

awaken, not stirred

Jonathan Lai

Writer's comment: I began writing this essay for an assignment in English 18; after hours of going back and forth between ideas, rewriting, revising, and re-uttering obscenities, I decided to write it for myself. The subject I chose was an event that I want everyone to be able to experience, if only vicariously and for the length of my essay.

The debutante scene has a beautifully ritzy and esoteric quality—and therein lies the appeal. I tried to examine this societal phenomenon as an outsider so as to provide my readers with a door to this culture, to gawk at the extravagance but be part of the glamour, to understand the gravity and history of the events yet concomitantly realize that it is a distant and alien world.

This endeavor would be nothing more than a tale told by an idiot filled with sound and fury if not for an audience with whom to communicate these experiences and realizations of my life; therefore, I'd like to sincerely thank my friends, especially Ms. Pamela Demory for lending an honest ear, unbounded direction, and the freedom for creativity.

—Jonathan Lai

Instructor's comment: English 18 is a course in Style—and so Jonathan's essay on his experience at the very stylish debutante ball seems particularly appropriate for the course. For this research paper assignment (to identify, research, and analyze a subculture), I asked students to rely on both primary and secondary research, and on their own experiences and observations, and to write from a first-person perspective. Jonathan succeeds admirably here in integrating his various sources into an apparently effortless narrative of his night at the ball—a narrative that also analyzes and reflects. But what I like best about this essay is that Jonathan embodies his attitudes and ideas about the ball and the people in the very language of the essay. It's a marvelously self-reflective piece about creating a persona in the social sphere that itself creates a writing persona. And it does so with entertaining wit...and style.

—Pamela Demory, English Department

SAN FRANCISCO IS POPULAR for its lush social climate, fine cuisine, and expensive everything. Although the City by the Bay can be an esoteric alcove for eclecticism, it isn't commonly known for its exclusive and lavish debutante balls. Why? Duh. They're exclusive. So when my wealthy and well-connected friend, Crystal, asked me to accompany her to one, I didn't know what to say. In fact, I just gave her a dumb look. Heck, I didn't know what a debutante ball was; I couldn't even spell debutante; and for all I cared, it was a party for a bunch of little sausage-looking dogs with small feet. "Those are dachshunds!" she exclaimed.

"Fine," I conceded. "So what is it?" She took in a deep breath and gave me a look that communicated a sentiment along the lines of, "why am I asking you to partake in this aristocratic affair when you're not even cultured enough to know what it is?" But, nevertheless, she understood—or at least I'd like to think she understood—that everyone has to get their information somewhere, and how better to prove a philanthropic friend than to explain to this poor, bourgeois lad the elitist minutiae of the occasion?

I'm not rich, though I've always wanted to be, and on occasion I've pretended to be as such. Though I never considered rejecting Crystal's offer to attend the ball, I personally contemplated what I would gain from it. I weighed the benefits against the risks, and I realized that the worst that could come of it was for the individuals there to discover that I was merely an influentially lackluster, middle-class person—and what was so bad about that? I may have great ambitions, but I'll never be ashamed of who I am. So I viewed the ball as a challenge to see how long I, furtively ensconced in this soirée under a cloak of high-expectation and the assumption of wealth, could maintain the façade and talk the talk for just one night.

Before I transformed from a nobody into a debonair prince—I had to get a little preparatory information from my benevolent fairy god-mother.

"So what kind of people are these debutante-ball goers?" I asked Crystal. "Well, for starters, they don't window shop or 'go shopping,' for that matter; they employ buyers to purchase clothing for them.... When they go to the mountains to ski, they fly to Switzerland, and when they're there, they don't rent rooms at resorts, they lease the resorts.... They don't just 'listen' to classical music—they 'appreciate' it. And they definitely don't clap between movements during concerts...." By the time Crystal finished explicating, I didn't know whether to be im-

pressed or scared, so I was a little of both. Hell, I wanna be the one buying, carrying, and bringing home my own frickin' underwear, I've only been to Switzerland once, I snowboard, and I don't see anything wrong with frequently reminding the orchestra of how well they're playing throughout a performance. I guess the point is that these connoisseurs of indulgence have their own snooty idiosyncrasies that denote them as such. In the forefront of my mind, however, I realized that I'd have to assume some of these qualities in order to camouflage myself in their company. I was anxious to incorporate some practical pretense into my life, and the ball was my ticket.

So back to the question "what is a debutante ball?" To familiarize myself with what I was up against, I did a little research. According to friends conversant with the topic and some helpful literature—a debutante party or "ball" is a ceremony, originating from the times of medieval feudalism. In this period, featuring a rigidly divided class system, the landed gentry held debutante balls as a fashionable means by which to keep the wealth amongst the "educated" and "powerful." Only maidens from influential families had the opportunity to "debut," and "implicit in the term is the acknowledgement that the young [women were then] of marriageable age," but "even when a debut is not an acknowledgement of availability for marriage, it still functions as a rite marking adulthood" (Haynes 52, 55). This was a serious matter as it dictated her social life—affecting how others treated her, but most importantly, allowing her to entertain the courtship of an aristocratic gentleman, thereby portending her establishment as a dame, and thus securing her family's nobility. Since the 1700s, however, "certain aspects of the debutante tradition, such as its role in declaring oneself available for courtship, have clearly faded" (Carlin 42) and the mechanics of the ball itself have changed, but the purpose and exclusivity thereof have not. Today's nobles and aristocracy endeavor to keep the tradition, and not just anyone can attend a debutante ball; one must be invited. Charity isn't even in the picture. This event would break hearts for the sake of selectivity. The ball isn't just a showy party, it's a filter that the affluent use "as a way to usher upper-class females into society," because "the debutante ball also functions as a form of identification and socialization with other members of wealthy families" (49), and today's wealthy families don't want their prized daughters mingling with plebeian society. Thus, "the debutante title recognizes the young women as a member of a particular group and aids in the matchmaking process between elite families" (49). The "particular

group,” in our case, is evident in the discerningly handpicked guest list. Of course, Crystal had to pull some strings, bypass ingrained tradition, and breech a few exclusive, “secret-society” laws to get me in. So we were going to a party for rich chicks to show off their riches to a bunch of rich folks in a rich environment for the sake of extravagance and richness—show me in!

We arrived at the Ritz, an hour early, and I handed the keys to the eager valet, walked over to Crystal’s door, opened it, and took her hand. “May the games begin,” I thought. We walked into the lobby and met some of the other guests. I mercurially tuned and sculpted my social character during a short, introductory repartee with some convivial old men in tailcoats. “Nice work,” Crystal whispered as we walked away from the venerable penguins. “The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain,” I replied, grinning under my composed countenance. We proceeded to the reception hall. It smelled like Cuba already, and I was getting lightheaded from second-hand smoke. When the concierge affirmed that I was on the list, I took out the platinum Mont Blanc that Crystal had lent me and John Hancocked the line beside my name. I nodded to the doorman, and pressed the back of my hand against the small of my back as Crystal wrapped her arm around mine. An usher escorted us down the staircase and into the main room.

The hall wasn’t quite as I had imagined, but of late I hadn’t really much time to imagine anyway. I had spent the previous two nights losing sleep, reading James Bond novels, and watching Cary Grant films—trying earnestly to incorporate their style and charm into my repertoire. Charm in hand, I went with Crystal to meet people. We seated ourselves next to some of Crystal’s acquaintances, after which she introduced me to a sizeable circle of rich men, and the more hands I shook, the less I remembered their names. This is not to say that all rich people are the same; they just don’t make too much of an impression when they introduce themselves as the owner of this estate in this province and then offer their name as an afterthought. To be consistently loutish, I must liken their salutations to a dick contest. They might as well have shaken my hand and said, “How do you do? I’m very small, and my name is Monsieur Lamont.” I view them differently than they do themselves. I’m on a different level. I belong to a different society, and I don’t share their *recherche* values, but as long as I remain blasé about it, they’ll never know, and the pretense proceeds as planned.

Somehow, Crystal got into an inextricable conversation about chartering private jets, and I dismissed myself to take a stroll around the grounds. Exploring the balcony, I couldn't find anyone my age. The general male population had more white hair than a traditional herd of sheep. This "ball" seemed like an excuse for rich, old chaps to check out the latest young women on the market: the debutante's entourage. I couldn't help myself either. I paced around, admiring the sea of refined young women in remarkably well-tailored, ivory outfits—every one with a white dendrobium orchid in her exquisitely coiffured hair. Finally, I found myself at the bar. Leave me in a social establishment for long enough and I'll always find the bar; it has something to do with the earth's Coreolis force, the magnetism of the poles, and my alcoholic genes. The bartender looked up as I rested my hands on the counter, a mosaic of multicolored bottles glistening behind it on the bar's shelves. "Hello sir, what would you like?" "A dry martini with three measures of Gordon's, one of vodka, half a measure of Kina Lillet. Shake it very well until it's ice-cold, then add a large, thin slice of lemon-peel. Got it?" This was not the first time an imprudent hotel employee had asked my obviously-under-aged self what I would like from the bar, and I never have my fill of exploiting these poor individuals. This time, though, I erred on the side of the law-abiding gentleman and was kidding with him. Unfortunately he didn't recognize the quote from *Casino Royale*, and turned to prepare my drink before I shouted that I was joking and just wanted iced water.

Walking around with a crystal tumbler of hydrogen hydroxide on the rocks, I went about to assess the social atmosphere without giving myself away. I realized that to fit in, I had to lose the water, and so I placed my glass on the closest attendant's platter. I was strutting around when a woman wearing a small county's supply of minks stopped me. "Pardon me, but would you be William Laurence of the Seattle Laurences?" My first reaction was: "They actually talk like that? What is this? Afternoon tea on the Titanic? Do I look like my last name is Laurence?" I politely replied that I was not, introduced myself, and walked away wondering: how many minks would a moneyed madam martyr, if a moneyed madam had to stay in fashion?

Disappointed by the awkwardness of the previous aristocrat, I wasn't expecting much better from the other invitees. Nevertheless, I met a man who probably had grandchildren my age. He was smoking a cigar and leaning solidly against the base of a Corinthian pillar, his shawl-collared tuxedo au courant and especially appropriate for his

age. I figure the “older” individuals are good practice for testing the social water, because they don’t capture every word and therefore have less of a chance of catching me in the act if I accidentally weave a contradiction into one of my specious and invented stories of horseback riding at my private ranch in the English countryside while managing perfect marks at Oxford. “Are you enjoying yourself, young man?” He asked, his expression polite, but his voice ominous like Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments. “As much as I can, without worrying too much about the lady I’m with,” I replied, trying to sound as composedly nonchalant as possible, watching his cigar embers ignite with each breath, and contemplating what to do with my unoccupied hands. “Oh, don’t worry so much about the women, my boy. They get along. Albeit cloaked in fine tradition, this event assumes a rather ostensible female predominance; tonight is for us men to enjoy ourselves. We have neither the burden to impress nor a script to obey—but to lead in the waltzes and follow through the doorways.” Though I missed Crystal’s company, I was feeling quite swell, having met such a poetically paternal character. And he and I talked for several minutes longer, though I fixated so much on the powerful smell of cigar smoke and the texture of his voice that I forgot the rest of our conversation and even the man’s name, but I honestly felt that he had redeemed the upper crust from the preconceived hauteur that I had previously assigned them.

By the time I walked away and left Charlton to his cigar, I had acquired a peculiar British accent, and had thrown out the “ums,” “likes,” “yannos,” and “hellas” from my speech. Unfortunately, I had derived my British from watching Austin Powers, and I took my dialogue and behavior from James Bond. I realized, however, that integration into this society relied upon learning to speak like a rich person. It reminded me of a line from the movie *Boiler Room*: “There’s an important phrase that we use here and I think it’s time you all learned it. ‘Act as if.’ Do you understand what that means? Act as if you are the fucking president of this firm. Act as if you have a nine-inch cock. Act as if. To do this properly you need to at least look the part.” I definitely looked the part, and now I was beginning to sound like a snob too, but I think the movie’s advice summed up my whole endeavor: act as if.

The master of ceremonies asked for everyone’s attention, although he already had it; everyone was aware of the time, and most had been waiting for him to commence the proceedings. The room fell respect-

fully silent, and he announced the debutante. Just then, her coterie, a flock of angels, filed out onto the stage, forming two long lines, whereupon chamber orchestras on either side of the stage struck up an exquisite adaptation of Johann Sebastian Bach's Suite no. 3 in G major. Then, accompanied by a distinguished patrician, the debutante made her entrance to the polite applause of nearly five-hundred seated guests. She was hot! I mean... she looked like a princess, diamond tiara scintillating in the spotlight, her long dress, shaped like an upside-down martini-glass, draping down to her feet and trailing off a couple meters behind her. He led her to the middle of the stage where, between the two columns of girls, she promenaded unaccompanied towards the audience. At the front of the stage, she made a sweeping bow to which the audience responded with a standing ovation. It was a classic DeBeers commercial moment; time might as well have played in slow-motion, the colors fading from the scene, and the crowds disappearing—just the music and her—enveloped in the photographers' electric succession of flashes, illuminating the entire room with refracted light so intense that I could feel the energy reflected from the walls.

The warmth of the light lingered on my eyelids as I closed them against the blinding glare. My field of vision temporarily painted over with a green filter, I looked at Crystal, smiling. The ceremony continued with the formal proceedings after which the hosts walked off the stage. The whole platform then retracted back behind the velvet curtains, opening up a spacious dancing area. As the guests proceeded to take the floor, I looked at Crystal, my countenance asking "do we really have to?" "Yes," she said, taking my hand and pulling me into the middle of the mass. She guided me through a few waltzes, helping me lead some fancy flourishes. When the faster movements came around, I told her I had to sit down. Pretending to be good at dancing is hard work, especially when you aren't.

When the dancing concluded, and the speeches were over, and the party was dying down, Crystal and I decided to leave. Actually, I persuaded her to leave with me. I revisited the bar for several shots of the "regular," swirling the ice in my water as I waited for Crystal to do her obligatory hand-shaking, and good-bying. I admired the ten-foot tall grandfather clock in the lobby and watched the short hand tick, waiting for the minute hand to catch up. We still had half an hour before the ball would be officially over and before our Mercedes would turn into a 389-horsepower pumpkin. But we left, early, and I drove back to Crystal's house.

On the drive back, she asked how I liked the ball. I responded, “I regret not being able to put this experience on my resume. When listing my qualities, I could say that I have excellent ass-kissing skills, and that I’m fluent in snob.” It had its intended effect, she laughed, but I just wanted to change the subject. Having just partaken in an event bred in royalty, sheathed in tradition, and submerged in profligacy—I was exhausted, my mind weary of pretending. I wanted to go and eat at McDonalds, wear jeans, and enjoy all things common and down to earth. Although the allure of extravagance and beauty can make one forget the ordinary world, I remain cognizant that it is but a vacation from reality, from which one must ultimately return. I believed that the faster I assumed normalcy, the sooner I would get along with my life, live within my means, and appreciate the serendipity of the smaller and more subtle blessings around me.

Do you remember being a child? Do you recall the comfort in building your own reality, of taking refuge in your mind, imagining a better circumstance, and living it for a few transient thoughts? We have the right to pretend, to wish we were a part of something better. We have the right to dream so much as we’re entitled to our own ambitions. Let them have their glorious soirees, with pomp and circumstance, and unnatural concentrations of beautiful, rich, and educated goddesses—we have our thoughts, we have our untouchable fantasies, our castles in the sky, our ivory tower. And who’s to say that it is better to have reached the top than to have something to dream about at night?

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