

Be Yourself

by Judith Horth

The stiff cream envelope plopped through the letterbox and landed on the mat with a satisfying thud. Greta picked it up, studied the crest on the back flap and tapped her way smartly across the parquet to the morning room, where she sat at the breakfast table, picked up the ivory-handled letter opener and opened the envelope with one swift slice of the silver blade.

“Marguerite!” Her voice was unusually animated. “Come down at once! Such good news, my dear!”

Marguerite was less thrilled than her mother to learn that the envelope contained an invitation to the 16th birthday party of Prunella Capstick, daughter of the local Conservative MP, and one of her classmates – the one she most feared.

“Of course, you must go! Don’t be ridiculous, child. Prunella is a dear girl - her father, Sir Gregory, and her mother, Lady Daphne, are delightful people. I’ve met them once or twice. Well, not met them exactly, but they did come to open the fete last summer, and I chatted to them for oh, quite fifteen minutes. Oh, they have such a lovely house, and you are lucky to be invited.” Greta beamed. “If you behave yourself, perhaps I shall be invited to tea...Now, what are you going to wear?”

Marguerite said nothing beyond her first protest. She knew it would be pointless, and she knew, too, that she had only been invited because Lady Daphne had told Prunella that it would be bad manners to exclude anyone from their form group. Prunella hated her and was the ringleader of all the bullying and name-calling that she had to endure daily. It would, she knew, be no different at the party.

In the following days Greta measured her daughter and hired a dressmaker. “You will be the belle of the ball,” she told her daughter, but she refused to divulge any information about the dress she had commissioned. “I know what I’m doing. Don’t question me, Marguerite.” Her mother’s narrowed eyes and clipped voice ensured that Marguerite did not pursue the matter.

A fortnight later, Marguerite arrived at the large Edwardian mansion where Prunella lived with her parents and her older brother, Perry. As she was ushered into the drawing room she was only too aware of the silence that fell and the eyes that stared. Flushing, she bit her lip and studied the pattern on the carpet.

“Well, look who’s come to join us!” Prunella’s reedy voice broke the silence. “I do believe we have Royalty in our midst.” She pushed her way to the front of the group and curtsied to Marguerite, a mocking expression on her face. She, like most of the other girls, sported a very short mini dress and platform shoes, which made the gesture rather difficult to achieve with grace. Nevertheless, it was Marguerite, not Prunella, who felt awkward and clumsy. Never had she felt more out of place than she did standing there in the billowing orange tulle ballgown, white gloves and patent leather court shoes her mother had forced her to wear. She knew she looked as if she should be sitting on giant toilet roll in some vast bathroom rather than standing here in a room full of teenagers.

Giggling, the other girls copied Prunella, then broke off to dance as Noddy Holder’s raucous voice and the driving beat of Take Me Back ‘Ome filled the room. Marguerite made her way to a chair in the far corner of the room and sat down to watch them. This, she knew, would be where she would spend the entire evening.

As Slade segued into T Rex’s latest hit, Metal Guru, the drawing room door opened and Prunella’s brother, Perry entered. Tall, dark-haired and very handsome, he immediately caught the attention of all the girls and there was a flutter of excitement. It was as if, Marguerite thought, a particularly impressive cockerel had sauntered into the henhouse, all shiny black feathers and strutting, and the silly hens fluttered their tail feathers at him.

Perry, however, took no notice of them. Instead, and to Marguerite’s horror, he made his way across to her corner of the room. She felt sick. Was he going to show her up too, for the amusement of his sister and her friends? Tears welled up and she felt one spill down her cheek.

“What’s this, Princess?” Perry threw himself down in the chair next to her. He was going to join in the teasing! It was more than she could bear. With a strangled “Don’t!” she ran out of the room and stumbled through the house, hardly knowing where she was heading. She found herself in the kitchen, where she wrenched open the door and ran into the back garden to sit on a low wall separating the patio area from the wide expanse of lawn.

She heard the door open and Perry came to sit beside her. “What’s going on?” he asked, and his voice was not mocking but concerned, and Marguerite found herself telling him all about Prunella, the bullying, the hated orange ballgown and how she wished she could be more like the other girls. He said nothing for a while, but offered her a clean, neatly folded white handkerchief.

“You know,” he said. “You don’t want to worry about that lot. They’re all the same. Shallow, vain and silly. You’re different. You look grown up and sophisticated – you can’t be anyone else. Just be yourself – everyone else is taken!”

Seeing the puzzled look on her face, he grinned. “Oscar Wilde, I believe. Now, will you come and dance with me?”