

An invitation

Sophie ran down the stairs and into the kitchen. She was late for school but knew that her mother would not let her miss breakfast. Her mother always said the same thing if Sophie tried to leave the house without eating anything. 'Breakfast is the most important meal of the day, Sophie!'

As she walked into the kitchen Sophie saw a big envelope on the table by her plate. She sat down at the table nervously. She didn't want her parents to see what was in the envelope. She knew they'd ask her. She reached for the orange juice.

'Sophie, are you going to open your letter?' asked her mother. 'It looks important.'

'Oh, it's nothing special,' said Sophie. 'Just some information I need for school. I'm late so I'll open it later.'

'Oh, go on, Sophie, open it!' demanded her mother. 'I know what it is. It's an application for university, isn't it?'

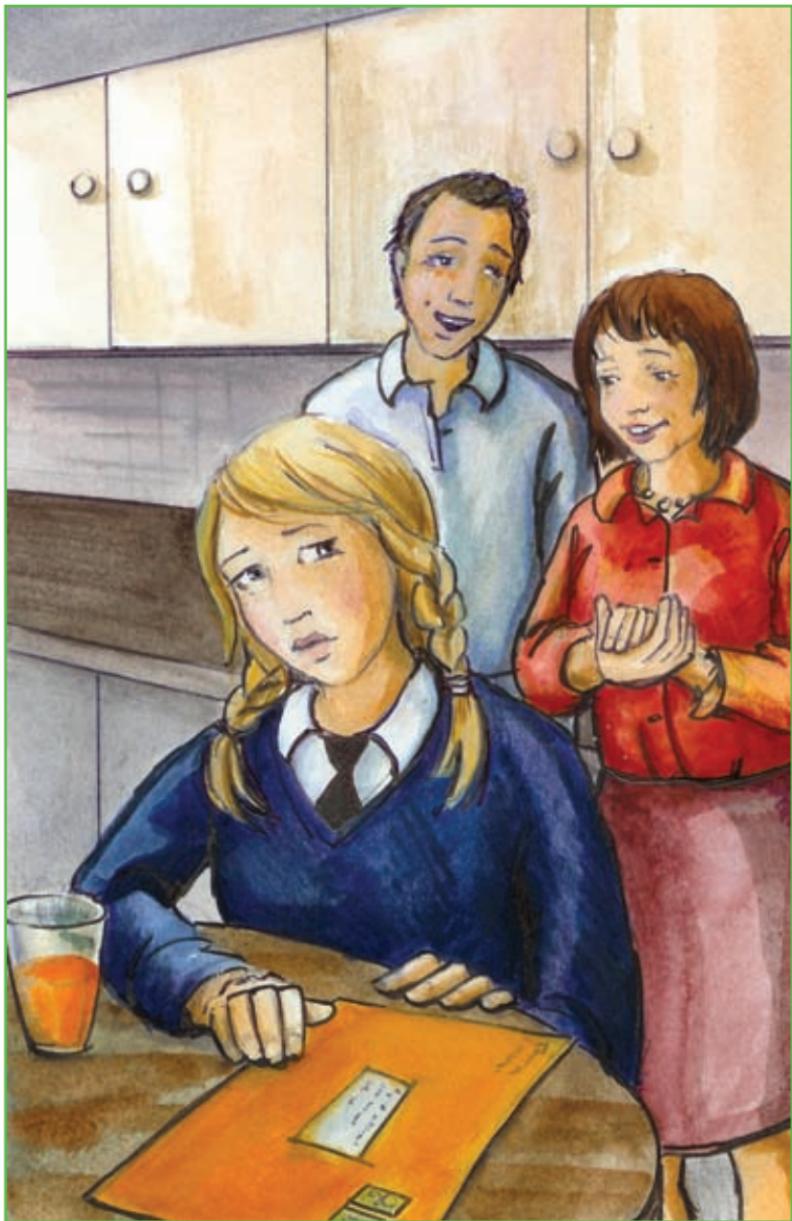
'Mum, please, I don't want to be late for class,' said Sophie.

'That's okay. I've got to go out, so I can drop you at school,' replied her mother. 'Now, which university is it – Durham, Sheffield or Liverpool? I still think you should look at a London one, or maybe Exeter. It's such an exciting time, isn't it, Frank?'

Sophie's father smiled at them. He was excited too.

Sophie sighed. Now she knew it was going to be a bad day. Reluctantly, she picked up the envelope and opened it. She couldn't think of any way to explain what was inside. She pulled out the prospectus and application forms. She held her breath, waiting for her mother's reaction.

'What's this, Sophie?' her mother asked, her voice rising in anger. She took the prospectus and stared at it. 'This isn't a university, it's an art college.'



'It's not just any art college, Mum. It's the Royal College of Art in London. It's the best,' Sophie said.

'I don't care how good it is, Sophie,' said her mother. 'We've had this conversation too many times before. You are *not* going to art college. How do you expect to make a living as an artist? No one makes any money painting pictures.'

'Maybe I'm good enough, Mum,' said Sophie.

'It's not about how good you are. Frank, you talk to her, will you? This upsets me too much. I'm going to get my coat.' Her mother marched out of the room.

Frank looked at his daughter sympathetically. 'You know it's for the best, love,' he said, patting her on the arm.

'Don't you want me to be happy, Dad?' asked Sophie, with tears in her eyes.

'Of course I do, Sophie, but you can't be happy without any money in the bank. You'll end up having to take other jobs to pay the rent. I don't want you to work in a factory like me. You're a bright girl.'

'Dad, I'm not as bright as you seem to think,' said Sophie. 'But I'm good at art and I love it.'

'You can still enjoy your art,' said her father. 'Just not as a job.'

Sophie was reluctant to get a lift with her mother. She didn't want to argue with her any more. But she needn't have worried – her mother drove in silence. As they pulled up outside the school, Sophie tried to think of something to say.

'I...I just want you to...' she started.

But her mother interrupted, 'Unless you are going to tell me about applying for university, I don't want to hear about it.'

Sophie sighed. 'Thanks for the lift, Mum.'

She walked up to the library. Her best friends Nadine and Anna were already there.

'What's wrong with you?' demanded Anna when she saw Sophie's face.

Sophie dropped the prospectus and application forms for the Royal College of Art on the table.

‘Mum and Dad saw these,’ she replied.

‘Oh!’ said Nadine. ‘How bad was it?’

Sophie shrugged her shoulders. ‘It could have been worse, I suppose.’

‘Sorry, Sophie,’ said Anna.

‘Oh, it’s just not fair,’ cried Sophie. ‘I don’t want to do anything else. I can’t understand why they don’t want me to be happy. It’s going to be horrible to sit at university for three years studying something I hate. It’s only the second week of term and I’m sick of hearing about everyone’s university applications.’

‘I know. I’m sure it will be okay,’ said Anna.

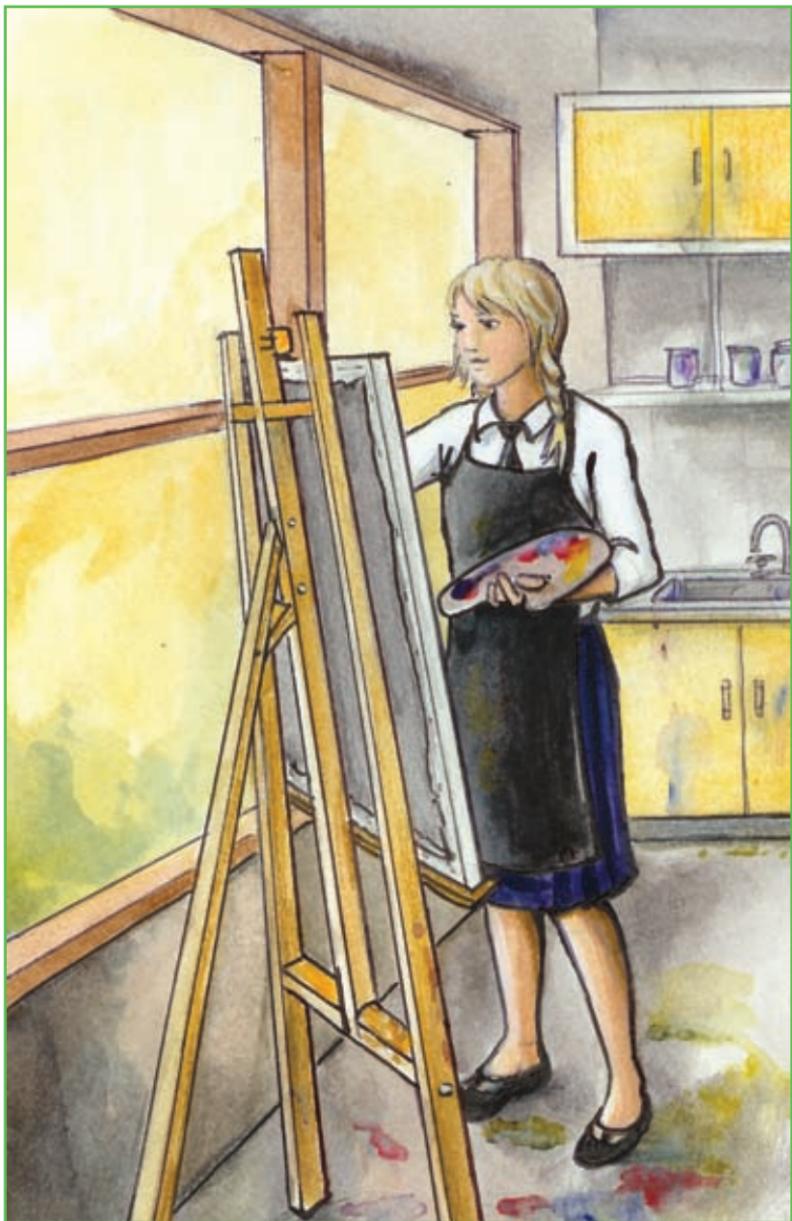
‘Come on, let’s go. Classes start soon,’ said Nadine. ‘Meet for lunch?’

Later that day Sophie pushed open the door of the art studio. It was lunchtime and she wanted to work on her latest painting.

She was relieved to see the room was empty. This was her favourite place to be. She loved the smell of the room. She loved to see all the half-finished pieces of work hanging from the wall. She loved the sinks splattered with paint collected over years of study.

She found her piece of work and put it up on an easel. She collected her paints and settled down to work. This was an abstract piece using oil paint – her favourite type of paint. She loved the texture of oil paint. With oil paint she could correct a mistake, or simply change her mind.

Sophie liked abstract art. She was trying to capture the feel of a walk in the woods. She didn’t want to do a detailed painting of trees. She wanted to capture the texture and mood of the woods.



She was so absorbed in her work that she didn't notice the art teacher, Mrs Pace, come into the room. She jumped when she heard her say, 'This is looking good, Sophie. I like the way you've captured the light here.'

'Thank you,' said Sophie. She always felt a little uncomfortable talking about her work.

Mrs Pace sat on a stool next to the easel. 'So, everyone's busy with their university applications at the moment?' she said.

'Yes,' said Sophie, pulling a face.

'Have you decided what you're going to do?' asked Mrs Pace.

'Oh, not really...I've got a few universities to apply to...'

Sophie didn't want to talk about it, but Mrs Pace wasn't going to be put off.

'What are you going to study?' she asked.

'Probably English...or maybe history,' Sophie replied slowly.

'I was hoping you'd apply to art college,' Mrs Pace said, watching Sophie closely. 'You are good enough, you know, Sophie.'

Sophie's face lit up. 'I got the prospectus for the Royal College of Art. It looks fantastic.' Then she looked down. 'But...' She didn't know what else to say. She didn't want to talk to Mrs Pace about her family's expectations.

'Yes,' said Mrs Pace, patting her arm, 'it's not always easy.'

Sophie was relieved when Mrs Pace went and sat at her desk. But she could still feel her teacher watching her. She spent a few more minutes painting, but she'd stopped enjoying herself. She packed up and muttered, 'Goodbye,' as she left the room.

On Friday of that week, Sophie was in Mrs Pace's history of art class. As the class ended and the students started to pack up, Mrs Pace called for quiet. 'Now everyone, I've got an

announcement to make. In two weeks, a friend of mine is having an art show at the Simmons Gallery in Walford. I thought that some of you might like to come along. This is nothing to do with the course. I just thought you'd find it interesting. I have some forms for anyone who'd like to come. I only have enough room for four passengers in my car. So the first four students to return a form signed by their parents will be able to go. Please take one now if you're interested.'

Sophie joined a few students lining up for a form. She was excited at the thought of going to a real art show.

'Ah, Sophie, you're interested in coming?' asked Mrs Pace as Sophie reached the desk.

'Oh yes, I'd love to,' replied Sophie.

'Good, good. I think you'll really enjoy it. Joshua has a great style, and opening nights are always so exciting. Try and drop your form in first thing on Monday. I'd really like you to come.'

'Yes, I will. Thank you, Mrs Pace.' Sophie left the room surprised and pleased by Mrs Pace's comment.

Mrs Pace wants me to go, she thought. She didn't say that to any of the other students.

She met Anna and Nadine in the cafeteria.

'Look at this!' she said, waving the form at them. 'It's an invitation to an opening at an art gallery.'

The girls read the form.

'Wow! Will your mum and dad let you go?' asked Nadine. 'They might think you're trying to apply to art colleges again.'

'Oh, I hadn't thought of that,' said Sophie.

'Just ask them when they're busy,' said Anna. 'That's what I do. Mum never listens when her favourite TV show is on. So I always ask her things then. She always says yes just to stop me talking!'

The girls laughed.

'What are you going to wear?' asked Nadine.

'Oh, I don't know,' replied Sophie. 'I hadn't thought about

it. What do you wear to an opening? I don't think I have anything.'

'Something simple and elegant,' said Anna.

'Well, I know I don't have anything elegant!' said Sophie.

'Well, I do,' said Nadine. 'What about my little black dress? The one I had for Mum and Dad's anniversary party last year? That'll fit you. You can come around to my house after school on the day of the opening and I'll help you get dressed.'

'And I'll do your make-up,' added Anna.

Sophie smiled gratefully at her friends. 'Thanks, guys. You're great. I'll ask Mum and Dad tonight.'