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I never wanted to go on exchange in the first place. When Miss Martínez gave out the letters I wasn't going to bother to take one but Fern grabbed two and passed one to me.

'Wow!' she breathes, her eyes lighting up as she scans the information. 'A fortnight in Spain! I can't believe it. And it's dead cheap. Count me and Jaime in, Miss.'

'You'd better ask your parents first,' warns our new languages teacher. 'That's what the parental consent forms are for. You stay with a Spanish student in their own home but then you have to put them up in return. It's a big commitment. That's how we manage to keep the costs down.'

'Wicked! Do we get to choose who we stay with?' asks Fern excitedly. 'Bags me the good-looking guy!'

'Sorry,' says Miss Martínez sternly. 'Girls will be placed with girls and boys with boys. And, by the way, I'll be

coming as well to keep an eye on you all.'

A universal groan ripples round the classroom in a Mexican wave of sound but actually, nobody really minds. In fact, Miss Martínez coming on the trip is a plus as far as I'm concerned. She's young and pretty, with long dark hair and a great figure, but she's no push-over. When she'd started, the boys thought they'd try it on but she was having none of it and had soon cut them down to size. She didn't take any stick from the more bitchy girls in the class either. Now she's shown who's boss, she's loosened up a bit, but you still wouldn't mess with her. At least you knew she'd be able to keep everyone on a tight rein.

That's important in our school. We've suffered a lot in the past from teachers who can't control us. It's not that we're that bad, it's just that my class is particularly noisy and there are a few kids who will always try their luck if they think they can get away with it. Like Jason and Adam and Holly. And Fern, to a degree, though she's more loud than bad. Before you know it, they've gone too far and the teacher's lost it and then we all get the blame and the whole class is slammed into detention which is JUST NOT FAIR!

Even the naughty kids recognize this and say things like, 'It was me, Sir, not the rest of the class,' or 'It's not Jaime's fault, she never does anything wrong,' which is

true. Not because I'm a goody two shoes by nature, I hasten to add, but because I would rather die than draw attention to myself.

But teachers, especially supplies who we get a lot of as some of the staff in our school make a habit of being off sick, see it as a sign of weakness to back down when students helpfully point out to them that they are being unfair. So we all get banged into detention on a weekly basis which is very annoying indeed, especially when, like me, you haven't done a thing. But I could no more point this out than walk naked into assembly, which is one of my regular nightmares, so I leave it to Mum to complain at parents' evenings.

Anyway, I'd already decided there was no way I was going to stay in a stranger's house as part of their family, even though Miss did make the exchange sound like fun. But I knew for me the misery of sitting at a dinner table trying to make small talk with unfamiliar people, sharing someone else's bedroom, using someone else's bathroom, having someone else's mum doing my washing . . . yeek! . . . would far outweigh the fun to be had on all the excursions that we would go on.

I'm so pathetic. I've never even managed a sleepover yet and I'm nearly fourteen. To be honest, I've not tried for a year or two. The last time Mum had to come and rescue me at two o'clock in the morning from Fern's

house because I had stomachache. I did, honest, I wasn't making it up.

What I didn't tell anyone though was, my stomach was hurting because I needed to go to the loo but I was holding it in because . . . well, I didn't want to go in Fern's bathroom. It's beautiful, all shiny mirrors and white marble tiles from floor to ceiling. It had a tall vase of fresh lilies by the loo and a white raffia chair beside the bath with big plump cushions. Next to it was a table with a selection of books on it. I never realized you could sit and read in bathrooms. Anyway, there was no way I could do my business in that perfect room, especially as, when I went to go in there, Fern's older brother, Duncan, was coming out of his bedroom too, but he stood back and said, 'After you.'

That was it. Constipation.

If I went on exchange, I wouldn't poo for a fortnight.

I find family life incredibly embarrassing. I mean, how do you manage living with so many other people? There is no privacy. The other day Fern's period started in school and she actually rang her dad up at work and asked him to get her some tampons on his way home. I went red just listening to her. And what was even worse, she did it in front of Adam, and he never turned a hair. He's got two sisters of his own; I suppose he's used to it. It's not a big deal for them.

It is for me though.

Actually, if I'm honest, I find life embarrassing, full stop. I guess mine's been pretty sheltered. There's just Mum and me, you see. No one else. My dad died when I was little; I can hardly remember him. Sometimes I worry that Mum will die too. If she's late home from work or sometimes in the middle of the night when I can't sleep, I think about what would happen to me if she dropped dead. I suppose I'd end up in care, with lots of other people. Which I'd hate.

Mum calls me her Little Stressling. She also calls me Wilma Worryguts, Tessie Tizzwizz and Minnie Mouse. I know she'd like me to lighten up and be more outgoing. *I'd* like me to lighten up and be more outgoing but it's easier said than done. The more I think about my shyness, the worse it gets.

The funny thing is, deep inside, I'm not shy at all. I mean, I don't think I've got low self-esteem or anything. I'm not boasting, but I know I'm not bad-looking, because boys are always trying to get off with me and Fern says if she had my straight fair hair and figure she'd flaunt it, no worries. I don't know what it is. On my own I'm a real show-off, like I'll sing and dance in front of the long mirror in Mum's wardrobe like nobody's business, but when there's anyone else around, I clam up. It's like an affliction.

Anyway, I crammed the letter into my bag and forgot all about it. Big mistake. Two days later my mother comes home from work and starts rooting through my bag.

'What are you doing?' I ask in alarm.

'Holly's mum tells me she's going on exchange,' says Mum. 'Ah, here it is.' She brandishes the letter in my face. 'Why didn't you say anything?'

'I don't want to go,' I say airily, like it's no big deal. Why hadn't I got rid of the incriminating evidence? 'It's boring.'

'Don't be silly,' scoffs Mum. 'It's a great opportunity.' She sifts through the information. 'It takes place over the Easter holidays!' she says, her voice rising in excitement.

My heart sinks. I know exactly where she's coming from. Mum only gets Friday and Monday off at Easter whereas the school holidays stretch to a fortnight. She hates leaving me on my own and pays old Mrs Bick from down the road to come in at holiday times even though there's no need. All she does is sit on the sofa, watching daytime soaps and stuffing her face with biscuits, and she pops home every hour, supposedly to check on her flea-bitten dog, but she comes back stinking of smoke so it's obvious she's been feeding her nicotine habit.

'It's really cheap!' Mum exclaims and I can see her precious tenners skipping merrily back out of Mrs Bick's

hand and into the housekeeping. 'This would be such a good thing to do.'

'No it wouldn't, it would be horrible.'

'It's not just going to school, you know. They lay on trips for you. There's one to a castle and another to an art gallery,' she says, scanning the pages.

'I hate castles and art galleries,' I mutter, but it's not really true.

'They say there will be a festival on because it's Easter. They go in for them in a big way . . .'

'Big deal!' I say rudely, though this does sound interesting. What sort of festival? I wonder. Music? Dancing in the streets? Film or theatre? Mum carries on reading out the itinerary.

'. . . a visit to the mountains . . . a day at the seaside . . . a tour of the city, with time for shopping. How lovely!'

Mum beams at me.

I scowl at her.

The next minute she's crouching down beside me. 'What is it, Tizz Wizz?'

'Dunno.' I shrug my shoulders but she's not fooled.

'Holly's going,' she urges.

'So?' I know what she means without her saying it. Holly's mum and dad are in the middle of splitting up, but Holly's still brave enough to go on the exchange

'And Fern. She's going too.'

'I know she is.' She'd talked about nothing else for the past two days. 'Everyone's going,' I admit.

Mum sighs heavily. 'It would do wonders for your self-confidence, you know.' She tucks a stray wisp of hair behind my ears. 'Why don't you give it a go? I'm sure you'd like it if you tried.'

I meet her eyes. They're soft and pleading. Poor Mum. Why did she have to end up with a wuss like me? I knew how she fretted about leaving me on my own and I really did not want to spend a fortnight sitting on the sofa with Mrs Bick, watching her dunk biscuits into her tea and listening to her clearing her throat and sniffing every couple of minutes.

'You'd be picking up a bit of Spanish before you start your GCSEs next year,' she prompts.

That's true. And if I didn't go, everyone else would have a head start on me.

'Would I have to speak Spanish?'

'That's the general idea.'

'But I don't know any.'

'They know that. That's the reason you're going there, to learn the language. You'll pick it up quickly this way, spending time in the country, living with a nice little Spanish girl, going to school with her.'

She made it sound easy-peasy.

'You'll all be in the same boat,' she says encouragingly. 'Starting from scratch. No one will expect you to be able to say much.'

Just as well. I'd be struck dumb with embarrassment anyway.

But actually, it wouldn't matter, would it, if I was? They'd just think I didn't understand.

'They say they match you really carefully with your exchange partner,' says Mum quietly.

'How can they do that?'

'Well you could ask to be paired with someone like you.'

Someone like me? Who was that? Someone who hates attracting attention to herself, but paradoxically always manages to do so by her amazing ability to blush to the roots of her hair.

Actually, that might be quite nice for a change. I mean, Fern is great, but she's so super-confident she hasn't got a clue what it feels like to be me. 'I wish I had your figure!' she'd moan, failing to grasp how much I hated the attention my newly acquired boobs brought me. It would be good to make friends with someone else who preferred to shun the limelight. We could talk about what it felt like, once I'd learned enough Spanish. Then she could come over here and I could teach her English and show her around. We could be friends.

'An only child perhaps,' continues Mum. We're thinking on the same wavelength.

'Would I have to share a bedroom?'

'I wouldn't have thought so. You might even have an en-suite bathroom to yourself.'

'Do you reckon?' I say hopefully.

'I wouldn't be surprised. When I stayed in a Spanish villa on holiday, every bedroom had an en-suite. And that was years ago.'

'Really?'

'Look,' says Mum, pressing home her advantage, 'there's a section here for special requests. Why don't you put down exactly what you want?'

I hesitate for a second. It wouldn't do any harm would it, to make a list?

'OK then. But it doesn't mean I'm going to go,' I warn, just in case she thinks it's a done and dusted deal.

'Absolutely,' she says, but I notice she's already signing the parental consent form.

In the end, these are the things I wrote.

I want my exchange partner to:

1. be female.

2. be an only child.

3. provide me with my own bedroom. (compulsory)

4. provide me with my own en-suite bathroom. (compulsory)

5. have a single parent. (optional)
6. be looking for friendship.
7. be genuine, kind and caring.
8. like reading and watching romantic movies.

I wanted two more to make it ten, a nice round number. What I really wanted to write was *be as shy as me,* but that sounded pathetic. In fact, PANIC! My whole list sounded pathetic!

I mean, I did want to have fun on this trip *if* I did decide to go on it. I didn't want to end up with some sad loner just because I have a tendency to blush a bit.

OK. To blush a lot.

But that's not the point. I still like having a good time. So I added:

9. be fit and fun-loving.

Then suddenly I remembered those initials you always see in the personal columns of the newspaper and wrote:

10. have a GSOH.

There! That rounded it off nicely.

'What's a gussoh?' asks Mum, reading over my shoulder.

'A good sense of humour,' I explain. She laughs out loud.

'It reads like one of those dating adverts. You can't put that in.'

'Yes I can! You said I could put down exactly what I wanted. I don't want to stay with a boring old misery-guts.'

Mums know more than you think they do. I should have listened to her.

But I didn't.

That's how I ended up with Concha.