

THE SMILE OF FORTUNE

Methuselah just couldn't do anything right.

In spite of all the jibes, the suffusing hate that seemed to always weigh him down, Methuselah was Fiona's role model. It might not have been entirely true, but Fiona insisted. Fiona was Methuselah's younger sister, and she loved to tease him, tickle him, tackle him onto the mat; anything to see him smile. When he smiled, which he barely did, it was a beautiful smile, discreet, wee, but brilliant. Fiona loved it. She hated the moments her brother sat sulking, planting his sorry body in the settee, chin dug into his palms, pondering deeply.

"Methu, look!" Fiona rushed in shouting one chilly December evening as Methuselah sat adjacent the mantelpiece, staring blankly at the burning logs of wood. He lazily turned to face his excited sister. She was waving a letter in her hand, and immediately he saw the logo, his lips puckered into a little, lovely smile.

Windfall School, his dream school, had accepted his application and he would be joining their candidate class at the start of the following year. The gloom suddenly lifted and although he did not waltz into excited chatter, he was visibly joyous. When his father came home later that evening, Methuselah gave him a reluctant hug and whispered a word of appreciation in his ear. Everybody was happy when they saw Methuselah unusually thrilled even as they took dinner, and for the first time in eons, he cleared his plate.

"Well done, Methu," his mother remarked, smiling from ear to ear.

"An apple now to keep Fiona away," his father joked, as Fiona had always insisted she wanted to be a doctor when she grew up. A tray of fruits was brandished and Methuselah happily joined in.

Fiona giggled in ecstasy, for nothing gave her joy like the sight of a happy Methuselah. The boy spun in his chair, reveling in the electrifying mood that had engulfed everyone. He even offered to clear the table after dinner.

But as he carried the plates to the kitchen sink, he felt his knees suddenly go limp, and he teetered. He tried to stabilize his body, but the plates slipped out of his hands and plummeted to the floor. One after the other, the crockery shattered with blood-curdling noise as Methuselah watched helplessly, the broken pieces spinning upon the tiles in all directions. His dazed family stood behind him, watching silently, looks of empathy eminent on their faces.

When the noise had died down and Methuselah stood over the mess, ashen, Fiona sprinted forward and threw herself into his arms.

“Don’t worry, Methu. Mum and dad will buy others.”

As a tear eased down his cheek, Methuselah thought he heard his mother sob softly and say, “I hope he manages at Windfall.”

The environment at Windfall was exactly as Methuselah had anticipated. There were children of the affluent and shimmering new fuel guzzlers littered the parking lots every morning and evening as day scholars were dropped to and picked from school. The Headmistress was a short, stocky woman who wore a rather tired wig, and her dimples ran all the way down from her eyes to her chin. She was a strict disciplinarian and was infamous for her uncouth, irresponsible utterances. She barely smiled, she had a bizarre grin that could mean anything, from exhilaration to hatred, and the teachers feared her as much as the students did.

Methuselah fell out with the Headmistress in the very first week. It was the first general assembly since his arrival, and the students casually trudged into the school hall, shivering in the morning breeze. Soft murmurs filled the hallway as the students took their positions according to their classes. The teachers took a bit longer to get to the hall, and a few cheeky students whispered some obscenities into the microphone as their peers checked out the appearance of a teacher for them. The larger group was catching up, talking about the NBA Finals, Lionel Messi’s freekick goals and Usain Bolt’s scintillating performance at the Olympics, which had all happened over the weekend.

It was around this time that Methuselah decided to rush to the washrooms. *I will be back before the speeches begin*, he thought as he sprinted across the basketball court at full speed. He was barely past the classrooms and metres away from the washrooms when the Headmistress, with the other teachers in tow, strode into the hall.

“Before we start,” the Headmistress’s shrill voice tore through the silence that had now taken over. “I need all the newcomers come up to the front. Hurry up!” Her pitch black eyes scanned over the neatly done heads and she grinned as a heavy shuffling ensued, culminating in a dozen students sidling up with her.

“We have thirteen new students,” she said, after counting the newcomers. “Where is the other one?”

Silence. The Headmistress’s emotionless glare lasted a full thirty seconds as she waited for some commotion. When it didn’t come, she motioned to the new students to introduce themselves, patting her watch impatiently. In panic, they rapped through their profiles.

They were still rumbling on and on when Methuselah came rushing into the hall, out of breath. The Headmaster cast him a venomous look and suddenly signaled to the speaker to be quiet. She asked

Methuselah if he was a new comer and when he replied in the affirmative, she seethed. That same day, Methuselah was sent to the school farm to help fix a fence as punishment for lateness.

Methuselah spent his days sulking. If you did not strike a rapport with the Headmistress, you were doomed. She was not affable, and the general feeling was that her patronising nature would one day lead to the school's closure through a demonstration from all facets of stakeholders. Worse off, if the Headmistress was alerted of any wrongdoing by any student, it would take divine intervention to take one's name from her infamous black books. In her poky little office, where she spent most of her day smoking and punching on her typewriter with unparalleled vigor, she had hung a list of students she loathed. Methuselah was the latest addition.

Methuselah knew he was terrible at many things. He was naturally reckless, and he was not one of the promising prospects in class. He often got late for meals, missed penalties in football, came last during the swimming gala, even misspelt the word "committee" three consecutive times. But there was something about him only Fiona knew. Methuselah had the voice of a nightingale when he sang, which he barely did. In the showers, he belted out his favorite tunes and severally, Fiona had been chastised by her mother for sitting at the bathroom door when Methuselah was taking his shower. She had recorded him twice and even he was dumfounded at just how nicely he sang.

So, when the music teacher announced that the Windfall's annual music festivals were to be held in a couple of months, Methuselah was exhilarated. It was his chance to redeem himself, show the Headmistress that he was not just a buffoon, a boy full of mistakes. There was something he could do perfectly, and he was eager to make the Headmistress, and the whole school, see just that.

The music teacher handpicked his favorite students. When the choirs came up for rehearsals, Methuselah was disgusted. He knew he could sing better than them all, and yet he was overlooked and sat hunched in between his watching peers, all cheering even as the selected teams depicted unwarranted mediocrity. Methuselah tried all he could to capture the teachers' attention with no success. The Headmistress popped in sporadically and the teachers did not want to risk including the student she disliked most in the crews. Thus, Methuselah was frozen out of action, completely.

On the material day, parents flocked the school as they had been contacted by the school to attend. The board also invited some guests they deemed important to grace the occasion, with some financiers who would sponsor some of the best performers from the music competition. The school would also trap a windfall of fortunes especially from the county government, which was famous for supporting talent and offering incredible support to those who were prolific in arts.

The governor's motorcade ground to a halt at exactly ten o'clock, just as the first batch of dancers ruffled the curtains and swung onto the stage to ear-rattling applause.

By noon, all the dignitaries were seated. A musical group called The Bumble Bees tumbled onto the stage, their lead soloist remaining behind the curtains, apparently going through the last drill of tuning his vocals. He was Methuselah's best friend and Methuselah had slipped backstage to encourage his pal. The soloist was just about to get out onto stage when something bizarre happened. He started staggering and his eyes dilated enormously, and the backstage crew sensed all was not right. The soloist's fingers went limp and the microphone crashed into the floor, the loudspeakers screeching wildly in the hall. He saw everything spin into a blur, and he was falling behind. He had lost consciousness and the backstage crew frantically helped him onto a mat. Anxiety had taken the better of him.

"Someone must take over," shouted the music master, pacing frantically. "We can't stop this. I'd rather we offered a shoddy presentation, but we must do something!"

In the hall, the rest of the choir stood patiently, swaying their frames right and left to the organist's tune, as they awaited their soloist to make an appearance. Thirty seconds. One minute. One and a half minutes. They were beginning to panic when an unusually splendid voice came tearing through the tension in the air and swept through the hall, ricocheting against the walls with unmatched clarity. The choir was surprised. Never in training had they heard their soloist ooze such candour in his voice. People glanced at each other in the hall and exchanged conspiratorial smiles. The music wafted through with such power, such grace, gripping everyone and raising their moods.

"That's the sweetest thing I have heard in a long time," exclaimed the governor, and the Headmistress nodded enthusiastically, a wee grin distinct on her face.

When the soloist finally appeared, the Headmistress' was obfuscated. She craned her neck and squinted against the lighting on the stage, trying to believe what she was seeing. A rapturous applause tore through the hall and the soloist acknowledged the audience with a smile. As the crowd went bonkers, one little girl clutched her mother's arm and cried. Fiona had never felt this happy for her brother. Their eyes met, and they exchanged a discreet wink.

When he had finished his presentation, in spite of his unpreparedness and his inclusion being an emergency and an extremely risky endeavor that could have produced any result, everyone was on their feet, clapping wildly, screaming, asking for more. The governor sauntered onto the stage and embraced him, and the other guests shook his hand enthusiastically. The Headmistress looked on, a smile visible on her face for the first time in years, her eyes still struggling to believe it was not a daydream of some sort.

In his speech, the governor promised to sponsor Methuselah for a music course at his university of choice. The Managing Director of Music Association of Windfall City promised to sponsor Fiona through school. The other dignitaries deposited wads of cash in Methuselah's arms, and the school received one hundred thousand dollars for promoting such special talent.

What's more, the Headmistress tore down Methuselah's name from the list of her most loathed students.