

Wilderness House Literary Review 19/3

Rebecca Hasulak

Tonight, They Felt Pretty

AT FIRST GLANCE, it looked like the makings of any other party. The kind that was so often held just so junior high kids could have a reason to get dressed up and make memories. The type that required a pre-party, where makeup brushes would dab fresh faces with fervor, the air marked by squeals of childlike voices longing to don the cloak of perceived maturity.

Except—this was no such party. Oh sure, it was held in a picturesque venue. An expansive barn with wood that had been pressure-washed with care. A dirt floor that had been cleared of all rocks. There was a dance floor and the requisite string lights, two of the most critical essentials for setting ambiance worthy of youth and innocence.

A woman, the age of someone's mother, strode purposefully around the space. There was a clipboard in one hand, pen in the other, ready to make check marks as she surveyed each station. Makeup and hair, check. Dresses (secondhand, of course), check. Catered food and chaperones, check and check.

And, of course, a DJ. One who was just old enough to have the whispers of a mustache but just young enough to bob his head to the as-yet-unheard beats, exposing the nervousness under his shiny blazer.

The clipboard woman used her tinny voice to test the microphone. "Hello there, hi. Hey everyone. Thanks so much for coming. Are we ready for them?"

Applause and cheers broke out among the adult volunteers who were strategically dispersed throughout the charming space. With a shy grin, the lady saluted in response. Right on cue, an older man with a crooked bowtie and saddle shoes practically sashayed toward the heavy barn doors. With a flourish, he pushed them open.

And then they were there, trickling in like eager ducklings crowding toward a stream. Ready for a cool drink, or at least the hope of hydration. They were split into groups, then sent to various stations. The night flew by in a heady fog of distant campfire smoke and hairspray.

Ariana sat, still and upright, as a volunteer dusted her cheeks with blush. "Beautiful," the volunteer declared.

Cam let her fingers graze the lace and tulle and satin of the dresses on the rack, an array of rainbow colors like she'd never seen before. She got to wear one of these? When she tried on the turquoise chiffon evening gown and turned toward the floor-length mirror, she held back a gasp. It didn't even cross her mind that this had been worn before, been donated. It was hers for the night—and she was downright elegant.

One by one, the girls were tenderly shepherded from station to station until they all stood in their borrowed finest. Until the apples of their cheeks twinkled under the soft lighting. Until they were giddy with the excitement of a night like tonight.

They were served breaded chicken and french fries on fancy, dispos-

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able plates and later had their plates cleared by the volunteers. They were the guests of honor, after all. They were given petite cupcakes with extra buttercream frosting and sprinkles as colorful as their dresses. They beamed at one another.

They were invited to dance and to sing. Montessa chose "The Climb," by Miley Cyrus, and girl by girl followed suite. Their young eyes had too much knowing in them as they sang. They belted out words of discouragement, lyrics about mountains that would have to be faced. Struggles and heartbreak. Uphill battles and losing. For many—most—their age, such words would've been beyond their realm of true understanding; a costume. For them? It was their skin.

They sang and danced, they smiled and laughed. Tonight, they weren't foster kids. They hadn't been given away or taken from their parents. They hadn't been forced into homes and lives they hadn't chosen and probably hadn't wanted.

Tonight, they were the children they should've been able to be all along. Tonight, they were seen. It wasn't everything, but it was something—and sometimes, that was enough to see the human spirit through.

Tonight, they felt pretty.