

The Dress of Many Colors

By Stephanie Jimenez

It was almost the month of prom at the private all-girls school Bell Seminary. Maria and her mother were standing in the bridal shop. Outside, the boulevard seemed to be moving like a treadmill, the sidewalks lunged forward with people.

They had brought Maria's aunt along, the once-fat-now-chubby one who always had something to say. Maria hated her, but her mother said she had to come. She was the one who could get the discount on the dresses. Maria couldn't forgive her for having once insulted her beaded bracelets, the ones she had made from that Lisa Frank jewelry kit she had gotten for Christmas when she was seven years old. That was nearly ten years ago, and with so much time holding on, Maria couldn't just let it go now.

Maria's mother said Maria ought to be nice. Her aunt Vivian had been diagnosed as pre-diabetic and then she lost 40 pounds in 3 months, but that still didn't change the fact that she had a nasty way of speaking whenever she came to family cookouts. *Did you really eat a piece of the cake and the brownie too? Why don't Spanish people know what a vegetable is? Corn and potato don't count.* Maria always tried to sit down right next to Vivian because she knew that no matter how good skinny felt, Vivian would always be jealous. The grilled pieces of chorizo, the thick slats of arepa, the crispy, fried pig skin—Maria wanted to give Vivian a good view of her plate.

On the street, a woman was selling stalks of corn from a makeshift grill on a shopping cart, the kind that Maria used to sit in at the supermarket. Maria wondered if people still did that anymore, put their kids in shopping carts.

"What the fuck is that shit?" Vivian said, looking out at the woman's elotes. "You'd think we're in Mexico. No. Peru."

Maria's mother glared at Aunt Vivian.

"No? Am I wrong? I'm sorry, it just gets worse every time I come here. Soon they'll be fighting chickens on the street."

They weren't standing in the entryway for long before a woman with curly bangs and the biggest earrings Maria had ever seen approached them.

"Y este milagro! Girl, when was the last time I saw you?" Her make-up was all thick lines and faded contours. It looked tattooed to her face. "Oh my god, you lost weight!"

Maria watched as Vivian exchanged kisses with the shopkeeper. She looked like she had just stepped out of a time machine. The only people Maria had ever seen with curly bangs were in the photos of her mother's friends before they had babies. Everything in the store looked like it had come out of those photos. From what Maria could see, all the dresses were either metallic and glittering, or were covered in rhinestones and ruffles. Panic was already starting to rattle inside her when the woman caught sight of Maria.

"So this must be the prom queen! Tell me, sweetie, que es lo que quieres? Something long? Short? Te gustan los colores?"

Maria looked at her mother. Her wide eyes were somewhere between pleading for help and exacting revenge. Bell Seminary didn't nominate prom queens.

"She doesn't like to wear bright colors," her mother said. Maria could nearly taste the derision in her voice. It was cold and blue, like a bike handlebar.

"Okay, no problem. Something subtle then. Come, follow me."

The woman turned and began leading them through the store, pushing aside dresses as

she walked. The dresses were spilling out everywhere, and the woman was battling gauzy veils and giant puffs of princess organza just to clear a path.

“What’s wrong with you? You don’t know how to talk?” her mother hissed.

“I told you I didn’t want a dress like these!” Maria wanted a dress like the kind that the Bell Seminary girls would wear, the simple black ones that were in fashion. The girls at Bell Seminary wore ballet flats and J. Crew sweaters, and their style was muted—they wore dark kohl on their faces. She had never seen them in anything that looked like a Disney ball gown.

The woman stopped and was shuffling through a clothing rack. She pulled out a dress the color of bubble gum with a breastplate ravaged in Chinatown rhinestones. Then she pulled out another dress that criss-crossed up the back like a shoelace and when Maria heard her mother go *ohhh*, Maria flinched as if she’d come at her. And now that curly-banged face was asking which one she wanted to try on first and untying the back of the laced-up corset, and Maria was supposed to respond as if she didn’t hate them all. She looked at Vivian and her mother. They had taken a seat on a low, cushioned bench. Maria hated them like she hated the dresses.

A word flashed in her head, illuminated like a neon sign on the bodega windows outside. It wasn’t her word but she heard it in her voice, and then she heard the Bell Seminary girls saying it, how they would whisper it over the chime of their Tiffany bracelets, those thick and interlocking chains. *Cheap*, they would say, sneering. It didn’t matter what the price tags said; all the dresses looked cheap. The whole store was cheap. Her mother, Vivian—cheap. Maria had hung out with the private school girls long enough to know she would never be *cheap*.

Maria looked at the dress that the shopkeeper was holding, its lime-green corset with the golden cross-stitching. If they didn’t know before, the dress would give her away. Everyone, from the students to the chaperones, would know Maria was on scholarship.

“I’m not trying on those nasty dresses,” she said, looking at the shopkeeper.

The woman’s tattooed eyebrows arched up and expanded across her face like a line dividing a road. She recovered quickly, almost as soon as she had reacted, but with all of those lines on her face drawn like a cartoon, Maria saw that the woman was shocked. She didn’t feel sorry.

“Okay, honey. I don’t think I can help you.” The Spanish words were gone from her voice. She looked at Vivian, her eyebrows back in place. “Maybe you can try Macy’s.”

When they left the store, nobody said anything, not even Vivian. Maria wished they would talk, even if it were just the stupid things they always said, the pieces of family gossip that Maria rolled her eyes at, the conversations about what they made for dinner yesterday and what they were planning on making today.

“I’m not giving you any more money than what your father already gave me,” Maria’s mother finally said.

“Okay,” Maria responded, her thumbnail in her mouth.

At Macy’s, Maria tried on the first dress she found. It was black and generic enough that nobody would know where she had bought it. It was tight at the bust, and even tighter at the hips, but it was sleek, unadorned, and it stopped at the knee. It was made of polyester. It didn’t puff out anywhere or belie the bare silhouette of her body. Her mother didn’t say anything when she came out to look in the mirror, and by then, Vivian was gone, hanging around by the jewelry section, picking up heavy necklaces to drape across her chest. Maria went to the counter and her mother paid in cash.

“Thank you, Ma,” Maria said as the cashier handed her mother the receipt.

They had just pulled out of the parking lot when Vivian and her mother began speaking

over the hum of the radio. Maria sat in the backseat with the plastic bag on her lap. Maria could recognize her mother's voice anywhere, the narrator of all those bedtime books in childhood, the one that pronounced library *liberry* and *share* instead of chair. Maria had developed a habit of correcting the way her mother talked, but now, as she watched the landscape go by from the backseat, the voice was soothing, more soothing than rain, and Maria said nothing. She closed her eyes.

Maria was accepted to Bell Seminary as part of a diversity initiative, thanks to the robust after school program whose mission it was to “create leaders” out of overachieving black and brown kids that given a couple of more years, would more than likely have gotten lost in the K through 12 spin cycle, a missing sock in the public school wash. Maria's parents had considered the afterschool program a godsend and Maria was a supporter too. But Maria knew it didn't work for everyone—there was her friend Brandon, who was dismissed from his private school because he was caught selling weed to a classmate, and then Mark, who mysteriously relocated to Jersey after only one year of his placement, and even Maria could only be considered a success of the organization if you squinted at her report card.

At this new school, Maria never heard Spanish songs blaring from phones in the hallway. She didn't need to keep up on Spanish telenovelas to have afterschool conversations. She began to make new friends and go over their apartments and houses. She could finally look up at her friends' parents' faces without feeling ashamed at the fact that she hated speaking Spanish, was self-conscious about her dopey accent. Nowhere in their downcast eyes did she see the thoughts about how raro it was, how much of a pity, how great a pesar, that a girl named Maria only answered in English. They shook hands with Maria, they invited her to family brunches, they asked if she'd ever tried quiche (she hadn't—and after the first time, she had no desire to ever try it again). Maria's transition to private school had been marked down as seamless as determined by the after-school program's advisors, people who noted that depression, and less commonly suicidal ideation, were the most alarming after-effects of a private school placement.

Bell Seminary was a place where blondes outnumbered brunettes and students carried their books in handbags instead of backpacks, and finally, Maria was something she had never been before at public school: different, exotic, and if she played her cards right, she could even be cool. Maria had never gotten much attention in public school. She only reflected off another girl's shine, she was perpetually known as someone's best friend. Bell Seminary girls had never seen those beautiful public school girls with straight black hair who knew how to cook and bandage all wounds. Maria was plain in public school, but at Bell Seminary, she stuck out just enough. So when the Bell Seminary girls asked her about rap, Maria pretended to know. They asked her to show them how to dance. Like birds to bread, they flocked to her.

Within her first month at private school, she had already been inside two Upper West Side apartments, and aside from the men who held the doors open downstairs and the color blasts of peonies in the lobbies, Maria didn't see what was so great about where these girls lived. After all, they lived in *apartments*, and Maria lived in a house, and her mother went to great lengths to keep this house clean and finely ordered—she didn't have the money or space to hoard—and if Maria had so much mentioned keeping a wastebasket full of old magazines stationed by the toilet bowl like she noticed in some of those uptown apartments, whether *The New Yorker* or

Entertainment Weekly, her mother would have flinched with disdain. To Maria, it meant nothing. She liked being invited to brunch.

There was only one thing that threatened to throw into tumult the small empire Maria created. She went by the name Brenda Campuzano.

Brenda had noticed Maria in her first year of high school. By then, Maria had become friends with Natalie and Laura and a few other girls who had gone to Bell Seminary since childhood. Brenda, though older than Maria, was newer to the school than she was, and within a few months of enrollment, Brenda had embarked on a mission to create a student club for anyone who could be considered “non-white”. It was a vexing task—the school had scrubbed and pressed all its students into a uniform so whitewashed that even the colors from their skin seemed to have faded. Brenda spent weeks studying the faces of her peers, and noted everything from kinks in the hair to the vaguest semblance of an aquiline nose. By the end of three weeks, she thought she had accounted for everyone. Her strategy for identification and outreach wasn’t based on an exact science, but then again, when had that sort of thing ever been?

She approached Maria in the hallway one Wednesday afternoon, just after last period.

“Maria!” she said, “We’re meeting today in like fifteen minutes. You’re gonna come, right?”

Maria had received Brenda’s email the day before about the club and had deleted it almost as soon as she opened it. She didn’t know much about Brenda beside the fact that she was very pretty and very big-breasted and spoke Spanish with another upperclassman named Adriana; Maria had heard them in the bathroom once and they reminded her of public school. She waited to come out of the stall until she was sure they had left.

“Um,” she said.

“You should. Seriously. It’ll be fun. I brought donuts.”

“Okay,” Maria said. “If I’m still here.”

“Okay.”

There was something that made it hard for Maria to look at Brenda in the face. She focused on her neck instead. Something golden, an oval inscription, hung there. Was it some kind of religious pendant? Maria couldn’t tell.

“You should come,” Brenda finally said before she walked away.

Natalie grabbed Maria by the arm. “Come to what?” she asked.

Maria was struck by how publicly Brenda had confronted her, in the middle of the underclass lockers. She had made sure to say very little for fear of what would be overheard. It hadn’t worked—even with Maria’s pained subtlety, Natalie had noticed.

“Nothing,” Maria opened her locker. “Some club.”

“Wait.” A grin formed on Natalie’s face. “Is that the Minority Club? Ashley got an email for it too.” Ashley was some mix of Black and Asian, had been a student at the school since Kindergarten, and lived on 88th and Park Avenue—at least that’s what Maria had gathered from clues. Maria couldn’t think of one conversation she’d had with her that didn’t take place among other students.

“Ashley?” Maria asked. “Is she going?”

“No!” Natalie yelled. “Why would she? I mean—are you?” Natalie looked at her quizzically. Maria looked away, and saw another classmate crouching near them, behind her locker door.

“No.” Maria zipped her backpack shut. “I mean—probably not.”

A bemused look came over Natalie’s face.

“Really? You think you might go?” Natalie tilted her head. “Brenda seems nice, I guess.”

“Yeah, she is nice,” Maria’s voice was enlivened. “I think I might go. Will you be around for clubs?”

“I’m going to go to Debate with Laura.”

“I’ll meet you here afterwards,” Maria offered, turning away from Natalie. She heard lockers slamming as she went down the hall, as if they were darts being thrown.

Brenda smiled when she saw Maria walk past the door into Room 323. For being such a small school, Brenda had rallied a significant number of students, at least, more than what Maria expected. Maria counted 6. She went up to the center of the room to take a white powdered donut from an Entenmann’s box, and Brenda passed around an agenda which included a bullet about making T-shirts and hosting a dance workshop. All the girls laughed when they heard how Brenda snorted between every few of her giggles, the golden pendant climbing up and down her chest each time she gasped for breath.

At the end of the period, they made plans to meet next week. Someone requested chocolate covered donuts instead of the sugared ones, and Brenda clicked her tongue in dismay. “You bring it then!” she shouted across the room, and the offender smiled and acquiesced.

When Maria got back to the lockers, Natalie was standing with her Longchamp bag zipped closed and slung over her shoulder.

“My spicy Latina!” Natalie shouted, as Maria made her way across the hall. “How does it feel to be an empowered woman?”

Laura stood beside Natalie and watched as Maria approached.

“What did you guys talk about?” Laura asked, a sneer holding fast to her face.

“About how to be empowered!” Natalie giggled wildly.

“Nothing,” Maria responded. Her face was leaking red, but she knew that Natalie and Laura didn’t notice, her skin was too dark to show. Maria loved using ink in her painting class, the washes that spread smooth like butter on canvas. She felt like she was being glazed in red; she felt it consume the length of her face.

“How does it feel, Maria?” Natalie asked. “Empowerment I mean?”

“I want to know what they talked about,” Laura said, her eyes steadied on Maria’s face. Maria couldn’t remember a time when Laura had looked at her like that. Laura hardly ever addressed Maria—she couldn’t think of a time she’d even heard Laura say her name.

Maria remained silent, the redness from her cheeks had welled up to her eyeballs and it was becoming harder to see. What did Laura think they had talked about? They had spent most of the period talking about games and snacks they wanted to bring for the next meeting. When someone had mentioned a bake sale and Brenda offered to bring a cake from a bakery in Washington Heights, multiple girls said “Oooh!” at the same time, causing an eruption of laughter that, fueled by intervals of Brenda’s pig snorts, lasted a full minute.

“Yeah, Maria, what did you guys talk about?” Natalie compelled Maria to respond by using her kindest voice. It felt like being probed by an electric rod draped in chinchilla hair. Excruciating pain in the softest of furs.

“I don’t know,” Maria said, avoiding Laura’s eyes. Her pimple-savaged face looked gruesome.

“She’s a strong woman, now, Laura,” Natalie finally said, a little more soberly now, the laughter controlled. “That means we shouldn’t fuck with her. She might get her homies to come after us.”

When the Women of the Diaspora club met the next week at 3:30, Maria had already left to go home. Even though Maria continued to receive all of Brenda's emails, she was never approached in the hallway again. Sometimes she saw Brenda bouncing around on the third and second floors, the golden pendant on a chain around her neck every day. They said hi and bye and smiled at each other, but Maria never looked close enough to see what it said.

When they opened the door to the house, her father was stationed at the TV.

"Where's your dress?" he asked, turning down the volume.

Maria pulled it out of the bag.

"Oh."

"What?" Maria asked, holding the dress to her body. She stretched the bands against her stomach so her father could make out the shape.

"Nothing. You got that from 82nd street?"

"No," her mother said. "We took her to Macy's."

"You don't like it?" Maria's eyebrows furrowed in alarm.

"No," he said. "It's nice. I just thought a prom dress was supposed to be fancier."

"This is fancy," Maria said, her voice raising. "What did you expect me to wear? One of those stupid quinceañera dresses?"

Her mother and father exchanged glances. *Te digo más tarde*, is what the look said.

"What?" Maria repeated.

"Nothing, *mija*. You'll look great."

When her mother went to kiss Maria goodnight, she found her daughter crumpled on the floor. Beside her was the dress, the tags of it ripped off.

"Why is that dress on the ground?" Her mother stooped to the floor, her back bending like a door hinge. She went to the closet and pulled out a hanger. "Goodnight, Maria," she said.

"Ma." Maria was staring at the carpet. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," her mother said. "Go to sleep. You have school tomorrow." She looked at the full-length mirror beside Maria's bed; there were fingerprints all over it.

"I didn't mean to call those dresses nasty. I just didn't want to try them on." Maria's voice was muffled by her sweater, darkened and wet at the sleeve. "Do you think the lady at the store was upset?"

"No. Those dresses just weren't for you."

Maria sniffled.

"I don't know," she said, looking up at her mother. "They were okay."

"They were fine." She lingered at the bedroom door. "But stop crying, Maria. No one was upset." She put her hand on the knob, and when Maria didn't protest, her mother went out to the hallway. She met her husband in the bathroom, and caught him just as he spat out a stream of green mouthwash.

"I'll be happy when she's finally out of that school," he said, reaching for the floss.

Before Maria went to bed, she opened the door to her closet. She looked at the black dress again. Nobody would compliment her in that dress. Nobody would make fun of her either. There were no prom queens at Bell Seminary, she reminded herself, as she closed the closet door. Still—she imagined a day when there'd be another dress for her, when she wouldn't have picked the wrong one. There will be other chances to wear other dresses, she knew her mother would say. Maria hoped it wouldn't be long.