

Shall we?

Lucie Rejfková

“Remind me why do I have to do this again?” I huffed out in frustration and tucked a loose strand of unruly hair behind my ear. Katie, the most obnoxious girl who ever walked on the face of this planet and also my best friend, marched right next to me, our arms intertwined to minimize my chances of swift escape. Not that I ever had any chance in the first place. Walking on high heels had never been particularly easy on cobbled streets of my hometown. *But I don't remember it being so difficult in sneakers*, I thought as I clung onto her arm for support. Suddenly, my foot slipped and I nearly face-planted the lovely sett pavement.

Katie was quick to drag me back up, never lowering her guard. “Because you promised,” she reminded me, “and you're also the one who is *paying* the whole thing. So stop whining already!”

I rather focused on not spraining my ankle. It was impossible to notice all the little obstacles on the ground when the sun had already set. Colours of my long skirt seemed faded in the dark, the little sewn-on rose had a dead look to it, its petals hanging loosely as if reflecting my own gloomy mood. *If I fell*, I wondered, *my dress would get dirty and they wouldn't let me enter!* True, Katie would have one more reason to brutally murder me, but desperate times call for desperate measures and I had to get away even if it meant sacrificing my own life. Well, maybe it was worth a shot after all.

Before I could seriously consider ruining my attire for the greater cause, the shady street was left far behind us and my feared destination came into view. An innocent looking building with a small parking lot overflowing with cars. I involuntarily stepped onto the well-lit porch and the true colour of my dress finally became visible. The little rose suddenly looked way more lively with its petals a pretty vibrant red. That offered me little comfort though.

A wave of nausea suddenly surged through me and I stopped dead in my tracks. “Katie, I mean it. I can't.” I looked up at her pleadingly. “I'm not going.”

Without a word, Katie pushed me through the door. “Stop acting like a baby,” she scolded when I made a grab for the wooden frame. “Remember our plan. You *are* going to dance with him even if I had to carry you there myself!” With one final shove, I lost my grip and unceremoniously stumbled through. Before I could swiftly bolt out again, she was already holding my arm and dragging me further into the building.

We ascended the main staircase, our footsteps echoing in the empty hallway. My head hung low, eyes glued to the tips of my dance shoes. I could hear faint music coming from upstairs – we were late again.

Finally, steps were replaced by a flat surface and I dared to look up again. Before us stood a pair of great doors with two guards positioned in front of them. They wore stern and serious expressions on their faces, but I knew from experience that they were also there to hand out extra ties to boys who have forgotten their own.

Katie pulled our tickets – she had confiscated mine before, just in case – from her purse and handed them to one of the guards. He quickly checked them and promptly let us in. Only then had Katie loosened her iron grip and actually let me stand still for a moment. When I looked at her again, she was giving me an encouraging smile. “Shall we?” she said, offering her arm to me once more. “Let’s do this,” I sighed and took a deep breath.

And so we entered the ballroom. My ears were immediately assaulted by voices, all talking over each other while the live band was happily adding more background noise to the madness. But that should have been expected. This was one of the very last dancing lessons after all, of course the place would be crowded. The room wasn’t very spacious, but it was bright and tidy, the central dance floor surrounded by many tables with fancy white table-cloths. I heard the song come to an end. “Quick! We’re right on time!” Katie urged and started dragging me towards the dancefloor. My legs started trembling even worse.

All girls were lined up at one side of the dancefloor while boys stood in a row opposite them. We slipped into the correct line and stood straight, overlooking the boys. Katie tapped my shoulder. “There he is,” she whispered, pointing with her chin. There stood Nicholas, one of our classmates. My heart sped up again. I was so nervous that my breath started hitching in my throat. “Look, it’s now or never. Don’t think, just go!” Katie urged one more time before the order rang out. I nodded firmly and marched across the empty floor. I stopped thinking. I just went. And surprisingly enough, I stood before the boy and forced myself to look into his eyes. “S-shall we dance?” I forced out, trying not to sound completely hopeless. After a second of surprised silence, Nick shrugged nonchalantly. “Sure, why not.”

He stepped closer and stood in position. I took his hand.

For a short, tense moment all movement seemed to halt, every single dancer standing stone still, as if the time itself froze. Then, soft music started to play and they all shifted in a near perfect unison, a short step to the right followed by a graceful spin. All kinds of colourful fabrics of skirts and dresses swung and rocked in the air as their owners swirled around their partners. While dancing, both partners moved and acted like one. Two bodies and two minds momentarily mended together to form a single being. It created a sort of unreal, magical atmosphere. It didn’t matter that many partners weren’t looking each other straight in the eyes, like they were supposed to. I knew that staring from such a short distance felt like ogling. A glance upward told me that Nick was staring at the top of my head too. I diverted my gaze over his shoulder instead and started searching for my friend. I couldn’t believe she really made me do this. I felt happy that her crazy plan worked, but on the other hand... it just felt wrong.

“Seriously, I don’t get you two,” Nick suddenly spoke, startling me a bit. “It’s stupid.”

I stared at him, baffled. "E-excuse me?"

He scoffed, but there was a smile on his lips. "Don't think I haven't noticed the way you look at each other. Come on, it's pretty obvious."

Now I started stuttering, my cheeks growing warm. "I-I have no idea what are you talking about." He must have seen through Katie's plan. Uh-oh.

He gave me a patient smile and leant a bit closer to whisper. "Just ask her out already."

Suddenly, my brain produced a blue screen of death. I forgot to continue moving and if he didn't drag me along, I would have just stood there like a marble statue.

"What?!" I whisper-yelled, staring at him like if he just grew a second head.

"You heard me," he smiled. "Just look at her, over there."

I shifted my glare around the room. And there she was, standing by the edge of the room, partially hidden by the open door. She was watching us with a sad frown and even from this distance I could see her eyes were red. Was she crying? But upon noticing my curious look, her frown twisted back into a smile.

I looked back at Nick. "...But I can't do that to her. You know how the society is..."

"Who cares about the society! It's better than living alone for the rest of your lives. Look, she obviously likes you back."

"Then why would she make me do this?" I vaguely gestured around to the two of us.

He rolled his eyes. "Perhaps she thinks the same way. She wants you to be happy. I bet that's why she stayed silent until now."

Slowly, I nodded. "Thanks, Nick."

"No problem. Now, shoo!" He dropped me off when the song ended and went to find a new partner. Meanwhile, I headed for Katie.

"Hey," I smiled at her, a bit awkwardly.

"Hey," she responded, trying her best to smile back. Her eyes weren't red anymore, but I noticed a small sad glint in them. I was a bit angry at myself, for being so blind until now.

"Say, how about we go for a drink later?" I tried, feeling as awkward as ever.

Her expression instantly lit up in pleasant surprise. "Sure, sounds great!" She hooked my arm in hers again, a happy grin on her face. The happiest, most sincere smile I have ever seen. "Shall we?"

I smiled back. "We shall."