlie grumbled. As I went to ask for a hammer, I heard another voice call my name, or rather, my character’s name. “Milli, oh Milli”! I turned around and saw Claire, the girl greeting people at the door motioning me over. I went up and bent over so she could whisper in my ear. “Niala, you’re doing great”, she began. “You saw how overly dramatic and funny Bethany acts as her part. All you gotta do is let your nerves run haywire, and the audience will be entertained. You got this girly”, she told me. I pulled away and nodded. As I did, I saw my family settling down into one of the closer rows. My mom smiled and waved at me. I wore an obviously feigned smile and waved back.

As I worked through several “unfinished” jobs on stage, I managed to keep myself composed, despite the sounds of Charlie yelling at Miles, Kyler asking where his dog went, and Sarah trying to convince me that we could fix the mantle piece with tape. As people showered me with the issues they discovered, I acted appropriately to each one. I pretended to have a panic attack, ranting about my three jobs that I was working to pay the rent so that I could give my son the life he deserves, as I had seen Bethany do at the previous shows. James, a boy about my age who played one of the main characters, got onto stage and started trying to stop Charlie from chasing Miles around with a screwdriver. At one point, I even laid crying on the chaise lounge in the middle of the stage, like I’d given up on the show. The audience seemed to get a kick out of that when I made Sarah hold my shaky hand. When the pre show was almost over, I turned to all the stage crew. “Just go you guys, I’ll be the mantel”!

“What about the door?” Charlie asked impatiently.

“What about my dog?” Kyler asked in a panic.

“Yeah are you gonna fix those?” Miles asked, trying to sound cocky and annoying. “Shut up Miles, you’ve done nothing all day!” I said. They all went to try the door, then shuffled behind the open curtains when it didn’t work. I stood in an awkward position, holding up the mantelpiece. Jace stepped onto stage to do his preshow speech, giving me a glance. “Milli, what are

you doing?" he asked. He said it as though he were whispering, but made it loud enough for the audience to hear. I copied his tone in my response: "nothing, just ignore me". He threw me a look, then got on with the speech. I only stumbled off, taking the mantel with me when Isaac came to do his preshow speech and whisper yelled at me to leave. I heard the audience chuckle every time I did just about anything. When I got backstage, Layla stopped me. "You're doing great, Niala. Just try not to talk to people so that you can focus and hear your queques", she whispered. "Got it", I said. Already ignoring her commands, Miles walked up to me. "You're gonna rock, Niala. This is gonna be awesome", he said. I smiled. I often found Miles obnoxious and somewhat stupid, but he was pretty kind. With everyone whispering words of encouragement to me, I felt confident in my performance.

Several times throughout the first half of act one, I had to do silly odd jobs on stage. Some of these I was involved in already, but now I had to do different parts. My big break came, however, when act one was fifteen minutes from ending. I stood nervously by the stage right door, holding my script open and wearing Joane's flapper dress over my overalls. It was partly unzipped and falling off my left shoulder, as I was instructed to wear it by Isaac. Gabe stood behind me. "Ready?" he whispered to me as our queue line came up. "Ready", I said, setting my hand on the door handle. "Get in here Francis", Ryan said from the stage. I pushed down the handle and fake stumbled through the door as Gabe pretended to push me out. "Get on there", he muttered to me. I yelped, getting my footing back. Gabe shut the stage door, and the audience laughed at the appearance of the girl who they thought would be no more than an anxious and incompetent stage manager. I turned to the door, knocking on it and calling Gabe by his character name in fear. "John, John!". I heard Isaac clear his throat awkwardly on stage. I turned around, nervously pressing my body against the door. I looked out into the audience. Or, lack thereof? The stage lights were so bright in such a dark building, I couldn't see the audience at all. It was just like practice. Seeing how I *couldn't* see, confidence and self sureness flooded my veins. I was ready to play my part.

“Um, Francis, you don’t quite look yourself this evening”, Ryan said to me. The audience went hysterical at this joke. I could easily pick out Miss Davise’s laugh in the sea of giggles. I looked down at my script and slowly, unsurely said my line. “Henry. I’m frightened”. The audience laughed again. Isaac face palmed and walked up to me. He took me by my arm and led me to the front of the stage, by the rest of the cast. The good thing about my role was the fact that a lot of the time, Isaac’s character was dragging me around the stage. “What’s happening inspector?” Layla said in her best confused voice. Isaac made a show of grumbling and finishing up my zipper. “Isn’t it obvious? Timothy has gone insane!” he said.

“Oh no”, I said blandly. “Not... Tim-O-thigh”? Another burst of laughter.

“He murdered his brother tonight, as an act of his lustful longing to have... *you*”, Isaac told me.

“I cannot believe it. Tim-O-thigh-”.

“Tim-*uh*-thea!” Isaac corrected. I glared at him and continued. So far so good. “*Timothy* wouldn’t do such a thing”.

“This is madness. Pure madness”, Ryan said.

“Save me Henry”, I said, turning and going open armed to Isaac, who turned me around and sent me back to Ryan. “Do not worry, sister. I shall not let a soul come near you”, he said, catching my awkward hug.

“Well, what a mess!” Layla began. “Mr. Anderson, killed in his private quarters on the night of his engagement party, by none other than his younger brother Timothy! And it’s already midnight”!

“I shall faint”, I said. I stood still, then looked at the expectant faces of the characters. “Oh”, I said before promptly and abruptly falling backward. All part of the show. Ryan and Layla made scared noises and caught me.

“Confound it, what a wicked situation this is!” he said. Just then, Gabe burst through the door, holding up a rifle. “Where do you think you’re going, inspec- oh, for heaven’s sake!” he said, turning around and going backstage again. Isaac face palmed again. As the show went on, I acted progressively more confident, though the progress was slow. I eventually started to use a hilariously bad british accent, finishing off act one with the energetic line: “what a disaster! Blackout, intermiss- oh”. The curtain closed and the stage lights were switched off. Just one more act, and my big, scary moment would be over.

My heart raced and my head spun as everyone on stage encouraged me and gave me buckets of compliments. "You're doing so well Niala!" Charlie said.

"Yeah! I liked the part where Isaac told you to 'have a hysterical episode' and you were like 'an episode of what?'" Miles said.

"I'm just wondering who's gonna help me drop the wall?" Sarah asked.

"I can", said Jess, another one of the ensemble.

"Good. Anna, can you drop both the curtains *and* coat for me? I'll be onstage", I asked Anna, Gabe's girlfriend. Her job was to pull the curtain hooks out of the wall, while mine was to pull the coat hanger out right next to her. "Totally!" she said.

"Ok, then I think we're ready. Wish me luck guys!"

"We already were", Jess said. I smiled and made my way to the stage. I had no idea what I'd do without them.

The ending of act two rolled around in a flash, and I was done. "Alright Niala, you ready for this?" Joane said as our time to do bows rolled around. "Yes ma'am", I said nervously. I came out proudly on stage as the crowds I couldn't see shouted and clapped my praise. I smiled and blew kisses into the air. "Wow", I thought. "So this is why people love attention". At that moment, it finally struck me. *I* was Milli. People were there, watching me act, and they enjoyed it. They loved my performance, and it showed in the applause. Just hours ago, I was a meer side character, sitting behind a scratchy couch. Now, my time to shine was all but over, and I didn't care. I'd tripped over my own two feet *and* my lines, I'd made a fool out of myself, and I think I broke character once or twice, but it was better than alright. I'd lived out my dreams. I shut my eyes and absorbed it. I smiled at the sweet feeling of it. I heard the crowd applauding, and never stopped hearing it. It was my time to take center stage.