Big Night

Elizabeth Ann Butler*
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Abstract

MARY JEAN came clattering down the stairs, her shoes flapping on her feet with every step. She skidded around the corner and pulled herself to a stop in front of the big chair where I sat reading...
you will never be able to come to see Nana again."

"I don't think I'll ever see you again even if the wind doesn't take me," Tina cried hysterically and ran to Nana who hugged the child tenderly—biting her lips to keep back her own tears.

"But of course you will, Tina. Didn't you know that they are going to build a bridge all the way from the waterfront of the village to America, and when you are big and have a car you'll be able to drive out to see me every weekend. Now, here, two pieces of strudel for you." Nana placed Tina in her seat and dried the child's tears with her apron.

"I have to get a clean apron now," she excused herself and went into the bedroom.

Mary Jean came clattering down the stairs, her shoes flapping on her feet with every step. She skidded around the corner and pulled herself to a stop in front of the big chair where I sat reading.

"Lizbeth, can I wear your gold evening slippers tonight?" Her brown eyes pleaded from behind the clear-rimmed glasses.

"Umm?" I was loathe to come out of the novel.

"Lizbeth, you aren't listening! Can I pu-lease wear your gold evening slippers tonight?"

"Are you kid—?" I stopped short and took another look at her. For gosh sakes! The girl was growing up. What used to be all arms and legs was developing into a form with a few curves. "My gold evening slippers, you say. Won't they make you taller than Mike?"
"I'm not sure. He's really taller than I am, you know—even if not very much. Please, 'Lizbeth!"

I gave her my best tolerant big sister look. "O.K. Try them on."

With a quick twirl she was gone again, her plaid skirt and overlarge sweatshirt bagging out behind her.

I tried to go back to my book but I kept seeing the comical figure in the run-over shoes and curlers standing in front of me. How had I felt when I was going to my first formal?

The whirlwind came downstairs again. This time it left in its wake a smell of cheap perfume. "Mother, I simply can't bear to wear this formal. It isn't nearly as pretty as the red velveteen would have been."

Mother's reassuring voice came from the kitchen. "It looks fine on you, dear."

"Oh, no!" Again she stopped in front of my chair, this time holding a white net skirt high. "'Lizbeth, do you think this looks O.K.?"

I pursed my lips, cocked my head, and for effect gave a low whistle. "Lana Turner in disguise."

Mary Jean stamped her foot impatiently, "Stop it! Now really?"

I grinned and nodded. It would look cute—but I had to make one last observation. "Don't wear that stinkin' stuff tonight though or you won't dance a step."

"Oh, I won't! I was just trying them all to see which was best." She started upstairs again but turned around and came back with a worried look on her face. "What do you suppose Mike will send for flowers? Do you think it will go all right with my dress?"

"Oh sure, dandelions go well with anything."

"Now stop kidding!" She drew her brows together thoughtfully. "Do you suppose he has any taste in flowers at all?"

Without waiting for an answer she turned and went upstairs. She called down from the top. "How would I look with my hair on top of my head?"

"Oh, Mary Jean, give up! What's wrong with you?"

"Well, I just thought—"

That kid with her hair on top of her head! Now wait a minute! She's almost sixteen. It wasn't so long ago that I was going through all this. I had wanted to wear some long droopy ear-
rings. Come to think of it, Mary Jean's method was about the same at getting ready as mine. I had streamlined the procedure, but the outline was the same.

Purely out of curiosity I ambled upstairs to see what was going on. I had to back out of her room once to regain my composure.

Her dressing table was littered with every kind of cold cream imaginable, a mascara box, my blue and brown theatrical eye shadow, pancake make-up, and—

She caught my reflection in the mirror. "C'mere," she commanded. "Which shade of lipstick do you think is best?" She pulled out a deep black red-violet that I had bought once in utmost folly. "I like this one."

She painted on a sultry glamour mouth which was entirely belied by the rounded cheeks and innocently eager eyes. The color made her olive complexion look green.

"Well," I pondered, "why don't you try the Tangee?"

"Do you think I'm a baby?" she sputtered. "How about this?" She held up a stick that was more blue than red.

This was getting serious. I couldn't let her face anyone with that stuff on. Her little face was pathetically anxious. I picked up a clear red and said, "This will go best with your dress, I think. Try it."

"O.K., but—"

At that instant the doorbell rang and Mary Jean was at the foot of the stairs, after taking them two at a time, before Mother could even leave the kitchen. She jerked open the door and then remembered her high school dignity.

"Mary Jean Evans?" The boy looked at her blankly.

"I am she," she replied haughtily. She took the package with undisguised eagerness and closed the door. "Oh, I forgot—" She jerked the door open again and called to the retreating back, "Thank you."

She scuttled to the kitchen and managed to tear the paper and string off clumsily with her long, graceful fingers. After one look she sank to the floor with the celluloid box cradled in her arms.

"Oh, aren't they beautiful! Oh, aren't they—Mother, 'Lizbeth. look—are they keen! Isn't Mike smart? Gardenias will go perfect with the green velveteen top!"

Yes, first corsages were always keen—even fifteenth and sixteenth too.

She was off up the stairs again. She reached the landing. All
was quiet. Suddenly she was in the kitchen again. "Mother, do
I have to wear my glasses?"

Mother heaved a little sigh. The expected had happened.
"Dear, you know you get headaches without them."
"Yes, but—"
"And you know that you can't see where you're going."
"Yes, but—"
"Mike knows you have to wear them so you needn't worry
about it."
"Yes, but how can I look glamorous if I have to wear glasses?"
she wailed.
"There's no use complaining, dear. You can't get around it."
"Oh-h-h." She trailed the formal slip that had been freshly
ironed up the steps. Poor kid, those glasses were such an obstacle
sometimes.

Every hour, on the hour, since three o'clock she had asked if it
wasn't time to start getting ready. At five we heard the bathtub
filling with water. Then came a long silence.

I could bear the suspense no longer. Mary Jean was never quiet!
I went up and glanced in the bathroom. Mary Jean was loung­
ing in a bubble bath up to her neck. The round little head with
its ridiculous curlers was all that was in view.

"If it isn't Cleopatra herself! What are you trying to do?
Saturate yourself?"

"No." She lifted a dripping arm and pointed to a magazine
on the bench beside her. "This article says to relax tired muscles
at the end of a hard day—but I forgot my eye packs. Would you
hand them to me, please? They're there beside you on the stand."

"Do you think you have all your clothes ready?" I asked, hand­
ing her the pads. This was almost like having a roommate.

"Yes, I think so." Her perspiring face coated thickly with cold
cream looked up at me. "Would you check them for me? They're
in on the bed."

In the bedroom the shape of Mary Jean was draped across the
flowered bed spread. The pearls were at the top, then the dress
with the stockings tucked neatly under the skirt, and the gold
slippers. A bracelet was placed carefully where a wrist should be.

"Would you wash my back for me?" Mary Jean called. I
scrubbed for her. "Does everything look all right?"

"Things look fine. I'll help you when you start to get dressed." I
gave her back an extra pat.
"Do you think I'll be taller than Mike? Do you think I should wear my white sandals? I do like the gold though." She chattered on.

"Why don't you try the gold and see how tall they make you, then decide," I suggested.

"And 'Lizbeth." She lowered her voice and looked up at me owlishly, "don't you think I could go without my glasses?"

"You heard what Mother said." There was mock severity in my voice as I pushed with one finger the end of her button nose. "Really, no one will notice them at all—much less than if you went without.—Better hurry!"

"What time is it?"

"Six."

"Six! I've only got until seven-thirty. Oh, help me get ready." She pulled the stopper from the drain and the water gurgled down. Springing from the tub she slipped on the bath mat and came perilously near to falling.

"Oh, my! Oh, dear!" She pulled down some powder from the shelf, glanced at the label, gave a disgusted "Huh" and ran for her favorite.

She created a small blizzard as the shaker flew back and forth spraying the scented talcum over her and the bathroom. "Should I put on cologne now or wait until later? Now, don't you think? Then I can add a little later."

Mother called, "Supper's ready, girls."

The table was cheerful with blue pottery on a white cloth, but Mary Jean didn't see it. Her eyes strayed to the clock every thirty seconds as she gulped her food. I knew how that was. She glanced at the little green onions on the relish plate.

"Do you suppose if I brushed my teeth twice after supper I could have just one onion?" She reached across the table. I slapped her hand and she looked at me with an aggrieved expression. "Well, Mike likes onions."

"That makes no difference. No onions for you tonight." The little screwball.

She glanced again at the clock and gasped, "Six-thirty!" Her chair rasped on the floor as she pushed herself away from the table. "Mom, I'd look better without glasses," she said without hope.

"No."

She was off again up the stairs.
As we were finishing supper, she came down holding three fingers before her. "Which color is best?"

I groaned. It couldn’t be worse. Not one matched her lipstick. "Try the Revlon in my drawer. I think it’s better."

"O.K." That clatter on the stairs again.

After the dishes were finished I went to look over the situation. Mary Jean was sitting with her fingers spread before her on the dressing table.

"I put this on and now I can’t get my stockings on. What’ll I do?" She wailed the last three words.

"Take it easy. All you have to do is wait. You’re doing fine. You have half an hour to finish."

The fingernails dry, the last flurry of dressing began. Mary Jean squirmed deliciously as the soft silk of the slip came down over her shoulders. She brushed her hair to a shining fluff and reached for her dress. It slipped over her and she stood ready for Mike. She looked down at the gold slippers and then put on her glasses.

Looking at her, I felt a warm glow of pride. It might be fun to double-date with her. She wasn’t a silly kid any more.

The doorbell rang.

Her quietness dissolved into panic. "Do you think he’ll think I look nice? Do you think I’m too tall? These darn glasses!"

"You’ve never looked better, Mary Jean. I’d like to go with you myself."

She picked up the black velvet cape and descended the stairs, her face radiant above the gardenias she carried.

Mike looked down at her. "Gee, Mary Jean, you sure look pretty!"