

The Formal

BY CHRISTINE SINGH

It's three weeks until the formal. Audrey begs her mother to take her dress shopping.

"Audrey, you know we can't afford anything too extravagant. You might have been named after a Hepburn but your mother sure doesn't make that kind of money!" Mrs. Donald's shiny black hair glistens in the rays of sunlight that penetrate through the kitchen window.

"I know, I know. I can still get something nice though; nicer than what I have right now anyway."

"What's wrong with your clothes?! My hard-earned money bought you those things."

"Nothing mom. My clothes are fine; I just want something a bit special, you know. It's the end-of-year formal after all."

Out of nowhere Audrey's younger brother races through the immaculate kitchen yelling: "No one's even asked her to go mom. She's a loser."

Princeton (specifically named in hopes that one day he would graduate from his namesake) is long gone before either Donald woman can chastise him. Audrey starts off to her room. Her mother, sensing her daughter's pain, says softly, "Friday night Audrey, okay? We'll go shopping Friday night."

Seven black women congregate in Mme Tussaud's Hair Salon. They've all been going there for years.

"The usual, Alice," Mrs. Murphy screeches over the noise of the warm, bubbly water flowing freely over her head.

"I know Kaaren. Long and luscious, as usual."

"Thank God for weaves." She slaps her thick thigh.

A few chairs down sits Mrs. Donald. "I just need a little trim Lucy. The ends are starting to frizz."

"You don't want it straightened Eva?"

"You think it needs it?"

"Oh yes girl! It's starting to kink at the roots. In a week or two you'll have to go afro."

"All right Lucy—do it then."

Once a month Audrey's mother spends half a Saturday getting her hair tamed, her nails polished, and her Jamaican tendencies out of her system. Proper speech and proper manners are all that's acceptable in the Donald household. Her roots are only revealed at Mme Tussaud's.

Once, when Audrey was 13, her mother overheard her speaking a broken patois on the phone. She slapped her

face so hard that Audrey had trouble smiling for a while, not from the physical pain, but rather from the shock. She was only imitating her mother.

"Hi Marie." Audrey sidles up to the head cheerleader.

"Hey."

Audrey made the team back in September. It took her three years. She was the only black girl on the squad. "Who you goin' to the formal with?" Audrey asked shyly.

"Jason Watts. He just asked me this morning. Isn't he gorgeous?"

"Yeah, he is." Marie's milky face shines like a hot red Jamaican sun.

"How 'bout you?"

Audrey stares down at the ground. "Oh, I dunno."

"Whatcha mean you don't know? This is the formal Audrey. It's like the most important event of our lives."

The bell rings. Audrey runs off to class.

Princeton started at Sir John A. MacDonald High this year. Audrey's three years older than him, but he has more friends. He's loud, outgoing, friendly; she's quiet, timid, shy. His first day of school he played basketball with the Grade 12 boys at lunch. It was as if he had grown up with them. "Nice shot, man." "Hey, catch ya later, Prince." He'd made it. He was a star. Audrey eased into the high school experience. "I can help you with your homework, Marie," or "I have some mauve nail polish if you want to borrow it." It took seven months of asking, probing, hoping for some attention.

"Si Audrey. That's right. *Y Cuantos anos tiene Julio Iglesias*" Senora Solano was the perky Spanish teacher.

"Veinte y seis?"

"No, I don't think he's 26."

The class shrieks with laughter. Audrey blushes, but no one sees because her dark skin serves as camouflage. She looks over at Mark Reeves. His brown wavy hair falls softly

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over his blue eyes. He smiles lackadaisically. "Smile back!" Audrey's inner voice yells at her. The bell rings. Mark rushes to baseball practice.

Princeton's buddies are all black, except for one guy — Jeff — he's white. But he's one of those white guys who thinks he's black. You know. He struts around with his pants around his knees, with a bandanna sticking out of

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the back pocket, wearing a baseball cap backwards, and chewing a straw. He gets that image from TV Or maybe that's the image he chooses to see. His skin is still chalky white.

"Pass the salt please mom."

"Here you go. How was school today?"

"It was fine mom. Where's Prince?"

"He's eating over at his friend Derrick's house. Something about basketball playoffs tonight; I don't know." Audrey shrugs. It was two years before anyone invited her over.

"How was the oral test in Spanish class?"

"Oh, it was okay. I messed up Julio Iglesias' age. Everyone laughed. It was so embarrassing."

"Oh, honey, they're only laughing because they know how good you are."

Audrey was good. She was top of her class in Spanish, French, Math, and English. She was an A student. Her mother often bragged about her, about her grades anyway.

"So you know what kind of dress you want, honey?"

"Yeah. Cindy and I picked it out in last month's *Mademoiselle*."

The teenager quickly zips to her room and returns with the magazine. She already has the magazine opened to this magnificent rose-coloured strapless Cinderella-type gown. "See, this one mom."

"How am I going to afford that child?!"

"But mom, look at it. I'll look so good."

"Audrey, when we go to the mall we'll see. Who knows, you might find something else that you like."

"Whatever, mom."

Audrey retires to her room for the evening. "Homework awaits," she says. She peruses the pages of various magazines—*Mademoiselle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Entertainment Weekly*. She wants to look like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman* when Richard Gere takes her to the opera. She sits herself down in a plush, pink chair opposite a full-length mirror, one of two she has in her room. The other

one is attached neatly on the inside part of her closet door.

She frowns at the limp strands of hair that contour her face. "I'll ask mom if I can go to Mme Tussaud's to get my hair and nails done." Her mother had been relaxing the spirit out of her hair for nine years now. "Maybe I could get some highlights. I'm so sick of this brown." Her cousin Leyla had gotten green contacts the previous summer. Boys were flocking at her windowsill. Audrey had asked her mom for some.

"Are you crazy child?! You don't even wear glasses."

Maybe her mother wouldn't object to highlights.

The teenager finishes staring at herself, at the image she would like to be. She plops down on her pink bed. "What am I thinking? It's not like Mark's gonna ask me to go anyway. He likes Cheryl. How am I supposed to compete with her amber hair and luminous, white skin."

The black girls sneer when she walks by. Audrey doesn't talk the walk or walk the talk, not like Prince. Her mother doesn't let her. Prince, though, he can do what he wants.

"Mark?" The math teacher craves a response.

"I don't know, Miss Morley." His eyes shimmer in a half-embarrassed, half-pleased manner. Audrey smiles inwardly.

"Audrey, why don't you help Mark out?"

"Um, well, if you take the square root of that and then solve for x , you'll see that the two don't match."

She tries to smile at the boy she's had a crush on for three years but it appears as a smirk. Mark looks at her, raises the left corner of his mouth.

"Did he wink?" she asks herself. Her stomach is churning; her palms are wet.

"Thank you Audrey. That's exactly right."

Miss Morley interrupts her thoughts. The bell rings. Everyone rushes to vacate the classroom. Audrey thinks she hears someone whisper "teacher's pet." She continues walking and heads for the bathroom, the perfect hideaway. Mark catches her four feet from the door.

"Hey, you know your math, eh?" His smile attacks Audrey's balance. She feels she might faint.

"Yeah, I've uh, always been good at math." She mentally kicks herself. What a stupid reply!

"And other classes too, I hear. Quite the brainer, aren't we?"

She returns his smile. His best friend Dan sneaks up on the conversation. "Hey man, you comin' to practice?"

Mark hesitates. "Yeah man. I'm comin'."

He turns to Audrey. "See ya."

Audrey softly returns a "bye" and quickly dashes through the bathroom door. She later tells her closest friend Cindy what happened.

"He must like you Audrey. Why else would he like purposely talk to you like that?"

"Yeah, but I'm sure he likes Cheryl."

"Who said he likes Cheryl? Her thighs are so fat! Audrey, he likes you! Everyone knows it. Marie said she heard Mark and Jason talking, and they were talking about you!"

"What? Don't be ridiculous Cindy. Maybe he wants help in math or something."

Audrey forgets about all the previous times Mark had approached her. She forgets the time he gave her his raincoat on that school trip to the Science Centre. What about that nudge at the Christmas party, or the dance at the Valentine's bash? Audrey seems not to remember. Isn't it the attention that made her like him in the first place?

"Mom, that's the dress. Pleeease!"

"Okay, okay. Try it on."

Audrey wraps herself into the change room, pulling the curtain tight at both sides. She steps into the pink, lush fabric and slides it up her sides. She strides out to her mother, her back straight, her shoulders back. Watch out Julia Roberts!

"Oh Audrey. You're gorgeous."

She starts patting down her daughter's messy hair, smoothing the pinkness over her daughter's round behind, tucking away her daughter's bra straps. "Oh you're so darling!"

"Thanks mom." Audrey's a little embarrassed, but not like usual. The dress gives her some conviction. She twirls in front of a mirror.

"Can I go to Mme Tussaud's mom?"

"Of course. We'll get your hair all fixed up. Maybe we'll try some braids, like that singer you like so much."

"You mean Brandy?"

"Yep."

"Oh, thank you mom."

"You're welcome Audrey. Now let's go."

Audrey hardly sleeps the night before prom. Her mother wakes her up to take her to *Mme. Tussaud's*. Prince smirks. "You sure need a makeover!"

"Shut up Prince." Audrey shakes the comment off as she exits the house.

At Mme Tussaud's Lucy pulls and stretches Audrey's hair, adding more hair, counterfeit hair, hair that doesn't belong to her. Audrey's nerves are fully awake after four hours of braid-weaving. She pictures Mark taking her shimmering, pink-tipped fingers in his strong hands, leading her to the dance floor.

At home, in her room, she slips on her dress and stares at her image in the mirror. She's not Audrey anymore. Her nerves are easing, her smile is peeking. Her brother's taunts dissolve at her closed bedroom door. It's the dress. Nothing can touch her in that dress.

"Have a wonderful night honey. You're magnificent." Mrs. Donald is proud of the way Audrey looks.

Mark doesn't ask her. He was scared she would say no. Audrey must go alone. She tags along with her friends and their dates. She's in her pink dress, her hair is finely braided, straight strands flying in the night breeze.

Mark smiles at her from the dance floor. She turns around expecting to see Cheryl. She's a step closer now to being like Cheryl, with her dress, her hair, her makeup. She's no longer "Brainer Audrey," the smart girl Mark actually liked. She feels one step away still, one step from perfection. She stands under the disco ball and it orbits and sparkles, shining light on various dresses. As it shines on Audrey's face, her colour is transported. The shadows and the twinkle paint her a new face, a white face, and she glides over to Mark and asks him to dance.

Christine Singh has just finished a Masters degree in English literature at York University and is now looking forward to spending more time on her writing.

BRONWYN GILLIES

I am Bronwyn. I am a girl. I like being a girl. I have Know Idea why I like being a girl. I just do. My favorite thing to do is art. So far I have don one hundrud things so far.

This is Bronwyn Gillies's first poem. It was written when she was seven years old.