

Lonely Standing Ovation

Emily Engebretson

2nd Place Short Story 7th Grade

I breathed deeply, in and out, waiting for my big moment. I had been practicing for hours, days, and weeks, but that all meant nothing if I didn't do well today.

"Introducing twelve-year-old Maria Smith, onto the stage! She will perform an original song," the announcer called. A stage-hand gently tapped me on the shoulder. That was my cue.

I walked onto the stage, expecting to see an audience full of happy, excited, and encouraging people, just like my family had been when I performed in front of them. It wasn't. There was a man on his phone, a bawling baby who was being carried out by an apologetic mother, and a lot of expressionless, cold faces staring at me expectantly and impatiently. They were waiting for their own children to perform, uninterested in the other performers like me.

I thought of what my mother said to me this morning. "Ria, when you go out on that stage, remember, all of those people in the audience are bored, because of the boring performances before you, not because of you. This is good. When you eat a sour blueberry, the sweet blueberry you eat afterwards tastes so much tastier than if you'd just eaten a sweet one."

With that memory, I began my performance. I started off well. My heart was thumping to the beat of the music, my blood rushing in my ears with the orchestra, my voice sashaying through the notes and lyrics like the warm feeling of hot chocolate in your mouth on a bitter, cold, rainy day, and my emotions swelling like a robin spreading its wings on the first day of spring.

I finished my song with a beautiful, full, rich, vibrato note. My chest heaving, my cheeks flushed with joy, I beheld the audience as I descended back to Earth.

The man was still on his phone, a woman was drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair, a boy was cajoling his father causing both of them to pay no heed to my performance, and - worst of all - the applause was scattered. Holding my head high and my tears in, I willed myself to slowly walk offstage, feeling like a punctured balloon.

Once backstage I let tears roll down my cheeks. As I dawdled home, I kicked a pebble between my feet, lollygagging, not wanting to see my mother's disappointed face when I told her what had happened. When I reached the driveway to my house I took a deep breath in and out, but now - instead of releasing bubbles of excitement - I was breathing out my flood of anxiety and disappointment.

"Mom?" I called, opening the door.

"Ria!" my mother called, rushing towards me to give me a hug and dropping her laundry basket on the ground. "How did it go?" she asked, then spotted my tear-stained face. "Oh, Ria. What happened?"

"They didn't like it!" I sobbed, burrowing my face into my mother's warm, enveloping hug. The fear of my mother's disappointment was replaced with embarrassment. My tears started to form a wet puddle in her clean shirt, and I let them soak into me as well, as I leaned into her tight embrace.

"Ria." Mother gently disentangled from my arms and looked straight into my clouded eyes. "Did you like it?"

"What?" I asked, confused.

“Did you like your performance?”

“Yes, but-”

“That’s all that matters. You didn’t spend hours working hard and practicing your song to make the strangers in the audience happy, you did that to make yourself happy. So as long as you enjoyed your performance, I couldn’t be a prouder mother.”

My tears slowly stopped flowing, and my ragged breaths evened out. “I did mom, I loved it! The music, the thrill, the emotions! I would do it again, and again, and again if I could! I’ve never had so much fun in my life! It was amazing!” I grinned.

“To make it a great performance, the only thing that has to happen is that you enjoy your performance. The audience? People are always critical, so just be you, Ria. Now as a special reward for your performance, why don’t we get ice cream? Then you can tell me all about it. Hopefully next time I can be there to watch you as well. I hope you’ve forgiven me for missing it.”

“I know you have to work, Mom. Don’t worry, you’ve given me the best thing of all!”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“The promise of ice cream on a weekday!” I exclaimed.

The next year for the county talent show, I sang another original song. My song this year started with the words:

‘Sweet blueberries taste better after sour,
Listen for your own applause, not ours.’

That year I got a standing ovation. Not from the audience, but from myself, because I had the time of my life.