

Ukulele Hayley

by Judy Cox

illustrated by
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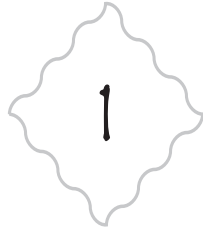
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Hidden Talent?

On the first day of school, Hayley trailed the line of third graders down the hallway. Around the corner. Through the double doors. On their way to music.

“Shrimp!” whispered Skeeter.

Hayley made a face. She hated that nickname. Why did Mrs. McCann have to line them up by size? *It isn't fair*, thought Hayley. All summer she had done everything she could to grow. She had eaten second helpings. She had played soccer. She had done exercises. Last night Mom had measured her, and she'd grown an inch and a half!

But when the third graders lined up, Hayley saw the other kids had grown too. They towered over her. Even Skeeter had grown.

Skeeter had been Hayley's friend since kindergarten. His real name was Scott, but everyone called him Skeeter. Hayley thought it was perfect. For as long

as she could remember, Skeeter had been hanging around. Bugging her, just like a mosquito.

“You’re the runt, now,” Skeeter pointed out.

I’m only one inch shorter than you, she thought. But she couldn’t seem to get the words out. Too shy. Again.

At first Hayley and Skeeter had been the same height—the shortest kids in kindergarten, first, and even second grades. But this summer, when she went to the amusement park with Skeeter and his family, Hayley noticed a change.

Everyone wanted to ride the Monster Masher, but the sign read, “You must be this tall to ride.” Hayley missed it by half an inch. Skeeter made it by half an inch.

He laughed as he boarded the ride. “Shrimp!” he teased. Served him right that he had thrown up afterward!

Hayley was still thinking about that as the line of third graders snaked down the hall past Ms. Lyons, the school principal. Hayley knew Ms. Lyons, but the man standing next to her was a stranger.

Unlike most teachers, he wore a suit and a tie. He carried a shiny briefcase. His gray eyes were cold behind his horn-rimmed glasses, but it was his frown that made Hayley shiver.

“That’s Mr. Penwick,” murmured Hayley’s best friend, Olivia. “He’s on the school board. My mother sold him a house.” Mrs. Watson was a real estate agent. She knew practically everyone in town.

The man was talking to Ms. Lyons in a loud voice. “We’ve got to save money!” he boomed. “I’ll bet the kids won’t even notice the cutbacks.”

The third graders tiptoed past the principal. Ms. Lyons nodded at them approvingly. But as soon as they rounded the corner, Hayley tugged on Olivia’s sleeve. “Cutbacks? What cutbacks? What’s Mr. Penwick mean?” she whispered.

“No field trips.” Olivia shook her head sadly.

“No art classes,” said Skeeter. “No soccer team. PE only once a week.”

“They can’t do that!” said Hayley.

“Mr. Penwick can,” said Olivia. “And—to save electricity—he made us have three weeks of winter break instead of two!”

“Well, that’s a good thing!” said Skeeter.

They stopped talking when they reached the music room. Something was different! There were the usual rows of chairs. The same old music stands. The same old posters on the walls. But instead of Mrs. Smith, the old music teacher, someone new stood in front of the classroom. A tall African American man in a bright red vest and a yellow bow tie. He smiled broadly at the kids.

“Good morning!” he said. “I’m your new music teacher. My name is Mr. Yaeger. But you can call me Mr. Y.”

“Why not?” yelled Skeeter, flopping down into one of the chairs. He laughed at his own joke.

With his shaved head, goatee, and earring, Mr. Y was a big change from Mrs. Beatrice Smith. Mrs. Smith had been the Bridgewater music teacher ever since Hayley was in kindergarten. Mrs. Smith had played an ancient record player. She had sung in a high, quavery voice. All the kids had loved her. Well, most of the kids. Make that some of the kids. She retired last spring. Hayley had eaten cupcakes at her retirement party.

Now, Mr. Y was in charge of the music room.

Mr. Y was still talking. Hayley stopped daydreaming and focused. Just like Dad always told her: “Focus, Hayley. Pay attention.”

“Talent show,” Mr. Y continued. “Anyone can sign up. The show will be December fifth. I’m telling you now, even though it’s only September, so you’ll have time to prepare.”

A talent show! Mrs. Smith had never done anything cool like that!

“I’ll help anyone polish up his or her act,” Mr. Yaeger added. “Just let me know.”

“I can juggle!” shouted Robin.

“Michelle and I can do double Dutch jump rope!” said Zelda. Michelle nodded.

“How about skateboard stunts?” called Skeeter.

“Sorry, no skateboards. We don’t have room on the stage to perform stunts safely,” said Mr. Y.

“Rats!”

“You can do a solo act or work in groups. You can act out skits. You can sing, dance, or play an instrument.”

“I do stand-up comedy,” said Devon.

“As long as it’s clean!” said Mr. Y. “This is a family show!” Everyone laughed.

Lupe didn’t say anything. But then, she never did. She came from Mexico. She’d said “*buenos días*” to Mrs. McCann and had not said anything since.

When music was over, the class lined up. Mr. Y didn’t make them line up by height. But Hayley got at the end anyway. She pulled Olivia into line in front of her.

“I’m going to dance for my talent,” said Olivia. “Ballet.” She twirled gracefully around on her tiptoes. She’d been adopted from China when she was a baby. She went to Chinese Culture Club every Thursday in addition to ballet.

Skeeter slid in front of them. “I’ll bet I can burp ‘The Star-Spangled Banner,’” he said. He belched loudly just to practice.

“I’m going to sign up too!” said Hayley.

“But Hayley, you don’t have any talent,” Skeeter pointed out. “You can’t sing on key. You flunked out of ballet. Your jokes stink. And you can’t juggle,” he added.

“That’s mean!” said Olivia.

Skeeter raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Whaaat? What’d I say?” he asked.

Hayley knew Skeeter didn’t intend to be mean. But his wisecracks still stung. Was Skeeter right? Was she a no-talent shrimp? She picked at a scab on her elbow.

“I must have some talent,” she said at last. “Mr. Y says everyone does. Maybe I just need to find mine!”

Hidden talent. Hayley thought about that as she followed the line back to the third grade room. Maybe her talent was like treasure in a pirate chest. Waiting to be discovered. But what could that talent be?