

A Six-pack of Bud, a Fifth of Whiskey, and Me

by Melissa de la Cruz

It was a month before the Senior Prom, and I had just taken a huge bite out of my tuna salad sandwich when I saw the Trio — the three most popular girls in our class — approach, their faces set in grim lines of determination. Sitting slumped against the wall of lockers, I felt trapped — cornered. There was no way out — I had to face them. I knew what they were up to, and part of me was elated, part of me was terrified, and part of me was humiliated knowing what was about to happen.

“Melissa,” said the tallest one, Luna.* She was one of the prettiest girls in our class — but odd, so odd that even her friends called her “Loony” behind her back. (It was rumored she’d once farted at a party in front of all the hottest guys at St. Ignatius.) Her face was a grimace of concern and pity. “Do you have a date for the prom?”

I chewed for as long as I could, swallowing that lump of tuna and forcing it down my suddenly dry throat. “Nuh . . .” I managed to choke out.

I didn’t have a date for the prom. I would never, in a

*Names have been changed to protect the popular.

million years, have a date for the prom. I went to an all-girl private school in San Francisco, and there were only thirty-nine girls in my class. More than half of them were debutantes from the city's wealthiest, most prestigious families. And then there was *us* — the misfits and losers — scholarship kids, metalheads, foreign students, the scarily anorexic girls. I was one of the immigrant scholarship kids and hence a member of two overlapping loser groups.

Some of us in this unfortunate bunch had lives outside of our little private hell. They had boyfriends stowed away in Oakland, San Jose, or San Mateo. They had lives full of all the normal teenage fun — bonfires on Stinson Beach, double-dating at the movies, “ragers” at their homes when their parents went on vacation. *Those* girls had dates for the prom.

But not me.

I had heard that the Trio of Caring Popular Girls had made it their mission to make sure every girl in our class would attend the Senior Prom. This was part of their outreach — an act of charity on their part. They were Giving Back to the Community. Real bleeding hearts, *they only thought of those less fortunate!* So, one by one, they interviewed us losers to make sure that we had a date for the evening and that we would attend the dance.

Their thinking was that since this was our “last” year together (sniff! sniff!) they wanted to make it a “class bonding” experience as reparation for all the mean, cliquy things they’d done over the past four years, so we could all sing the class song (the theme from *St. Elmo’s Fire*, with the lyric “we laughed until we had to cry, we

loved until we said good-bye”) with a clear conscience on Commencement Day. Their plan: renting buses instead of limos so that no one would feel left out when their date pulled up in a twelve-year-old Honda, and having a formal catered dinner hosted by one of the popular girls’ families in their Pacific Heights mansion so that we poor ones wouldn’t have to worry about shelling out for a hundred-dollar dinner at the Fairmont Hotel. The bonus: Everyone was invited to the after-party at some other rich girl’s beach house in Marin.

“Do you want to go to the prom?” Luna asked gently.

I felt like a paraplegic. I wanted to say, I’m not disabled, just unpopular. As far as I could tell, that was not yet a disease.

“Yeah, I guess.” I shrugged.

“WE NEED TO GET MELISSA A DATE TO THE PROM!!!!” she suddenly yelled across the entire locker room, her voice echoing like a bullhorn.

Lord, kill me now.

A week later they gave me the good news. They had managed to scrounge up one Patrick O’Shanahan, a half-Filipino, half-Irish Joaquin Phoenix look-alike, a skater guy with an asymmetrical haircut and a sullen expression on his handsome face. Patrick was a junior at St. Ignatius and an ex-boyfriend to several of the girls in the popular clique — he was secondhand goods, but with a reputation as being a “great friend” and “the life of the party.”

Patrick checked me out at the Senior Luncheon that Saturday, when we girls got all dolled up in our white

gloves and white tea dresses (hemlines mid-calf, no cleavage, sleeves). I had my hair pulled up in a chignon, with curls cascading down my forehead, and I wore a white lace dress with stiff butterfly sleeves my aunt had especially made in the Philippines — the whole outfit made me look like Imelda Marcos Junior. I still cringe at the photos. But apparently Patrick wasn't completely repulsed. He agreed to be my date.

Against my skeptical nature, I was actually pretty excited. I had spent four years of my life wishing high school over, and now that it was almost coming true (I had my escape ticket — an acceptance to Columbia University in New York City), I wanted to experience what having a social life was like for once instead of just sitting at home hanging out with my parents and younger siblings, watching *SNL*.

My mom and I bought my dress from JC Penney. Don't laugh — it was actually quite stylish, and I still remember it was \$75, which seemed knee-shakingly expensive then. It was a sleeveless black silk dress with a drop waist and three tiers of ruffles — very 1920s flapper, which I wore with my mom's old Ferragamo heels (hey, we were rich once) and a black lace shawl that my mother made on her Singer sewing machine. Plus, my date was actually really cute, popular, and all mine. All I thought about was how Patrick was going to fall deeply, totally in love with me at the prom and give me my first kiss.

You can imagine my surprise when Luna delivered a message from him the week before the prom. "Here's a list of alcohol Patrick wants you to get for him for the

night.” Apparently, as payment to be my date, I had to provide him with two six-packs of Bud and a fifth of Jim Beam. As my mind raced with the thought of how I would ever be able to ante up the desired bounty while being underage, Luna dismissed my concerns. “Don’t worry, my maid is hooking us all up. You just need to pay me back.”

Sweet relief, and back to my daydreams once again . . .

Since we were all taking the same bus to the prom, it was agreed that Patrick would just meet me at the house where the dinner was being held. Stepping inside the bus was like making an entrance in a fashion show; everyone’s date and dress were scrutinized upon arrival. I was thrilled when Caitlin Reardon, one of the popular girls, stepped in wearing a dress shockingly similar to mine — black silk, drop waist, tiers of ruffles. She even commented on it later at the party, complimenting me on my good taste. She told me hers was from Saks Fifth Avenue. Was mine? I shook my head demurely and gave her a vague answer. It was the first time I realized what *knockoff* meant.

When we finally arrived at the dinner party, I saw Patrick standing by the foyer, and my first thought was disappointment that he wasn’t wearing a black tuxedo — he’d cheaped out and rented a blue smoking jacket instead. (It only cost \$40, he told me later, rather than the \$100 for the tuxedo, and he had the decency to apologize.) The second thought was that he looked even cuter than I’d remembered — like a rockabilly star, with his floppy black hair and bright blue eyes.

I handed him his carnation boutonniere and pinned it on his lapel. Then I waited expectantly. All around me, all the other girls were sporting monstrously large flower arrangements on their wrists.

“Oh shit.” He grinned sheepishly. “I forgot your corsage at home,” he said, smacking his forehead with fake disgust. I knew he’d never even bought it. He’d agreed to be my date, but that was as far as it was going to go.

Still, I was elated. I was dressed up, I was out on a weekend night, I was going to the prom! I was with a date — he’d have to dance with me, right? He’d have to talk to me . . . right?

Wrong.

Patrick ignored me throughout dinner, asked *several times* if the booze he’d ordered was secured, and flirted with all the popular girls in the room.

He also spent the entire evening taking sips from a silver flask in his pocket, so that by the time we arrived at the prom, he was completely plastered, slurring his words and smelling like a liquor distillery.

But ever the romantic, I found all this extremely exotic and charming. I kept thinking, *When is he going to kiss me? Maybe when we say good-bye tomorrow morning? I can’t wait!*

Our prom was held in the ballroom at our school. It used to be the mansion of some rich oil family, and the public spaces were routinely rented out for weddings and fashionable society events. We were supposed to feel privileged that we didn’t have to rent out some dumb hotel room for the event, but all I could think about was how we were “partying” in the same place where we had

principal's meetings. Still, the marble floors shone, and it did look very elegant.

Patrick danced with me for a few songs and proved a capable and very suave dancer — he had a repertoire of 1950s Jerry Lee Lewis moves. I was starting to relax and think it wasn't turning out to be such a huge disaster after all, but when the DJ put on a slow song, Patrick decided he wanted to hang out outside in the cortile where the cool kids were hiding and smoking.

I sat next to him on the edge of the fountain for a while, watching as he said hello to everyone in his popular clique, feeling more and more like a useless appendage. It soon dawned on me that they had given me Patrick as a date simply to get him an in to the party. Everyone went back inside, and Patrick and I were all alone. I thought we would finally get a chance to talk to each other, get to know each other more.

And that's when he threw up on my dress.

Bleeugggh.

And I shook it off, disturbed but also kind of elated. He'd liked me enough to try not to get most of it on the skirt hem! He'd even turned his head and everything, when he saw what was happening.

I helped him to his feet and practically carried him back on the bus, wondering once more, *Does this mean he's going to kiss me tomorrow morning?*

When we arrived at the after-party in Marin, Patrick proceeded to drink all twelve cans of Bud and the fifth of whiskey I'd bought him, laid down on the carpet, and promptly passed out. I sat next to him the entire evening, nursing my two wine coolers (you also had to put

an alcohol order for yourself at the party) while the popular girls played a game of sticking beer bottle caps up their butt and attempting to see who could release them daintily on the empty beer bottles. Sphincter control — entertainment for all! I still remember one of the girls pretending to be drunk by walking around with a lampshade over her head. Seriously. She was stone-cold sober but just didn't want to be left out of the fun.

The party was the first time I got buzzed, and I was relishing my position as date to Totally Passed-Out Boy. I had to hold his head up to make sure he didn't choke on his vomit, and I felt like a true heroine — I had to keep my date alive!

The next day, my dad picked me up from the after-party. I had changed into jeans, and Patrick was still asleep. He was going to hang out for a while with all the other popular kids, but I didn't want to take any chances, I was ready to go home. I was still reeling from my first brush with teenage debauchery — The drinking! The vomiting! The butt-clenching! And I wanted to go home to be alone and think about everything in the privacy of my own room.

But I wasn't going home without getting THAT KISS.

"Hey," I said, tapping him on the shoulder. "Thanks so much for taking me to the prom."

"No problem." He smiled, bleary-eyed. In the morning light, he already had a five-o'clock shadow and his breath stank faintly of alcohol and puke. He obviously wanted nothing more than to continue to sleep, yet he lifted himself up on his elbows like a gentleman to say good-bye. I was touched. Even looking totally wasted, he was still a hottie.

He was about to close his eyes again and that's when I did it. I just leaned over and kissed him on the lips.

It was just a simple peck, but it mattered to me.

My lips had brushed the lips of an attractive boy. It wasn't a real kiss at all — but it was *contact*.

And to this day, I don't regret attending the Senior Prom for one second. I even proudly displayed Patrick's picture on my dorm room mantle and called him "my boyfriend." If I saw Patrick today, I'd thank him again and present him with another six-pack of Bud for his troubles.