

THE
GIRL
ON THE
TUBE

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Reformation
Lightning

Grey pleated skirt.

Navy blazer.

Crisp white shirt.

Green striped necktie. *A tie!*

I cannot *believe* I have to wear this getup. Every. Single. Day. This country is weird.

If it wasn't for the frizzy brown hair, I'd hardly recognize the girl in the mirror. I grab my brush and tug through my untamable mop.

"You ready?" Dad hollers from the kitchen.

"Almost!"

I give up. There's no fixing it. I find a hairband and twist and pull until my hair submits into a ponytail, then I slip my feet into my brand-new Mary Janes that Dad bought me earlier this week. Here in England, you can't wear any old shoes to school like you can in America, here you have to wear school approved shoes. Why this style of shiny black shoe with a strap jutting across the middle got the name *Mary Janes* I'll never know, but I decide my right shoe will be *Mary* and my left shoe will be *Jane*.

I examine myself in the mirror one last time from every angle. Front, back, and side. At least my room came with a full-length mirror attached to the wall.

My room.

But it's not really. My room is back home, in Wisconsin.

"Addie! You don't want to be late on the first day of school!"

"Coming Dad!" I grab my backpack and find Dad making toast in the kitchen.

"Look at you," he says. "Very smart."

"Why do I have to wear this?"

"Because all the kids in London wear school uniforms."

I sigh and ransack the fridge for the strawberry jam.

"Just think of the time you'll save by not having to decide what to wear every morning. Oh, I forgot." Dad thuds a small stout jar on the counter. "Someone at work gave me this to try."

"What's that?"

"*Marmite*. You eat it on toast I think."

I unscrew the yellow lid and dip my pinky into what looks like chocolate syrup, then pop my finger into my mouth. *Gag!* What is this, beef paste? Whatever it is, it's definitely *not* chocolate syrup! I gesture for Dad to quick get me a glass of water.

Dad grins. "I've heard it's an acquired taste." He hands me a cup and I swish water around my mouth to wash away the salty poison.

The toast pops. Dad spreads on a thick layer of strawberry jam and hands it to me. By the time I gobble

it down, the butterflies in my gut have migrated to my throat, but I don't mention them. Dad wants me to be brave. So I take one last sip of orange juice, sling my school bag over my shoulder as Dad grabs his work bag, and we fly out the door.

Our apartment is on the fourth floor of a brick building south of the River Thames, not far from the high street that holds all the shops and restaurants. For the past month it's just been me and Dad and all of London. We munched fish and chips under the London Eye, and cruised past Big Ben, and even celebrated my twelfth birthday on September 1st by zipping up the elevator to the top of the pointy Shard building. But now, ready or not, it's time for school; for Dad to teach at the university and for me to start year seven.

We pass the Vietnamese restaurant that serves soft-as-pillow dumplings and merge into the current of people flowing toward the station.

"You remember how to get there?" Dad asks.

"First we take the green line."

"Right. The District line," Dad clarifies.

"Then we change to the blue line..."

"Piccadilly."

"And get off at... Barry's Court?"

"Close," Dad says. "*Barons* Court."

Up ahead, I spy the bright red circle with a horizontal blue bar through the middle that marks all of London's Underground stations. We hurry past the coffee kiosk and the purple flower hut and enter East Putney Station.

I dig out my travel card from my pocket and hold it against the electronic reader until the tiny light on the barricade flashes green. The barriers flap open, we step through, and Dad and I join a herd of strangers plodding up the stairs to the platform.

“Welcome to rush hour,” Dad says.

Moments later, a train roars up. Everyone piles on. There aren't any seats left so I clutch the bright yellow safety handles dangling from the ceiling and execute a half pull up, my feet swinging off the ground. The train jerks forward. I lose my balance and drop down on a foot.

“Sorry,” I say to the foot whose owner is wearing orange stripy socks and a serious grey suit.

He wordlessly scolds me with his eyes.

The train is brimming with kids in uniforms. A group of boys in maroon blazers and black ties huddles by the door. A cluster of students in grey blazers and red ties leans over a phone. Some of the kids are wearing navy blazers and dark green ties, just like me, which means we're heading to the same school.

Even though we're technically on the Underground, this part of the District line slithers up and over the sludgy brown Thames before dipping underneath the city. Up through the rooftops we sail, where the brick homes resemble white frosted gingerbread houses and the chimneys remind me of *Mary Poppins*.

At each station the train jolts to a stop, but not for long. The doors swish open, and everyone in the train squeezes toward the middle to make space for more

people. Three girls in navy blazers get on, chatting as if they've known each other forever. They probably have. Just like my best friend Lauren and I have known each other since we were four. Lauren and I have always started school together. Except for today.

A hot lump claws my throat. One of the navy-blazer girls catches me staring at her. I quickly look above her head, to the advert sign of a yawning woman who needs vitamins.

"This is us," Dad says as we pull up to Earl's Court Station. The carriage doors open, and we tumble out. "Now what Addie girl?"

He's testing me. We practiced my school route a couple of days ago and he wants to see if I remember. The navy-blazer girls are heading towards the escalators, so I follow. "Down to the... the... pickle something line."

"Piccadilly."

We step on the escalator that transports us to the belly of the city. The biggest rule about riding escalators in London is to *stand on the right*. That way anyone late for work can blow past you on the left and not get any more annoyed than they already are. Down we descend, flashing past poster after poster of shows and concerts in the world above.

London is two cities really, one on top of the other. Above ground, it bustles with double decker busses and businesses and sights like Buckingham Palace. But underneath all of that you'll discover a whole other world, a labyrinth of tunnels where people scurry

like mice and trains rush through giant tubes. The Underground holds London together. It keeps the city connected and flowing, like veins in a body.

The long escalator spits us out and Dad and I find the westbound platform and wait for the next train. I keep my toes behind the bright yellow line that reads *MIND THE GAP* and peer down the gloomy hole in the wall. Moments later, bright headlights pierce the dark tunnel. A train snakes up. The doors beep open and Dad and I clamber on.

The Piccadilly line is hot and smelly, much tighter and scummier than the wide airconditioned District line. Sweat trickles down my side. If only I could peel off this blazer! But we're jammed packed in this canister like socks stuffed in a drawer and I can't even lift my hands.

Another London rule: don't look anyone in the eye, especially on a crowded train. The more surrounded you are, the more you pretend other people don't exist, even if your nose happens to be trapped in someone's armpit. Passengers stare blankly into space or look at shoes, books, or phones, anything but one another. Unless, of course, you're riding with your Dad.

Dad catches my eye. *One stop*, he mouths as the rub of wheels against the rails heightens to a deafening screech.

Finally, we reach Barons Court. I push past passengers, hurdle over suitcases bound for Heathrow airport, and squeeze out the door.

Air. Space. Relief!

"We made it," Dad says unbuttoning his suit coat.

“I miss you driving me to school.”

“You miss my singing, don’t you?”

“Dad, your singing is the worst!”

If I were starting school back home in America, Dad could get me to school in six minutes flat. We’d jump in the car, zip to school, and he’d sing along to whatever happened to be playing on the radio, even if he didn’t know the words. It’s true, Dad is a terrible singer. But he’s right, I miss it. And our car. And my old school. And having Lauren beside me.

We head up the steps, exit the station, and turn left.

“Dad?”

“Yeah.”

“Lots of the kids ride the Tube on their own.”

“No yellow school busses here.”

“Some of them seemed to be my age.”

“I suppose so.”

We wait for the green man signal and cross the busy street. The school looms before me, proud and impressive looking in its sturdy brick exterior. My stomach twists and turns.

“Remember,” Dad says, “this is the first day of high school for everyone in your year.”

“But a lot of them will already know each other.” My voice sounds weak, like someone is squeezing my throat.

“Some will, some won’t. You’ll do great. You’re my brave girl. Don’t be nervous.”

How do you make yourself not be nervous? Is there a trick I should know?

Year seven is the bottom rung of high school and most of the students look older than me. Maybe the school forces everyone to dress the same so everyone feels as if they belong. It's not working. I don't belong. I may look like I fit in but deep down, I know the truth. I should be home.

What's more, Dad *really* doesn't belong at this school either. Where are the other parents? Nowhere. We're nearing the front entrance and I want to turn around. Head back to Wisconsin where I belong, where I should be starting sixth grade in new jeans and a carefully chosen t-shirt, surrounded by other kids – kids I've known since kindergarten, wearing new jeans and carefully chosen t-shirts.

London was cool for a while. Playing tourist with Dad was fun, but summer is over. We've hit real life. I'm ready to go home.

I spot the same trio of girls from the station. They look like they're having the time of their lives. One glances my way but not for long. Why should I matter to her? She's got friends and I'm just the new kid.

The first day of school used to be about swapping stories. Seeing friends you haven't seen all summer. Checking out everyone's outfits.

Not anymore. Now it's about keeping it together. Feeling like you're invisible *and* sticking out. Hoping to go unnoticed and wishing someone would see you. Survival.

"You ready?" Dad asks.

No. Not at all. My stomach hurts. For some reason I want to find a rock, a big, hard rock and throw it at the circle of chatty girls. Break them apart like bowling pins.

But I don't say any of these things to Dad. Instead, I force a smile.

“Ready.”