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Pretty in Blue

I went to every school dance through high school for a total of eight semi-formals and two formals; that's ten dances throughout my secondary school career. My high school throws two semi-formal dances per year for the entire school: Fall Ball and Snowball. I planned at least half of those as vice-president and then president of the class, slaving over minute details for centerpieces as part of the decorations committee only to have people haphazardly throw their coats on them.

I will always remember my two older sisters, Lisa and Michelle, getting ready to go to their respective dances while I was in elementary school. I shared a room with Michelle despite the nine years between us, and I remember the girlish giggles and the cloud of hairspray that filled our room because all of her friends had come over to primp before the festivities. The girls in their different colors and styles of dress paraded down the stairs where their dates waited with corsages and huge grins. I loved how elegant all of the girls looked. I couldn't wait for high school when I would follow in my sisters' footsteps and do the same—the dress shopping, hair, make-up, and the date.

There were three occasions out of those ten dances that I actually had a “date” and those were friends whose tie matched my dress. The first experience with a matching date was my sophomore year Snowball. Ethan Harrison. He was a year older than I was but we had mutual friends because of the music department, Scholastic Bowl, and Model UN. I developed a crush on this lanky, pale guy with cropped auburn hair. He had a penchant for non-Western cultures and was extremely articulate but could lay down a beat and dance with the best of them. The spring before, I first noticed him struggling with his string bass on the bus of the DC music trip. He hung out with my older friends so all of us were naturally together that trip and then afterwards. I got to know Ethan

and quickly became enamored with his intelligence, humor, and down-to-earth personality.

A few of my friends had long-term boyfriends but all I wanted was a date for the dance. I knew if he agreed to it that we would only go as friends but I so badly wanted to go *with* someone. Why not him? I asked him in the hall one day if he could meet me at my locker so that I could ask him a question. I was finally going to take a chance on something new and far more hazardous than enrolling in harder classes, signing up for too many activities, or public speaking—Ethan’s reaction and response would be something that I couldn’t control.

“Hey, ‘Stina. What’s up?” he asked as he pushed one strap of his backpack further up on his shoulder. ‘Stina was a nickname he had created for me to change my three-syllabled name, “Christina,” into a more simplified two-syllabled one.

“Oh, not much,” I replied, blood frantically pumping. I could do this. I was a liberated woman of the 21st century. I could certainly ask a friend to the Snowball, right?

“Ethan, so I know that the dance is coming up in a few weeks and I know that I like to dance,” then I motioned to him “and you like to dance...” I hoped he would get the hint. He didn’t. So I continued, “So we could go...t-t-together.” I stammered out the last bit and I’m sure that my face turned five shades of scarlet.

“Oh. Um—”

“Well, we would definitely only go as friends. I probably should have said that first. I figured it would be fun to go with a friend and match.” I said really quickly trying to salvage the situation.

He looked relieved and replied, “Okay. Well that’s a definite possibility. I’ll let you know. See you later!” and then I responded “Later,” back to him. *Wow, I just embarrassed myself.*

I turned back to face my locker with a hangman’s knot in my stomach and a headache starting to form. *You couldn’t have been more eloquent with that one? And the arm motions too? Oh God.* I closed my locker door and walked down the hall to tell my friends what just happened. They knew I was going to ask him and wondered what his response would be. So when I said “definite possibility,” their faces were just as confused as mine was earlier.

One issue regarding this particular Snowball was that it was the day of my niece, Gracie’s first birthday. Before deciding to ask Ethan to Snowball, I had been grappling with the decision of going to Snowball or the party. I was leaning towards the birthday party but my sisters and my mom told me to take advantage of the dances while I was young. “Gracie won’t even remember it,” they said. There would always be more birthdays and I would spend more time with my niece in the future. Even so, I felt some guilt over missing the party. Without a final answer from Ethan, I was leaning closer and closer to abandoning the

plans for Snowball to stay home with my family.

Within the next three weeks before the dance, I had seen Ethan but he still had not told me if we were going together or not. The rumor going around my group of friends though was that he had asked a freshman, Jordyn, to Snowball and she turned him down. Jordan with a “y”—tall with a narrow bone structure, large green eyes, and bright blonde hair; the only thing I had in common with her physically was my height. I figured she was the reason why he never gave me a concrete answer, but I still wasn’t sure if we were going to go together.

The week of the dance arrived. That gray, Monday afternoon I was sitting in the band hallway waiting for my dad. I could see Ethan as he strolled down the hall towards the door. We said our “heys” and “what’s ups” to each other and then he asked, out of nowhere:

“So what color is your dress?”

“Blue,” I replied with confusion.

“Oh cool. I think I know what shirt and tie I’m going to wear. Do you know where we’re going to go before the dance starts?” he asked me and I froze noticing he said “we’re” and that he knew which shirt he was going to wear. *Are we going together?*

“Umm... we’re taking pictures at Lily’s house and then going to ‘Sunny’s’ for dinner. Afterwards the girls are having a sleepover back at Lily’s.”

“Nice. So what time should I pick you up?” he asked me, and suddenly I had a date. Even if we were going to go as friends, I was going to have my first date for a dance and take pictures, match, and dance together like my sisters had done in the past. My decision for the birthday party was made. I would be going to Snowball.

I knew we were going to have a great time and I kept picturing how the night would go. First I would get ready and then walk down my stairs like in the movies. He would see me and think, *I should give her another chance*. My parents would take a lot of photos where I would act embarrassed but be secretly glad that we were going with each other. After that, we would drive over to Lily’s, our petite, effervescent friend, and take some more pictures, eat a great dinner, and arrive at the dance. This is where my fantasy for the night turned into one of those romantic chick-flick movies. I believed that when one of the slow songs would come on, he would put his arms around my waist and we would sway to some sappy love song. Then he would look at me in the eye and tell me that I looked beautiful—that he was glad he came here with *me*.

When you fill your mind with fantasies that happen in books and movies, you only set yourself up for clichéd disappointment. My life wasn’t *Pretty in Pink* when the quirky girl gets the guy in the end. Consciously, I knew that my life would not be a formulaic teen movie but that never stopped my daydreams.

The day of the dance came. My cousin Sharon, a hairdresser, came over with her big-barreled curling iron, glitter hairspray, and a bag of bobby pins. After

about an hour and a half, my wavy and slightly frizzy hair had transformed into sparkly tendrils around my face. Michelle, having a knack for the dramatic eye, was naturally the one to do my make-up. I slipped into some new and constrictive Spanx, and then came the dress that Lisa picked out. It was a floor-length, sapphire ombre sparkly gown of satin with chiffon overlay. The empire-waist and deep “V” of the sleeveless A-line number was reminiscent of a Grecian goddess.

“Christina, he’s here,” my mom told me. My heart skipped a beat. *The moment of truth.*

I walked out into the living room where Ethan was waiting. He had come a little early. I was grinning from ear-to-ear as I heard many “oohs” and “ahhs.” Ethan, who was sandwiched between grandparents walked up to me and said, “Your hair looks really nice, Christina.” My braces-filled grin faded into a smaller smile and accepted his compliment. *Not the exact reaction I wanted but that’s fine.*

We stood together and took photos and I gave Gracie a big hug and a kiss and together Ethan and I left in his car. I had this feeling that I was missing such a monumental event at home with my family and Ethan’s reaction hadn’t helped. I was going to miss her chubby fists diving into her first piece of cake.

There was awkward small-talk between us in the car until we reached Lily’s house. At the house, my friends and their mothers came up to me saying how beautiful I looked. I appreciated the compliments, but it wasn’t coming from the person I wanted to hear it from most. All of the flashes from the camera had put me in sort of a daze as I hobbled back in my heels to the car to go to Sunny’s for dinner. *I probably should have stayed home, I thought as I got into the car. But I’m going to make the best of this. I’m going to have a great time and –SHIT.* Ethan had taken the corner too quickly and I hit my head against the car window.

“Hey, are you all right?” he asked staring straight ahead out of the windshield.

“Yeah. I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.” I mumbled through as pain was stabbing my temple. *Things can’t get worse.* But of course they can.

Dinner went by and Ethan acted increasingly worse. As the teenage conversation inevitably turned to random celebrities, he immediately started talking about which ones he would “tap.” My friends looked at me with pity and I averted my eyes to focus on the eggplant parmesan placed in front of me. *I wonder if my family has eaten yet; they’re having pasta too.* I looked up from my plate, noticing the stark contrast between my uncomfortable situation and the contented one across me between my friend Maddy and her boyfriend Tom, Ethan’s best friend. He gently reached over and grabbed Maddy’s hand. They were having the happy evening I dreamed about. When I got up to leave after dinner, the waitress tapped me on the shoulder and told me privately to have a good time. I was touched by the fact that this random, unknown woman had been

concerned and upset that my face had been an openbook for my discontent.

We arrived at the dance and Ethan and I saw two of our friends who did not go with our group. They were joking around with us and mentioned being dateless.

“Ethan, I wish that I could be your date,” one of the girls, a notorious flirt, said as she eyed him. *Really? Are you serious? He’s going to politely decline her. I know it. And then we’ll walk in to the dance together and grab some punch and the rest of the night will be great.*

He laughed and replied, “Since we’re all friends, I’ll just have another date; if you don’t mind, ‘Stina,” *Really?! Did you just say that?* Then the other girl said she wanted to have him as a date too. “Looks like I have three dates now. I’ve got so much swag.” *You said “definite possibility” to me. Not. To. Them,* I thought as my molars ground together. I stayed silent as the four of us walked in together.

We entered the crowded and sweaty cafeteria to put our coats down and take my heels off. Then we moved into the dance floor. The DJ’s bass was thumping in the soles of my feet and I could see girls bent over as guys mimicked having sex with them in the middle of the dance floor. *I will never dance like that. So gross.* We joined our group of friends and then Ethan started to grind on one of the single girls in my group, not even the “other” date. I stood there with eyes agape. Then I decided to focus on the music playing and dancing like an idiot with my real friends if my date was going to ignore me.

The first slow song came on and I figured it would be his redeeming chance as a date. He came up to me and I smiled in my self-assurance.

“Hey, since we came as friends, do you mind if I go dance with Jordyn for this one? I promised her that I would slow dance with her once.” Jordyn. The one who turned him down. My eyes stung with sweat and developing tears.

“That’s fine. I’ll see you for another song,” I replied. I watched him walk over and ask her to slow dance. He put his arms around her waif-like waist and hips. I focused my attention on serenading my friends to Aerosmith’s “I Don’t Wanna Miss a Thing.” *Make yourself laugh, Christina, before you start crying. You won’t be that stereotype from the movies.* The slow dance ended and he rejoined our group, and focused on dancing with a different friend. I felt like hot sauce was running through my veins; I was thoroughly pissed at him and at myself for the situation. Another slow song came and he was conveniently next to Jordyn. Coincidentally I knew all of the words to the next slow song too. When the fourth slow song came on that night, it was about a half hour before the dance would end. Ethan had asked one of my friends to dance. I watched angrily and then saw her mouth something with my name to him. He stopped dancing with her and walked over to me.

“Christina, do you want to dance with me?” he asked with this cool smile his lips had created. It wasn’t genuine, but neither was my response.

“Definitely!” I smiled at him and we swayed to the music for about a minute

and a half before the song ended. We weren't dancing very close and nor were we even looking at each other. I looked at my other coupled friends dancing sweetly and serenely and sighed to myself. I think that both of us were relieved when it finished. He went back to dancing with another girl and I went back to my friends.

When the dance ended, Ethan drove me to Lily's house. Tom joined us in the car in the backseat. We were listening to music on the radio and the two of them were talking about where they were going to go after depositing me. I reflected on my night and what it would have been like if I stayed home with my family: the homemade cake, gifts, and giggles. After their conversation ended, Tom addressed me:

"Christina, you looked really beautiful tonight." I saw his friendly smile at me in the rear-view mirror.

"Yeah, 'Stina," was the response from Ethan.

Screw you.

I arrived at Lily's house and was ambushed with junk food, baked goods, sympathy, and insults about Ethan. I was the focus of the conversation for a large portion of the evening through bites of muffins I heard fleeting words like "jerk," and "bitch," despite the fact that I wasn't participating in it. On Lily's pink bed, I hugged my plush frog pillow and focused on the feel of the softness against my face. I was glad that I had friends that were trying to defend my honor but despite the fact that I had a miserable time with Ethan, I didn't want to insult him. I just wanted to move on.

The next day I went home and found a piece of leftover birthday cake on my kitchen table eyeing me with lofty judgment. I couldn't eat it. Lisa was the first one to ask me about the dance in the kitchen. I told her it was "okay," and then my dad asked with over-protective concern. My grandma even called to ask. Finally my mom asked me hours later when I was laying on the couch reading.

My throat closed up as I responded with the perfunctory "Okay." My mom started to talk about my niece's birthday party and the guilt of missing her first birthday created pressure in my head like water behind a thin dam. I was a bad aunt who put childish dances before family. I lost it. I started sobbing into the pillow my head rested on. Through my bleary eyes, I could see my mom's concern for me. She walked over and sat at the end of the couch and began to rub my back.

"Tell me about it."

And so I did.