

Love Like Your Heart's On Fire

Sally-Anne Lomas

**Story
Machine**

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Print ISBN: 9781912665181

Ebook ISBN: 9781912665198

Published by Story Machine

130 Silver Road, Norwich, NR3 4TG;

www.storymachines.co.uk

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For Anthony Frank Wright with all my love

‘Set your life on fire – seek those who fan the flames.’

Rumi

‘We do anger. We do love. In this world
to love is to resist.’

George Monbiot

‘We are living in unprecedented times,’ Jock spoke softly into the silence. ‘Not only for our species but for all species on this planet. We take from the planet, but we have forgotten to return our respect for it.’

I was standing in the large dance studio at Tartan Fling’s headquarters. There was a wall of windows along one side, with mirrors down the other, so the sunlight fractured into circles of swirling silver sparks and made me squint.

‘Imagine a creature, one you care about’, Jock demanded. ‘Don’t overthink, the first idea that pops into your head.’

Birds. The blackbirds. They sang to me this morning. Even in London, in a strange house, the familiar liquid golden stream.

‘Dance your care, find the feeling and let the feeling move you.’

I tried not to look at the other dancers. To stop worrying about whether I was getting this right. I pictured the blackbirds on our lawn at home in Birmingham. Imagined a world without their morning song. I tilted my head as the

birds did, hopped, and pecked, copying their movements as a way of connecting.

Reaching inside to find the feeling, I dived into a well of fear. I must look like an idiot. Everyone else was professional and used to improvising. Dear blackbirds give me courage. You can do this, Pen Flowers. You're living the dream, dancing with Tartan Fling.

Mum and Dad had agreed I could do work experience with the choreographer Jock Briggs. Dad drove me down to London yesterday. I was staying with the company manager in a three-storey terrace house a short walk from their studio.

This morning I'd helped in the office, putting flyers in envelopes, and answering the phone. The company was starting a new piece called *Respect* about the climate crisis and I hoped I'd get to watch some of their rehearsals. But then Jock called me upstairs into the studio and said everyone was happy for me to join in the dancing.

'Now what makes you angry? What makes you boil?' I could barely hear Jock's voice he spoke so quietly. 'Reach into the feeling and move with the anger.' There was a strange whirring soundtrack, more noise than music. I visualised great sweeps of rainforest being hacked down. My rage spurted out in a gush of arm-waving fury.

'Don't demonstrate, feel.' Jock spoke to the whole room, but I was sure he was correcting me. 'Forget about abstract ideas, find something personal. Something that got your goat this morning. Did someone push you on the tube? Has a friend let you down? Be specific, dig in.'

Before he left last night, Dad had said, 'make sure you phone Mum. She'll be worrying.' That pissed me off! What about me being on my own and scared? Didn't he think about that? Why was it always about Mum? She should call to see if I was okay. Dad could call her. He was the one

who'd walked out and left us. Mum's mental health wasn't my responsibility.

I was hunched over, eyes scrunched up and jaw rigid. My hands had turned into claws. I was making small jerky movements that were tight and pointed.

'Good Pen. Yeah, that's it. That's real.' Jock was smiling at me. 'Own your anger. Use it, move with it.'

Part 1

Dance of the Bewitched

1

The new English teacher, Mrs Mulligan, had been a professional actor before she started at the Kings School for Girls. She'd been on the telly in an episode of *Midsummer Murders*. If that wasn't exciting enough, she sent the sixth form into a frenzy by announcing that this year the school play would be a joint venture with the boys' School. Never had there been such enthusiasm to participate.

Vivienne Cooper, my best friend and drama diva, dragged me along to auditions.

'Come on Pen, it'll be loads more fun if we're in it together.' I had no interest in acting but I stumbled through the embarrassment of standing on stage in front of Mrs Mulligan and a teacher from the Boys' School mumbling my lines, and was rewarded with a minor part as one of the girls in the chorus.

When the cast list was posted on the notice board a crowd gathered eager to see who had nabbed the major roles. No one was surprised that Coco Dunn was playing the sexy temptress. She was tall and slender with a sheet of platinum blonde hair that shimmered down to her waist. Her Mum was a model. But there was general confusion to find that Vivienne had got the starring role. At Kings, Vivienne was dismissed as the fat girl with a bursary who sold rejected chocolate bars from the Cadbury's factory where her Mum worked. She was in a youth theatre group and had done loads of performing. But as she never mentioned this at school, I was the only one who wasn't

amazed at her landing the female lead. I'd seen her act. She was awesome.

Walking away from the notice board I could tell Vivienne was thrilled, but she was careful not to show her feelings until we were alone together in the library. Viv had learned that at Kings it was best to keep a low-profile if you wanted an easy life. I was working on my low-profile skills.

The library was an L-shaped room on the first floor. Viv and I had a favourite spot in the far corner out of sight of the door. There was a small table underneath a window that looked out over the hockey pitches. We could talk here without being overheard.

'Oh my God Pen, it's such a difficult role. Elizabeth Proctor, she's the wronged wife, she's got to be uptight and angry but still sympathetic. I need the audience to side with me rather than Coco. How am I going to do that?'

'You'll find a way.'

Vivienne sighed, looking worried, but then brightened.

'And you got a part, that'll be fun.'

'I don't know why I let you bully me into it. I'd much rather be dancing.'

'You're always on about wanting a boyfriend – now's your opportunity.'

'As if any of the boys will be fit?'

'You never know, keep an open mind.'

Vivienne had met the man of her dreams when she was fourteen, whereas here was I, sixteen years old and barely been kissed. Seemed to me that loving someone was an open invitation to pain. Didn't stop me from craving it though. I was desperate to throw myself into the flames. Passion at any cost. But I wasn't convinced that the love of my life would be found in the Kings school play.

*

‘Welcome everyone.’ Mrs Mulligan stood at the front with Mr Andrews from the Boys’ School next to her. We were in the hall, sitting in a circle of chairs, boys on one side, girls on the other. There were two empty chairs between the last of the girls and the first of the boys. No one had planned it that way, but it was early days for inter-sex mingling.

Mrs Mulligan certainly knew how to hold the stage. She was tiny but dressed in a red sheath dress with shiny shoulder-length caramel-coloured hair and bright red lipstick. Her movements were quick and energetic, like a little bright-eyed bird, all peck and flap. There was an intensity that made her unlike any of the other teachers.

‘The play we’re doing is *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, about the witch hunt trials in Salem in the late 17th Century.’ She handed a pile of play scripts to the boy on her left and he passed them around. ‘It’s a truly wonderful drama, the subject matter as shocking and relevant today as it was when Miller wrote it in 1952, and I’m confident we’re going to make a marvellous production. To kick off I’ll go through the cast list and can the actor playing the role stand up and I’ll introduce their character.’ And off she went.

Grant Barker was playing the leading man, John Proctor. He stood up and took a mock bow to much tittering from the girls’ side of the room. Vivienne was playing his wife, Elizabeth Proctor, hurt, loyal, and strong. As Vivienne rose from her seat Mrs Mulligan said, ‘Vivienne’s a member of the prestigious National Youth Theatre. I saw her performance as *Mother Courage* and she was excellent.’ Vivienne blushed deep puce and sat down. The other girls stared at her as if reassessing. This play was going to do wonders for her social standing. Coco was playing Abigail; the beautiful young girl whom John Proctor has an affair with.

I was playing one of the young servant girls who, egged on by Abigail, accuse the Proctors of witchcraft. ‘Mercy Lewis – Pen Flowers,’ Mrs Mulligan called out and I stood up, ‘described by the playwright as a fat, sly servant girl who’s been seen dancing naked in the forest.’ I sat down quickly, glaring at Vivienne. I had not signed up for this! Some of the boys were sniggering and whispering to each other. There was no way I was staying for this. I started to get up, but Vivienne put her hand on my arm and pulled me down.

‘Keep calm,’ she whispered.

Mr Andrews drew a finger across his throat to tell the boys to cut it out and they stopped. Mrs Mulligan looked over to their side of the room and said, ‘Sixth formers or six-year-olds? Obviously, Pen is lovely and slim, but,’ she turned to look at me, ‘I’m told you’re a dancer and I’ve got an idea for the start of the show.’ She moved on.

‘See?’ Vivienne whispered. ‘She’s great, isn’t she? No-nonsense.’

‘Reverend Hale – Mark Burrows,’ Mrs Mulligan continued and a tall thin boy with a strangely small head stood up. He was the one who had come up with the name Giant Arse Movie to describe a film of me dancing that had been shared around the Boys’ School last year. The video featured a zoomed-in shot of my school skirt tucked up and my bum cheeks filling the screen. Thinking about it still filled me with shame. I knew my face had gone red.

Once everyone had been introduced there was a read-through of the play. It went on forever and as I only had three lines, there was a lot of sitting still and listening which I wasn’t good at. Vivienne was the only one who brought any of the words alive. Once we’d done my first scene I drifted off. I’d won a scholarship to Kings, one of the best schools in Birmingham, and Dad had insisted that I stay on

into the sixth form to do A Levels. But because I was determined to be a dancer, there'd been much painful negotiation until both Kings and Dad had finally agreed that I could go to City College, one day a week, to do Dance A Level. I liked History and English, but dancing was my true passion.

Tomorrow, we had our first choreography assignment and I wanted to try out the impro exercises I'd learnt in the summer with Tartan Fling. I moved my feet on the floor, tapping out different rhythms.

'Ouch!' I cried out as Vivienne elbowed me viciously in the side. Mrs Mulligan was looking at me with a raptor's gaze. My third and final line had arrived.

'It's on the beam, behind the rafter,' I said with none of the drama the line deserved. The room's attention moved swiftly off me and back to Coco. This was the part where the girls go hysterical and see evil spirits attacking them. The room livened up. The end of the play was also good with Vivienne's voice quivering with emotion as she forgave Proctor for his infidelity and declared her love. Grant Barker came over as way too full of himself, but wasn't as bad as I'd expected. When he went to the scaffold, I felt tears gathering in my eyes. Vivienne got the last line of the play which she delivered with power and dignity.

As we got up to leave Mrs Mulligan came over to speak to Viv.

'Excellent start Vivienne, you'll have the audience in floods.'

Vivienne blushed from her chest to her parting.

'Thank you,' she mumbled.

'But it's actually Pen I wanted to talk to.' My head jerked up. With luck she'd been so appalled by my terrible acting that she was going to drop me from the play. 'This idea for the start of the play.'

‘There’s no way I’m dancing naked.’ I said quickly. Vivienne might be mesmerized by Mrs Mulligan’s wide bright smile, but I could see the arrows of determination in her eyes. This woman would stop at nothing to get what she wanted.

She dismissed my concerns with a flick of her wrist as if waving away an irritating fly.

‘Totally inappropriate. But the girls are seen dancing in the forest, so I want you to choreograph a short primitive dance sequence. Shades of voodoo, led by Tabitha, the slave. I’m imagining dim, shadowy lighting, a backdrop creating the forest, and the girls in loose shifts. Can you do it?’

I could see it immediately. Green light on white cotton, rhythmical African dance moves, something raw and shocking.

‘It would make a provocative opening to the play,’ Mrs Mulligan continued. I was about to say I’d think about it when Viv could contain herself no longer and burst out.

‘Oh, that would be sooo brilliant. Pen you’d be brilliant. What a brilliant idea.’ Vivienne’s enthusiasm sometimes had the opposite of its intended effect. I considered saying ‘no’ just to resist the pressure. They both faced me, so I was caught on the triangulated point of two demanding stares.

‘Okay,’ I said, giving in. ‘Yes, I’d like to do that. Only I’m in college on Wednesdays and...’

‘Fabulous.’ Mrs Mulligan having got her way was already off to her next victim. ‘I’ll be in touch to set up your rehearsals.’

The sun was setting as I got on the bus to go home. The number eleven Outer Circle Bus route was the longest in Europe, a twenty-seven-mile loop around Birmingham.

Some days I felt as if I spent most of my life on the number eleven bus.

Vivienne who lived five minutes from Kings would already have changed into her sweatpants. But I had miles to go before I got home. From the front seat of the top deck, I watched the orange ball of the sun turn the sky damson and magenta, all the deep reds, as it sank over the roof tops. The trees were blazing copper and gold so for a moment the grey streets of Kings Heath were on fire.

The bus ride was my dream and drift time, when I unhooked myself from the world and floated into imaginary spaces. The movement of the bus gave me my best ideas.

But today my mind kept returning to the stupid Giant Arse video. I'd been so upset I'd run away to London and spent a hideous night by myself on the streets. But even though it was the most terrifying experience of my life I realised that surviving that night and then dancing for Jock the following morning had proved how much dancing meant to me. Without that, I wouldn't have won the battle to do Dance A Level. So maybe in a weird way the video had been a good thing.

But I hated thinking of that disgusting clip of me still out there on the internet. Supposing I did fancy one of the boys in the play? There was no way they'd be interested after seeing me looking so gross and ugly. I was destined to die lonely and unloved.

I was feeling sorry for myself as the bus pulled into Bournville Green. Looking down at the pavement I saw Grant Barker get off. He looked up and saw me watching him. He was the type that'd find the video hilarious. I pretended to look at my phone.

As the bus lurched off up the hill an idea leapt out of nowhere. My fingers curled into a fist, and I dug my elbow into my side.

‘Yes!’

If boys like Grant were laughing at me for having a Giant Arse, well, I was going to give them arse! Arse with bells on! I’d choreograph a dance for the play that was dark and dirty with thrusting buttocks everywhere. Instead of running from my shame, I’d flaunt it.

2

'You're Penelope Flowers, right?'

A tall, boyish girl was towering over me. I smiled up at her.

'Most people call me Pen.'

'I'm Frieda. We're working together this afternoon. On the duets.'

'Oh.' I hadn't even realised we were doing duets.

'The list's up on the notice board.' The notice board was also news to me. I was inching my way into college life. So far, I'd come in, done the lessons, and left. That was as much as I could manage. At lunchtime, if the day was sunny, I sat outside on my own and ate in the courtyard where there were benches.

'You don't say much do you.' Frieda sat astride the bench opposite and gave me a huge grin. Of course, I knew who she was. I'd watched her in class, she magnetized attention. She had thick black hair that was shaved at the sides but with a big curly quiff tumbling over her forehead. She wore huge trainers and black ripped jeans with a hoody. Her dark brown eyes were bright and scrunched up as if she was about to laugh. 'Yeah,' she continued before I could answer. 'We're doing opposition, so I guess they put us together because I'm tall and you're short.'

'How do you know all this?' I asked wondering if I'd missed an email. I let the 'short' reference go for now.

'I was just chillin' with Joe.' Joe Thorne was one of our teachers, a former ballet dancer whom I found alarming.

The thought of being able to ‘chill’ with him made me look at Frieda with awe. ‘Don’t worry,’ she gave me the full blast of her mega smile, ‘I’m used to teeny weenies, my Mum’s your height. We can put in some lifts if you’re up for it – I should be able to throw you about.’ She grinned again and I found myself smiling back.

‘Just don’t drop me,’ I said.

In class that afternoon Frieda proved to be completely right. We had two hours to work on a duet that explored the idea of opposites. Frieda, I soon discovered, knew everything that was going on before anybody else. That was her superpower.

‘Okay here’s what I think we should do,’ Frieda launched in straight away. We were standing around the large dance studio in pairs. ‘We should do opposition not opposite – standing up to power – like with Me Too or Black Lives Matter or LGBTQ rights – resistance to oppression – that’s opposites in a way that really means something.’ Frieda spoke fiercely, stalking around me and making punching movements in the air. Dressed for dancing in leggings and a vest top I could see the muscles in her arms. She must work out at the gym to get biceps like that. I wasn’t used to other people having strong opinions about dance. She was so forceful that I felt a bit steamrollered. I had ideas too.

‘Yeah, that’s true. But I was thinking we could undermine the obvious ways we think about opposites – like people say, ‘Big and Strong’, and ‘Small and Weak’, but why not small and powerful, big and vulnerable.’

Frieda stopped pacing and stared at me. ‘That’s good. I like that. Just because I’m tall I’m somehow not allowed to have feelings. It’s bullshit.’

‘And because I’m small people treat me like a child.’

‘Let’s do yours,’ Frieda said, and I was surprised she’d

let go of her idea so easily.

'I think we could put both ideas together. Look at Greta Thunberg, she was younger than us - a school kid when she went on strike taking on the government over climate change.'

'Yeah, and like Stephen Lawrence, he was an athlete but he still got murdered.'

I didn't know who Steven Lawrence was, but I didn't like to admit it. Frieda read my blank expression correctly.

'He was an eighteen-year-old boy doing A Levels who wanted to be an architect. He was standing at a bus stop when a gang of white boys murdered him. Just because he was black. They didn't even know him.'

'My God, that's terrible.'

'Yeah, you could say that!' Frieda sounded angry. 'And the police didn't bother prosecuting. Said there wasn't enough evidence. His Mum campaigned for twenty years to get justice.'

I felt bad for not knowing. I hoped I hadn't offended her.

'Let's start with those two examples,' I said quickly, 'and improvise some moves. See what develops.'

'Right on.' Frieda punched me in the arm gently.

I'd never worked with anyone like this before, as equals sharing ideas, and creating together. There was no one at Kings who was passionate about dancing the way I was. To be making something new with someone as engaged as me felt weird and challenging, but in a good way. I tried out some moves and Frieda responded. We were riffing off each other. I had a genius thought.

'I know - why don't I lift you?'

Frieda burst out laughing. 'Get you Mrs Ambitious! You couldn't. Do you know how much I weigh?' She banged her thigh. 'I'm 100% muscle.'

‘Let’s find a way to make it work – we’ll be doing the total opposite of what anyone would expect.’

‘Yeah sister, I like you. The Mighty Pen. Let’s do it.’

Lifting Frieda was hard, and I kept dropping her. We were laughing but we weren’t mucking about, we were completely into it. Frieda was heavy, but she was also strong and graceful. I loved the way she moved. We made a great team.

Our final piece was a protest dance that used our different body shapes in unexpected ways. Joe seemed pleased when we showed our duet to the class.

‘Well done Frieda and Pen. Original use of relative body weights, you worked as a unit, showed trust.’

‘That’s our first ‘A’ in the bag,’ Frieda whispered to me. She was so confident. I admired that. ‘Let’s get a drink,’ she suggested after we’d showered and changed.

I hesitated. Even if I left now, I wouldn’t get home until after six, and I had loads of homework to do before school tomorrow. But this could be the start of a new friendship.

‘Sure, let’s.’ I followed Frieda to the first-floor canteen where I’d been too shy to go on my own. Frieda, I hoped, was going to open doors into exciting new worlds. College was so different to Kings – for a start, there were boys everywhere. Not many doing dance A Level, but in the corridors and in the café, there were lads sitting in packs and watching as we walked by.

‘Wednesdays you get the apprentices in, plumbers, decorators, and electricians,’ Frieda nodded at the boys. ‘I thought about doing plumbing – you can earn good money but imagine spending your life up to your elbows in shit! Urghhh!’

We got our drinks and sat down at a table for two near the window. I expected Frieda to do the talking but instead, she asked me loads of questions and I found myself telling

her about Kings, about Mum and Dad splitting up, and me doing work experience in London. In about ten minutes she had my whole life story.

'Yeh well, at least your Dad's still around,' she said when I told her about Mum and Dad, 'I barely know my Dad. He bugged off when I was a baby. Mum brought me up by herself. His parents, my grandparents, they live in Handsworth, so I see them and they're alright. Mum says it's important that I know about my Jamaican heritage even though Dad was born in Birmingham. Mum comes from Portugal. You gotta meet her. She's an incredible artist. She teaches here at the college. I used to go to school in Handsworth, but I got grief from some of the other girls for being gay. Here I can do Art, Dance and Politics A Levels. Handsworth thought that was an odd combo but makes total sense to me.'

A pretty girl with short blonde hair walked past our table and Frieda stopped talking to give her a whole-body smile.

'She's in my art class.'

'Is she gay?' I wondered how Frieda could tell. She shrugged.

'Who knows but she's cute. I've got a weakness for blondes. What about you? Any love action?'

I laughed, there was something so buoyant and irrepressible about Frieda. She was like a giant puppy.

'There was this guy Mick who I was seeing. He was alright, but I was never sure about him. I guess I didn't fall in love and now he's finished his A Levels and gone off traveling with his mate.'

'I want to go to Brazil. We've got relatives out there that I've never met. You could come too. Hey, we should dance in the Carnival.'

Hanging out with Frieda was definitely going to take me places - even if we didn't get as far as Rio.

3

The streetlamps had come on and the sky was turning inky as I walked down Knightlow Road from the bus stop. The leaves on the trees had started falling, decorating the pavements in patterns of yellow, red, and copper. Pretty soon now I'd be leaving for school in the dark and coming home in the dark. The night was closing in around me.

I turned the corner and saw a small red car parked in our drive. Dad drove a green Volvo and the lady from the mental health team who was helping Mum came in the mornings. As I squeezed past, I peered inside the car but didn't get any clues. I unlocked the front door twitching with suspicion. What was Mum up to?

'Whose car is that?' I shouted from the hall, taking off my coat and dropping my bag on the floor. The bag weighed a ton filled to bursting with dance gear and school-books. My spine was starting to curve from carrying it. Mum came bustling out of the living room her face flushed pink and her eyes dangerously bright.

'It's mine. Ours,' she said beaming. Mum had agoraphobia and for the last ten years she'd not been outside the house on her own. Until this summer when Dad left. Now, with help, she could sometimes get to the corner of the street, two hundred yards away – which was a big deal for her.

'You can't drive,' I pointed out.

'I've got my first lesson tomorrow.'

'Ok, wow. Well done Mum that's great.'

The thought of Mum driving with her shaky hands and monumental capacity for panic was disturbing. But I was supposed to be encouraging so I didn't voice my concerns.

'Where's Thomas?' I asked. Thomas had just started at the local High School. It took him ten minutes to get home from school.

'He's gone to get fish and chips for tea.' Mum said.

'Oh brill.' This was excellent news. Life was much better now that Thomas was old enough to do the fish and chip run. With Mum not able to go out and Dad leaving, usually I had to do all the shopping.

When Thomas got back with the fish and chips Mum wanted us to sit in the car to eat. We put our coats on and bundled out. Mum sat in the driver's seat with me next to her and Thomas in the back. We couldn't even have the radio or heating on because Mum was worried about the battery running down.

'It's a shame we're not facing the road, isn't it?' I said. We were staring at the garage door.

'Yes.' Mum sounded worried, 'I'll have to reverse out tomorrow.' But she rallied, obviously determined to remain positive. 'By Christmas I'll be able to drive us out to the Lickey Hills.'

We used to do that with Dad. The mental health lady wanted Mum to imagine herself doing these things by herself and feeling relaxed and happy.

'Maybe we could get a dog then,' I suggested. 'You'd love a dog, Mum.'

Thomas stopped eating. 'Please, let's get a dog. A Staffy.'

'We're not getting a Staffy,' Mum said. 'Your Dad is dead set against any kind of dog.'

'Well, he doesn't live here anymore,' I pointed out.

Mum looked at me then spoke slowly as if she'd just

discovered the solution to string theory. ‘No, you’re right. He doesn’t have any say in it.’

I’d eaten as much as I wanted. Fish and chips tasted delicious to start with but the second I stopped eating a tsunami of grease hit me first in the mouth and then kicked me in the belly.

‘Can we go back inside now?’ I asked. ‘Only I’ve got a load of homework to do.’

I don’t know why Dad leaving had made such a difference. He worked away half of the time anyway. At least now they weren’t screaming at each other when he came home. Mum still had her bad days but overall, surprisingly, she seemed to have more energy and cry less than she used to. But I hated Dad not being there. I missed him all the time. With him gone I felt as if I had to fill his place and look after Mum and Thomas. If only I had a boyfriend I could talk to. Someone who cared about me. Vivienne spoke to her boyfriend Louis every night.

One of the exercises Mum had to do was rate her well-being between one and ten every day. I’d been bumping along at a lonely four but after the duet with Frieda, I reckoned I’d jumped up to a six. At least I had dancing and a new friend.

I lugged my bag upstairs and got out my books. We were studying *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë as one of our A Level texts. What I needed to take me up to a full ten out of ten was a grand passion like Cathy and Heathcliff’s. I wanted to run wild over the moors with a dark handsome lover. Not that their love brought them much happiness. The moment Heathcliff returned from his travels everybody’s well-being score plummeted to rock bottom. Maybe I should embrace my single state and put my passion into dance.

*

I hardly saw Vivienne anymore because she had so many rehearsals.

'Honestly Pen, Mrs Mulligan is amazing. You can tell she's been a professional actress – she pushes us sooo hard.' We were sitting in the kitchen of the sixth form extension where we could make drinks and heat up food in the microwave. We shared it with the boys' school, so the atmosphere was completely different from that in the main building.

Viv was tipping powder into a cup and adding water to make something vaguely resembling soup which was all she ate for lunch these days. She was dieting for the play. Evidently, Elizabeth Proctor needed to be scrawny. Mrs Mulligan and calories were her two topics of conversation.

'Grant's much better than I thought he'd be. I was worried he'd muck about, but he takes it seriously. Trouble is Louis's gone weird on me.'

Vivienne had met Louis at her Youth Theatre. He was older than her, studying drama at college. They were about as secure a couple as it was possible to be.

'In what way?'

'He goes grumpy and silent when I talk about Mrs Mulligan.'

'Well, you're always going on about her. Remember he's a director too. Maybe he feels threatened?'

Vivienne looked at me while she stirred her soup, attempting to dissolve the fizzing lumps of yellow powder.

'Maybe you're right. And he keeps asking me about Grant like he's jealous of him.'

'Should he be?'

'What do you mean?' Viv was at me in a second, full-on glaring. I squared up to her.

‘Well, Grant’s super good-looking and you get to do these heavy emotional scenes with him.’

‘God no,’ Vivienne swallowed a mouthful of soup, pulling a face as if it tasted as vile as it looked. ‘Grant’s better than I thought he’d be at acting, but I don’t fancy him. Urgh no, he’s all cheekbones and sharp angles, too wired for me. Absolutely not.’

Viv shuddered and I thought she was exaggerating her distaste but let it go.

‘Louis doesn’t know that unless you tell him.’

‘When did you get so wise?’ Vivienne grinned at me sipping her soup while I tucked into my cheese sandwich. She was watching every bite I took and any minute now she’d tell me how many calories I’d eaten just to be helpful.

One of the boys came into the kitchen invading our space with a tube of rolled-up paper carried in his fist like a lightsabre.

‘Hi Viv.’ He had big shoulders and a wide neck with very short hair and ears that stuck out slightly. He and Vivienne obviously knew each other.

‘Oh, hi Ed. How are you?’

‘Yeah, good. I need to talk to Pen.’ As he faced me his whole head turned pink - even the tips of his ears - I felt sorry for him.

‘How can I help?’ I asked quickly to prevent him from any further embarrassment. Ed unrolled the drawings he carried and smoothed them out on the kitchen table.

‘I’m making the set for the play. Mrs Mulligan says you’re choreographing a dance for the opening, so I need to know how much space you’ll need. Would you like different height levels? Have you, you know, got any special requirements?’

The three of us leaned over the drawings. Ed explained them to us.

'This is the empty central area – will that be big enough, it's about,' Ed looked around, 'yeah I'd say it'll be about the size of this kitchen.'

I mentally evicted the table and chairs and imagined six girls dancing. 'Yeah, I think so, it should feel intense and claustrophobic.'

'How about if I put a block in there? You'd have a raised section you could use.'

'That'd work. I could have Tituba up there and the other girls below.'

'Then I can fit out these frames with vertical slats of wood and if we angle light through them the stage will be mainly dark but with stripes of light like you get in a forest. What do you think?'

I was impressed. 'Sounds great Ed, really creative.'

'Ok let me know if you think of anything else.'

Vivienne was poring over the drawings. 'Where's the Proctors' house going to be.'

'I haven't got the drawings for your scene, but I can get them if you're interested.'

'Oh please. I love sets. They help me get a sense of how the play will look to the audience.'

'Ok, I'll bring yours over tomorrow.' He rolled up the paper, gave us a quick shy smile, and hurried away.

'So how do you know Ed?' I asked.

'Primary School. He lives on the estate up the road. He got a scholarship place like us. Got loads of brothers. One of them got into trouble with the police. But Ed's alright. He's sweet, a bit quiet.'

'His head's a funny shape, all neck and ears.'

Viv frowned at me. 'Don't be mean Pen. He's got a nice face. He plays rugby that's why he's got a big neck.'

I felt guilty. 'Sorry, you're right. I didn't mean to be rude about a friend of yours.'

Vivienne shook her head at me.

‘Why do you want to be rude about anyone?’

As I walked back to the main school after lunch, I thought about how I’d criticized Ed for the way he looked. I went through life secretly labelling people as attractive, ugly, clever, stupid, cool, not cool, even when I didn’t know anything about them. Look at how I’d judged Vivienne when I first knew her, totally on her appearance with no idea what a loving, funny, caring person she was. I didn’t want to be this superficial. I wouldn’t want a boyfriend who judged me on my looks – I’d want them to love me for who I was as a person. I needed to stop this judgy attitude and become a kinder, warmer, more caring person if I was ever going to find love.