

## The Acting Class

I didn't take the acting class because I was really into theater or because I yearned to be an actress. Honestly, it just sounded like more fun than the alternative: Math Club. Those were the only two electives with openings. Isn't switching schools in the middle of the year great? With the number of times my mom has moved us around for her work, I should be used to it by now, but it had taken me until the beginning of sophomore year to make friends at my old school. Then a couple months later, away we went and now I had to start all over.

Anyway, on the upside, I had on good authority from my neighbor in Chemistry, Joanna, that Mathew Artesta was in this acting class. Despite having only attended my new school for a short three weeks, I was already head over heels in love. That is what I keep telling myself anyway, as I had never really had a boyfriend before. I didn't talk to Matt much, he was only in a few of my classes, but somehow I knew he was amazing. He listened to Journey and Queen and AC/DC, he rode a skateboard to school, he always had the right answer, he said funny things in class, and he was handsome. I sort of watched him whenever he was around me, not that I'm a stalker or anything. He was everything I was looking for. So when the school finally sorted out my activities schedule, I was looking forward to trading the free period in the library I had been enjoying for the past three weeks for the acting class.

Our acting instructor was a bit different. I guess that is par for the course when you are an actress. Ms. Donahue, though she told us to call her Liz, had an affinity for the bizarre. You could tell from her outfits (anything from flowing scarves and beads by the dozen to tight leather pants and chokers), her hair (long, curly, all over the place), and her behavior (erratic). Just picture Professor Trelawney from *Harry Potter* or Ms. Frizzle from *The Magic School Bus* and

you are almost there. Liz had a very hands on way of teaching, which I learned my very first day in her class. I learned a lot that day.

“Everyone,” Liz announced in her best center stage voice, “this is Ariel Leon, our newest addition to the sacred art.” I waved shyly and made a beeline for the back of the room. I know I was in an acting class, but I really did not like being in front of other people. After introducing me to the class, Liz went over what they had been covering before I arrived. Only half listening, I looked around the room at my fellow acting students. Matt was in the front row, hanging on Liz’s every word. I heard from several sources (mainly my Chemistry partner again, as well as her friends, all of whom were also in the acting class and liked to chatter) that he was a major theater buff with aspirations to be an actor. There were a few kids in the back whispering among themselves. Clearly they didn’t really care about acting, they just picked the easiest sounding elective. Everyone else was paying all due attention to a review lecture, eyes politely forward rather than actually engaged.

Once the basics were covered for my benefit, we moved on to the part of class Liz was legendary for, her acting exercises.

“Okay,” our teacher said, clapping her hands together. All eyes were on her. “Today we are going to try something new. I want to gauge how comfortable you are with each other as well as how brave you are. These two things are essential parts of being actors. You must trust your peers and be ready to do anything, especially in front of said peers.” We all looked at each other, half excited, half nervous. Some of my classmates had talked about Liz making her students parade around the room as different goofy characters, or speak and even sing using various emotions. I hoped today was not one of those times. Liz waited for our attention to return to her. “So, in pairs, you are each going to stand about five feet apart and face one another. Then each

person will take a step towards their partner. Switch off and keep going until you are too uncomfortable to step any closer. The pair that stands the closest wins the crown of King Henry the Eighth.” Many students snickered at this. The crown of Henry the Eighth was a plastic, gold costume crown Liz used as a reward. Joanna told me she claimed that it was actually worn by the actor portraying Henry the Eighth in a performance of Shakespeare’s play on Broadway, but the students were all pretty sure she had bought it from Party City.

Once Liz had finished giving her instructions, she immediately began pairing us up. It was as if she knew that without her intervention, no one was going to budge. Not when she had just asked us to invade one another’s personal space in front of the entire class. She made sure that no one was paired with his or her friends. I was focusing on controlling my breathing at the thought of the impending mortification and praying to the most benevolent and understanding deities I could name that I wasn’t paired with Marvin, the gross weirdo with long, greasy hair and pimples taking over his face who talked to himself and smelled, when I heard Liz call my name. Then she said who my partner was and I was tempted to beg for Marvin instead.

“Ariel, you will be with Mathew.” Was it just me, or did her voice carry an edge of doom? I glanced his way and he smiled. I had no idea what my face was doing, but I could guess it wasn’t pretty. I couldn’t be paired with Matt. What if he didn’t want to step close to me? Or, to prove he was a great actor, what if he came very close? I wasn’t sure which was worse.

“Hey, Ariel right?” Matt said as I walked to stand near him. My heart went into overdrive, thrilled he knew my name despite the fact that Liz had said it only moments ago.

“Yeah, that’s me.” Lame. Why am I so lame? While I tried to formulate something cleverer to say, Liz blew her best cab whistle and signaled us to begin. Matt and I moved what

seemed like a very short five feet apart and stood facing one another. His deep, brown eyes found my pale blue ones and I looked at my feet before I could get lost. I didn't look up again until he cleared his throat. He had already taken a step towards me. Now it was my turn.

I considered taking a tiny step, just to prolong the inevitable closeness, but I worried it might hurt his feelings if I seemed reluctant to be near him. I took a normal sized stride towards my partner. Then he moved closer. Then me. Around us students laughed at themselves and one another as they were forced outside their comfort zones, or else remained sullenly silent as their limits were reached. I subconsciously fidgeted with my hair, the light brown locks never lying flat. The nearer Matt came, the quieter the noise around us grew, until I heard nothing. We were in our own private bubble of anticipation.

His steps never varied, always about half a foot in length. Mine grew incrementally smaller in my nervousness. I traded off between keeping my eyes glued to my feet and watching his face. Seeing the confidence there simultaneously irritated and inspired me. I steeled myself, determined not to be the first to stop. He was two feet away, one foot away, half a foot away. My turn again. I shuffled forward an inch or two. For a moment, he hesitated and I thought he was going to stop. I stared straight into his eyes, this time allowing their dark depths to engulf me. I waited for him to make his choice. He started to move and I held my breath. His foot touched the floor and we were nose to nose.

"Hello again." A sort of half smile played around the edges of Matt's dark pink mouth. Only now did I notice the small scar above his upper lip, disrupting the otherwise smooth, tan skin and momentarily distracting me from my sudden annoyance with him. We hadn't spoken one word to each other throughout the duration of this exercise and he decided now was a good

time to strike up a conversation. I tried to think of something, anything, to say but the only thing on my mind was the garlic bagel I had eaten for lunch.

“Um...” I didn’t dare take a breath. We stood like that for what was probably only moments, moments that seemed to contain lifetimes.

“So, how are you liking it here so far?” He was relentless. Did he mean here at school or here inches from his face? I fought a smile and shrugged. Matt’s eyebrows furrowed as I avoided making small talk once again. He began to take a step back, his eyes apologetic. He thought he was too close, I realized, that he made me too uncomfortable.

“No!” I practically shouted without thinking. Thankfully my unintended volume was covered by the noise of the class. “You uh, want to win, don’t you?” I asked in a deliberately softer tone. Matt grinned and resumed his position facing me. I looked around the room without moving my head, both gauging the competition and avoiding Matt’s gaze. There were several pairs standing within inches of one another, but no one as close together as us. “Looks like we’re the closest so far,” I whispered. Matt glanced at the others.

“Yeah,” he agreed. He was still smiling, as if heartened by the fact that I didn’t mind being so near him. We were quiet again. It was funny that I had been dreading the moment we stood this close together, but now that I was here, it was not so bad. I hoped that Matt felt the same. He stared intently at my face and I struggled not to blush or make a face or move at all really. His dark hair shined in the fluorescent light overhead. I resisted the urge to brush a piece that had fallen over one eye out of his face.

Almost everyone had stopped moving at this point, finally at their courage's end. Still, Liz did not call the exercise to a close, as if urging us to move even closer, testing our endurance of this extreme proximity.

"I wonder what she is waiting for," Matt mused, his eyes on the instructor.

"It's like she wants us to keep going," I answered, too late realizing my mistake. Matt looked down between us, the light of Liz's silent challenge in his eyes. Oh no, he was not serious. I could already see him shifting his weight as he prepared to move closer still. Except there was no closer. I had to do something. He lifted his foot when I said, "Wait. Uh... isn't it my turn?" Matt peered curiously at me, but didn't argue. He gestured for me to continue. Oh crap, now what was I supposed to do? He was waiting, so I knew I had to act quickly. I did the only thing I could think of, the one thing I was trying to avoid, the only thing left to do. I stepped closer.

My cheek was millimeters from his, and that space only existed because I was significantly shorter than him. Every other surface of our bodies touched. My eyes were shut tight and I was again holding my breath as I waited for Matt to react. Half of me screamed for him to move back and break the tension filled contact. The other half begged for him to stay just where he was. He was very warm. I could feel his muscled chest resting against my own. So many times I had dreamed about being this close to him and now here I was. His arms hung at his sides and I could feel them brush gently against my waist. I held mine firmly back, fists balled. He had still not shifted an inch when I could finally hold my breath no longer. I let it out slowly and opened my eyes to study his expression. He was looking down at me, bemused.

"What?" I breathed. I felt him shrug.

“You are a very devoted actress.”

My face reddened. “Well, I’m not really an actress,” I confessed. His silence compelled me to continue. “I, uh, only took this class because it was this or Math Club. I really hate math.” His body shook with laughter. I leaned back to see his entire face, about to ask what was so funny when Liz called the class to attention.

“This was quite an interesting activity. I learned much about you as both people and actors.” And with that, the exercise was finished.

A collective sigh of relief swept through the room as pairs stepped apart. I was wistful as Matt backed away. He didn’t look my way again and said nothing throughout the rest of class. I supposed I would see him again next Monday at two-thirty. That is, if I had the courage to come back to class after what happened today. My mood sunk like a deflated balloon as I exited the room when class had ended. The more I thought back to the exercise, the more humiliation I felt. Hadn’t I just admitted that acting wasn’t my motivation for standing ridiculously close to Matt? Why on Earth did I have to open my mouth? I had no control over myself around him. He was intelligent, and if not acting, then what? He would figure it out. And clearly he didn’t feel the same. He didn’t acknowledge my presence for the rest of class. He likely regretted standing so close to a girl he barely knew. I was debating the best place to hide every following Monday afternoon when I heard someone call my name.

“Ariel!” It was Matt. He ran up beside me, grabbing my hand so I was forced to stop. I flushed but dragged my eyes to meet his. He wore that half smile that I discovered I found beautiful.

“Y-yes?” I stuttered. He held up the gold crown from class. Of course we had won. No one else had been foolish enough to press themselves against their partner. I cringed internally.

“I thought you should have it, since you took the last step.”

“Thanks.” He placed the crown on my head. The edge fell over my eyes and I heard him chuckle. I quickly adjusted it and waited for him to leave. But he didn’t.

“Mind if I walk you out?” It took me a moment before I could manage a nod. We walked down the hall, and I was suddenly overjoyed that the acting classroom was on the other side of the school from the main entrance. We were quiet for a while, but eventually curiosity got the best of me.

“So, what was so funny earlier? You know, when we were...” I trailed off, blushing again. Matt didn’t answer for a moment and I began to think the worst. Clearly, he was laughing about me, maybe even at me. He probably thought I was desperate or pathetic. I focused so hard on not hyperventilating as I spiraled down in a tailspin of paranoia that I nearly missed his next words.

“I really hate math too.” He was grinning at me and for the first time, I returned the smile. He had never let go of my hand.