

**Sing
If You
Can't
Dance**

*For everyone who has had to adjust their
dreams to changing circumstances:
may the life you find instead
turn out to be even better.*

First published in the UK in 2023
by Faber & Faber Limited
The Bindery, 51 Hatton Garden
London, EC1N 8HN
faber.co.uk

Typeset in Sabon by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
All rights reserved
© Alexia Casale, 2023

The right of Alexia Casale to be identified as author of this work has been asserted
in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

*This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade
or otherwise, be lent, resold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the
publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser*

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-37380-2



Printed and bound in the UK on FSC® certified paper in line with our continuing
commitment to ethical business practices, sustainability and the environment.

For further information see faber.co.uk/environmental-policy

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Sing
If You
Can't
Dance

ALEXIA CASALE

faber

Before

Breathless anticipation.

Whispers that keep rising until a chorus of voices say, ‘Shh!’

Runners bustle around the studio, shepherding competitors on and off set. Technicians glare as they manoeuvre their huge rolling cameras to get the best angle on each group.

The air thrums with urgency and excitement and anxiety.

Nearly our turn, nearly our turn.

Just a few minutes now.

Keep it together. Keep the energy up. Harness it.

Swallow down the swoop of sickness. It’s just nerves. So many nerves I almost feel dizzy.

But I’m not, of course. That feeling in my chest is tension. I’m fine. Everything is totally one hundred per cent fine. I am not sick or injured. And I’m certainly not going to do a Pip and start whinging on about fainting just because I’m a teeny-tiny bit nervous.

We're about to record our second-round TV audition for a national dance competition. This is officially the biggest thing to happen to anyone in our whole school in the history of forever. So we're all allowed to be nervous. But, as leader, I'm not going to be the one turning it into a drama. I've got this. Everything is totally, completely, absolutely fine.

After all, we got full points in the first audition, sending us straight through. Now this – today – will determine whether we get onto the live shows.

Just one year ago there was no PopSync. Now look at us, standing on the verge of a future so big and amazing I feel myself sway as if the ground's gone unsteady, sending me jostling into Maddie.

She yelps as my sudden weight tips her into the wall.

'Shh!' a harassed young man screeches as he hurries past with a roll of gaffer tape.

Maddie wraps her arms around me as we giggle into each other's shoulders.

'Ohmigod!' she whispers in my ear. 'Ohmigod, Ven.'

'I know, I know, I know,' I whisper back, so overwhelmed I can't think of a single thing to snark about.

'Ready?' says the smiley assistant floor manager, whose job title seems to translate to 'person in charge on this side of the set'.

And here it is. Our moment.

One second we're walking forwards, then we're on stage and Maddie and I are introducing PopSync. A moment later we're in position and our music is on and this is it, this is it, *this is it*.

I want to remember every second, relish every breath, but I'm puffing for air in that irritating way I've been doing on and off this last month, as if I've somehow been getting less fit from all the rehearsing. And I know it's just nerves, got to block it out, focus, but my muscles are pulling and aching too – have been for weeks . . .

But I can't fail now. Not when we're a minute away from the finish line.

Just focus.

My eyes blur on the lights. I tip off balance mid-spin, reeling then correcting. Did anyone see? I'm at the back for this part so maybe they didn't notice . . .

But now my knee is doing that thing where it feels like it's bending in different directions above and below the joint and I can't seem to get my foot down right and the next spin is wrong too.

I'm mucking it up. I'm mucking everything up.

Don't panic. Just keep going.

Only my knee is stabbing pain up and down my leg and my flick-kick is wrong, there's something wrong, and I really might throw up, oh God I'm actually going to throw up because my leg is wrong, wrong, wrong and I can't breathe and I'm going to throw up in front of all these cameras, on-stage, on the best day of my life.

One of the technicians has obviously realised because they're lowering the studio lights. Thank God for that.

Maybe they'll fade us to dark and let us start again . . .

The whole stage goes black.

Raised voices all around. A hand on my arm.

I need to say something – keep the girls calm till they put the lights on again.

Then someone pulls the floor away.

And I fall and fall and fall.

18(ish) Months Later ...

Before we start, I'm going to be totally upfront and tell you that I don't care whether you like me or not. That's your problem.

Sure, we all fancy the idea of being the type of person everyone likes. The type of person who never has a bad word to say about anyone – the type of person who never has bad words said about them. But how blah would you have to be to pull that off? Honestly, that sort of person sounds like an idiot to me.

I'm not an idiot. I'm a hedgehog. I've got some nice bits but mostly I've got spikes. And sarcasm, which isn't something hedgehogs are known for, but there you go; metaphors are either clichés or they fall apart the minute you examine them. For instance, I'm pretty sure I'm softer on the outside than on the inside. It's a pity that you're in my head, but I'm not going to nice it up for you.

You can call me Ven. It's short for Venetia (pronounced Ven-ee-sha) but if you call me that you'll regret it.

You're probably wondering why you're here, but I don't care about that either. Stay, go, your choice. I'd stick around out of interest, but then I'm smart and you might be dumb as a rock.

First thing to think about if you're sticking around is my Year 12, spring term, Monday to-do list.

Item 1: get to school as late as possible (without officially being late) in order to avoid the temptation to damage Abigail Moss: winsome purveyor of goodness, light and purest spite. It's delaying the inevitable but the anticipation makes it all worthwhile.

Item 2:

Oh, for God's sake. That's *my* parking spot. Yes, literally: not only does it have the disability symbol on it, but my name to boot. (If you're wondering why I'm driving at sixteen, it's legal in the UK when you've got a serious enough mobility impairment so let's keep our focus on the person actually breaking the law – and the rules of basic decency.) I back up then angle in so I can peek at the woman's dashboard – not a blue badge in sight.

Well then excuse me (or don't) while I make judicious use of the horn.

And the finger.

And the roll-down-the-window-and-shout-obscenities.

And here comes Ms Walker, head of Sixth Form, just as I'm really getting into the swearing.

My life is complete. With detention as the cherry on top.

Item 2: figure out a dastardly plan to make whichever teacher is running detention at least twice as miserable as I am. I'll probably just keep up a steady stream of impolite conversation. That usually does it for most people.

Ms Walker's telling off means the pair of us miss assembly. I'm devastated.

I only get one day's detention (and I'm allowed to choose the day) even before I do the casual-lean-against-the-car-door then the I'm-just-going-to-slowly-slide-down-into-a-heap.

Before The Disaster with PopSync Ms Walker would have told me to stop being a drama queen. Now she immediately ushers me inside and offers to call an ambulance – the standard 'this school is not inviting a lawsuit, we did everything strictly by the book' response. I decline in a show of womanful stoicism. To be fair, I'm not putting it on – but that's not to say I'm not happy to make the most of it.

'I really don't know what else we can do, Ven, to avoid these ... regrettable disturbances over your parking situation. I understand it's very provoking, but as we've now added a named signpost I can't see what other options there are. We *do* send all our parents regular bulletins about parking issues ...'

I zone out. I'm only in trouble because of the number of dimwits who think there's nothing wrong with parking in disabled spots provided they're in a rush and 'it's just for a second'. Because, yeah, with ten of you doing that one after another, of course that won't be a problem. And then there are the ones who think that

if they're helping a disabled person run an errand they're entitled to a little 'extra convenience'. Just give me a Licence to Savage and I'll 'extra convenience' them into needing their own disabled parking, then we'll see how they feel about it.

Ms Walker is still mid hand-wringing à la 'it's not our responsibility to ensure you can actually park at school', so I do the 'casual leaning on the wall' thing again and Ms Walker takes the hint. 'Shall I walk with you to class?' she asks.

'Nope, but I'd better go so I can sit down.'

'Just make sure you report for detention when you're able or ... Under the circumstances ...' She rubs at her forehead. I slump a bit more and work on looking pale. 'Let's forget it this one last time. But please don't take this to mean that we're condoning your behaviour.'

I resist the urge to perk up, then slope off to class. I must be pulling one of my most unpleasant faces, and slopping along particularly badly, as it's one of those rare days when people coming the other way actually move for me. Why is it that those in a rush are usually so unwilling to skirt around people in the slow-moving-obviously-mobility-impaired category? Today, I'm both glad and frustrated to be given a wide berth. I would dearly like to gift at least one idiot an 'accidental' smack with my stick.

And, lo, destiny has answered my prayer, for who is leaning in the maths classroom doorway but my favourite person in the world, Abigail Moss. Now, if I can just time this so my stick goes down *plunk*, square on the middle of her foot, without it looking entirely intentional ...

‘Venetia, darling, are you all right? You’re looking shocking,’ she says, all wide-eyed innocence.

My moment for ‘accidentally’ damaging her is gone. Fate still hates me.

‘Get out of the way,’ I snap.

Although she is purposefully blocking the door and making a patronising pity-face, she draws back as if I’m the one being nasty for no reason. ‘I’m just offering you a hand, Venetia.’

‘I’ll take your hand when you’re happy for me to detach it from the rest of you first,’ I gasp, leaning against the wall as frustration and tiredness set the corridor rippling under my feet.

Abigail makes her face go all hurt, though her snake-eyes tell the usual story of delight. Then one of her pack draws her away, making comforting noises, and I manage to slip past. My classmates look away as I head for the first empty seat. It’s messy going and I know I am clenching my jaw and my eyes are glazed, but the alternative is a nosedive into the carpet. And if you’ve seen my school’s carpets, you’ll understand why this is to be avoided at all costs.

When I get to the chair, I tuck the strap of my bag around the back, brace my hands on the desk and let myself drop, slowly crumpling forwards till I can rest the side of my face against the – *yuck* – slightly sticky surface of the table. Someone comes up, as someone always does, and starts to Fuss at me. I raise a slightly shaking hand and present them with the ‘leave me alone’ finger.

There is a wash of tutting then the gossip resumes over my head.

When I hear the change in sound that signals the arrival of Mr Singh, I slowly sit myself up and try to drag my hair into some semblance of ‘that’ll do’. Propping my chin on my hand, I take a stab at gazing soulfully out of the window.

I’m not sure I’m doing it right – I still feel pissed off rather than wistful.

Just past the school wall, a boy is getting out of a car: a tall, slim boy with long black wavy hair. I don’t recognise him (and I know I’d have remembered, even if we’d just passed in the corridor), but second week of spring term seems a weird time to join a new school.

The boy raises a hand to run it through his curls then suddenly pulls the hand away and hunches his shoulders forwards, letting his hair fall back over his face. It half makes me want to look closer, and half makes me feel I should look away.

Before I can decide, there’s a noise by my shoulder. I look up to find that Mr Singh is not amused by my ‘staring soulfully out of the window’ efforts.

MONDAY TO-DO LIST

Item 3: find a way to make it Tuesday already.