

Grace's number is 1143; like most of the other people here, she has it pinned just above her left breast. Debbie's number is 1682 but she's placed her badge across her belt as she wants to be different. They sit beside each other and watch as a tall boy with bad skin and trembling hands is called into the room.

'State of him,' says Debbie, taking a stick of gum from her pocket, rolling it into a ball and placing it on her tongue.

'He was here last year,' replies Grace. 'We were in the same group. He was wettin' himself. And his ma was with him.'

Debbie shrugs her shoulders and looks away; it's not a good idea to get into conversation with the competition.

Conor paces the floor like an expectant father, running through an arpeggio under his breath; his nerves make his voice quiver. He's wearing a white singlet over blue jeans but he forgot to put deodorant on and he can smell a staleness emerging from beneath his arms. When he was twelve he was Oliver for nine months at the Olympia. He got fired when his voice broke and he couldn't sing the falsetto for *Where Is Love* anymore. He wants this bad. If he can't become a pop-star his father wants him to come to work in his garage but he's decided that he'll leave and try his luck in London. He won't say anything, he'll just go.

A middle-aged woman in a too-tight top is applying a little more colour to her daughter's cheeks. Eight other members of her family are there to support her and they look like they might make trouble if they don't get what they want. 'You're a star,' the girl's mother is repeating over and over like a mantra. 'But don't be arrogant, they don't like that. And remember to look them in the eye when you're singing. And flirt with what's-his-name if you think you can pull it off without looking tarty. Make him think you're up for it. It'll help.' Her daughter, just turned fifteen years old, nods, knowing she doesn't stand a chance.

The door opens and the tall boy with the poor skin emerges. He isn't shaking anymore. He looks shell-shocked. He walks over to another boy, a year or so younger, his brother perhaps, and shakes his head in amazement. 'They said I sounded like nails being dragged down a chalkboard,' he says. 'My life is over. What am I going to do if I can't be famous?'

The other contestants look at him with distaste and edge away from him; they don't want to be tainted by his failure. The door opens again and a young woman with a clipboard emerges, crossing his name off as she goes. She looks around the room and sighs inside before checking her schedule for whose turn it is next. She wants the day to end soon; the judges have promised to listen to her at the end.