

Prom.
by Christopher Gesualdi

I had always admired the ability of contemporary American television to portray High School as some moving experience that should be treasured. Where the kids were all smart troubled individuals, with complex experiences and relationships on whose importance hung the very fabric of the world. And here I am at my prom, wondering if I've had any of those. I'm drunk by the punch bowl, which is spiked to appropriate levels. I was drunk when I came in, couldn't have handled this sort of thing sober, but the punch had helped worsen it to even more wonderful levels of blissful intoxication. The crappy rented disco lights dance along the ceiling like a 60s art house flick, and my daydreams flicker back and forth between making love to Miranda Jones in the men's restroom stall and getting into a fight with a hated school administrator whose name I've conveniently forgotten. It's about that time my partner in mediocrity shows up, her prom dress adorned with a big red spray-painted X on the back of it that in actuality means nothing but everyone has assumed to mean she's a dyke. Darcy was pretty, smart, coy and for the record not a dyke. She was that girl I was supposed to be dating if this was the teen movie filled with self-revelations, where you spend the whole movie chasing the popular girl only to realize the girl next door was the one you had wanted all along. But Darcy didn't live next door, and I was pretty sure Darcy had no interest in me sexually. I don't think I wanted Darcy, but I was more than a fan of the few brief sexual encounters I'd been thankful enough to experience purely out of what I attributed to sheer luck as opposed to any sort of true mating prowess, and I was willing to want just about anyone these days.

"Sucks" she offers, a brief statement on nothing in particular. She fills her dixie cup with the red elixir of kings behind us, and realizing I'm running low I follow suit. I don't have anything to say, too busy trying to appear as uninterested as I can, watching as the laser lights flash like an epileptic seizure. I keep waiting to wake up screaming and crying, writhing on a padded bed like a blithering idiot. If I only I could be so lucky.

"Alright everybody, this is going to be a hot one so get yourself on down to the dance floor. Laser Joe commands it!" On cue, tens of kids shuffle onto the fake wood tiled floor in their rented clothes.

"I hate Laser Joe" Darcy tells me with a slow sip of her Kool-Aid gin. I take a look at our master of ceremonies, a middle aged man in a Hawaiian shirt. I might've had some respect for the man if he was actually cueing up records at spaced intervals, but it was just a guy with an MP3 player and some stereo speakers. The biggest night of my life and its being hosted by a jackass with an iPod. And the cogs turn ever onwards. As I turn my head away, trying to not take notice of white kids trying their best to show off "moves" copied from various MTV music videos I'm sure, I can't help but notice Miranda Jones is at a side table laughing, she and her entirely too beautiful teenage friends passing yearbooks and colored sharpie markers around.

Cue: From stage left, DWAYNE. Unkempt, vaguely unbalanced, "wacky" neighbor-esque character. His entrance is punctuated with little fanfare.

"Sucks" he mentions casually. I enjoy my mono-syllabic friends, they're easy to understand and return to their original upright positions with the simple press of a button.

"Punch is spiked" I let him know.

"Like I didn't know." He's already filling himself a cup and taking a long swig. He must not find it to his liking, pulling out a concealed bottle from his jacket pocket and adding to the concoction. Darcy tips her glass in appreciation, Dwayne can only grin methodically. "So you going to ask her?"

"No."

"You know you're going to."

"Who's asking who what?" Darcy enquires. I would tell Darcy that Dwayne is an idiot but she already knows that, and it doesn't change the fact that he's right.

"Rob's going to ask her to dance."

"Bullshit."

"Truth." That part about enjoying my mono-syllabic friends? A hasty misjudgment.

"Look, no, I'm not doing that" I protest.

"No you are, because you're still dreaming that impossible dream" Dwayne says with his grin. I would strangle him if he weren't so right.

“Ah, yes, you and your big moment, you still chasing after that?” Darcy asks me with a coy smile. “Get the girl, slay the dragon, all the chauvinistic bullshit?” I don’t answer her directly, though my extended middle finger does a well enough job. I hold out my cup to Dwayne and he knows the drill, once again pulling out his bottle and filling the cup to half full.

“Dutch courage” I say, downing the glass in a quick shot. The back of my throat burns like a funeral pyre, though I wipe my mouth on my sleeve and take off towards her table without complaint. “Wish me luck” I mention casually. You need luck when you’re a fool.

She’s still at the same table, still laughing with her friends, still talking about god knows what pretty popular people talk about. I wasn’t exactly privy to that information, I was far from popular, though I still considered myself relatively pretty. That was a lie by the way. In actuality, I was just another kid, white as death and full of misdirected and unjustified angst. But as I stood by the table, all that faded away. I was here; I was in this moment. And it was my one chance to do whatever I felt mattered, hell to the consequences. By the time they finally notice me their laughter has grown silent and awkward. Miranda is the first to speak.

“Can I help you?”

There’s a million responses in my head. Do I tell her I love her, how I’ve noticed her from afar, how I know that deep down she’s a beautiful person and I want to be a part of that? It’s all so cliché; unreal; lines stolen from movies I’ve never seen and songs that I didn’t even listen to. There were no proper words to justify what I felt. I hated Miranda Jones, I hated her to the point that I loved her, that I wanted her more than I had ever wanted anything in my life. I wanted to hate her so much that the love would be so goddamn pure as we fucked like animals. Bizarre, depraved, instinctual. It’s then I realize that in the thirty seconds I’ve been standing here I haven’t said anything.

“Um...” she says slowly, her friends giggling to themselves at the awkward spectacle I’ve created. “What the hell do you want?” I only have one answer.

“This.”

The kiss is deep, and sweet, and like so many things is over before it even begins. As I pull away she’s sitting there; face contorted in shock. I stand up and turn around, waving her

goodbye forever with a flippant toss of my right hand. It's then I see Darcy and Dwayne, both looking a bit similar to Miranda.

"Dude, what the fuck did you just do?"

"Was that for real? Did you seriously just kiss Miranda Jones?"

I don't say anything. I'm not one for words. I just refill my punch cup and take a sip, as behind me the curtains go up in flames. The hall is on fire; bad wiring. As the fire spreads quickly around us the music crashes to a halt. And as my classmates scream and run for the door, I'm happy to just sit and sip my punch, crumple the dixie cup in a perfect little ball and toss it over my shoulder as we begin our slow walk back to the real world.

Outside, we're standing side by side, watching as the rented hall is engulfed in brilliant red orange flames that lick the sides of the old brick like a brilliant luminescent paint on a dull red canvas. Dwayne just stands in awe, eyes unblinking, unmoving from the building, as he slowly reaches into his pocket and grabs the bottle of gin, taking a long slow sip. Darcy is the same, transfixed by the spectacle, finding just the right amount of mental capacity to utter her slow and fitting statement.

"...It's beautiful."

And it was.