

The Last Dance

By

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Bitter. The wine, being a deep garnet, leaves a glossy film as a loose droplet tries to roll down my chin. I catch it with my tongue and lift the goblet once more. Though I try to be gentle, the engravings on the rim roughly brush against my lip as I clumsily spill more drops— many of which I cannot catch. Though I can feel wine drops bouncing off of my bare chest, I still dart my tongue from side to side in vain. A laugh echoes from beside me.

“If you’re awake, relieve me of this torture. My arm has been twisted in your grasp for hours.” After setting the goblet down on the bedside table, I motion to my right arm. Its visibility is limited due to the two layers of cover surrounding it— the bear hide blanket and the fair lady from last night’s endeavors. She peeks at me from beneath the covers and continues to laugh, loosening her grip but not letting go. “The reason I’ve made a mess of myself is because I cannot use my right arm to imbibe. I’ve been nothing short of a gentleman in not waking you and— ”

Before I can finish orating my request for freedom, her arms unwind from around my bicep, and her mouth is warm as she kisses the semi-sticky wine off my chest. Cherry red specks blossom on my cheeks as my face begins to warm. Soon enough, her face is parallel to mine. After pushing the stray cinnamon-brown tendrils out of her face, she smirks at me with defiant eyes. “All clean.” Her voice is raspy and her French is choppy. She’s an Englishwoman and, if I remember correctly, is traveling with her brother— a terrible chaperone, I must say. I met them last night at an affair their cousins were hosting after the viewing at my university’s art gallery.

Bitter. The smell was bittersweet— a mix of ladies' fragrances and sweat. The smoky haze that filled the room succeeded in placing every entrant into a fog. Even if you didn’t smoke cigars, you were inadvertently partaking that night. Maybe that’s why I downed glass after glass

of whatever I could get my hands on. Maybe that's why I didn't think twice when a beautiful Englishwoman twice my age placed her hand on my arm and whispered in my ear, "You don't look like you're supposed to be here." I tried to not notice it. I didn't want to acknowledge that people laughed a little less freely when I joined a conversation. They bowed their heads a fair share deeper when addressing my presence. We were all in the same room yet I lived in a completely different world. Most students pursuing art are not descendants of royalty. If they are, they are not firstborn sons. I will one day be Lord Estienne Des-prez of Vienne with a title, land, and countrymen to rule over. No one would possibly treat me like a man when I am a lord.

I let her whisk me away. She fawned at the fabric of my tunic. We inhaled the hypnotic fumes surrounding us and deluded ourselves with liquor. Her name still escapes me, as she mentioned it only once before continuing her commentary on French fashion. She's been designing gowns for the women of the English court for 11 years and chose to explore Europe to expand her horizons in hopes of bettering her technique. I halfheartedly listened as my hearing became muffled from intoxication. I was dosing off to the half-developed voices around me when she pulled me to my feet and led me through her cousin's house to her temporary quarters. She kissed me fervently and it was easy for me to oblige. In close proximity, I could see that years of smiling had etched soft creases on her rosy skin. She's taller than most women, as she only had to lift her head slightly to press her soft lips against mine. I became flustered at the thought of her noticing my quickened heartbeat when she pressed her hands to my chest to pin me to the wall. I've only shared a bed with a few other women, each of them more mature in age than I. I am humbled in those moments with them and I feel like I can be a 20-year-old young man. They're women who have chosen to remain unmarried and follow their passions in a

society where that is nearly impossible. They are prime examples of what the human experience should be.

Though, I wish these encounters didn't always turn intimate. I flinch as my thoughts are interrupted by a firm kiss from my bed partner. *Bitter.* The salty taste of sweat from beneath her lip and the residual hints of wine dance on my tongue. I pull away, lips pressed in distaste. I've gotten used to the flavors of sex and sin. I assume the first would not be so distasteful if the moment wasn't as fleeting. Only for a night, and only in this way, can I truly lay myself bare.

"We are hosting a ball tonight. Have you forgotten such essential information, Estienne?"

I look up to meet the piercing, green gaze of my mother. Her jaw is clenched and her face is flushed, troubled by my appearance and delayed arrival. She stands in the middle of the balcony between the two stairwells. The servants scurry about, trying to complete their preparatory tasks for tonight's ball. Two butlers have begun to roll out our finest rug while a few maids hang elaborate wreaths embellished with our house flower, camellias, on the stairwell railing. My tunic and silks are wrinkled and partially buttoned. My ash blonde hair hangs in a disheveled bun at the nape of my neck, a crown of frizz adorning the top of my head. I smell ripe, my skin sticky with the residuals of my previous festivities. No one is disturbed by this normality, of course, except my mother.

I ascend the left staircase and journey to my quarters, nearing my mother in the process. "It crossed my mind once or twice," I jest. It's the truth. I've been attending operas, galleries, theatres, and parties to remove myself as much as I can from this world. All of it is fleeting,

though— a passing fancy. In the end, I still must make face at the important events and pretend all of us aren't detached from reality. We, as royalty, build and reinforce these societal roles that depict us as “chosen by God.” We've isolated ourselves and our children through a supposed birthright. *Idols*. Sinners. We bear no right to rule over anyone or anything when we have never experienced the harsh realities of life. We're complacent in our fancy clothes and towering castles. I've no wonder, as I've seen it all. I've no passion, as I've been raised for one purpose. All of us in the French court are meant to set ourselves apart.

The sun paints every corner of the foyer in a soft, amber glow. I slept late into the day and it is already around two hours past noon. Preparations for the event are nearly complete. I must have frightened my mother at my inopportune disappearance. She is still in her pale, blue day gown instead of her evening attire. With three hours until the ball, she should have already started preparing.

I smile at her halfheartedly and she shakes her head in disappointment. “This ball is for *you*, Estienne. You are your father's only child.” She looks away from me and clutches her skirts in her gloved hands for composure. The act of vulnerability does not last long, as she meets my eyes once more. “You are *my* only child. You must marry and carry on your father's name. We cannot wait any longer. Tonight, Estienne, you *will* choose a bride. Your father wishes to return from his travels to hear good news. I cannot stand to hear these rumors about your behavior and endeavors with the common people. It is time you fulfill your duties.”

After a tense nod of approval from my mother, servants hastily usher me to my room for my preparation. I become docile as they work to clean and dress me for the occasion. My head begins to throb as thoughts cloud my mind. *Isn't this what I want?* I yearn to let down my guard

and show that I'm human to someone— and for *them* to recognize that I'm human. None of the ladies at the ball tonight will see that, though. They've been raised at an even farther distance from society. The ladies of the court are kept sheltered, away from the sins of the world. They want nothing and are raised to be silent, meek wives of the nobility. Each of them will know who I am and either fear or want me, because of my title.

I'll be on display. I won't be like a ballet dancer, though— showing off my talent, mobility, and passion. My movements will be constrained, remaining within the bounds that I have been sculpted in.

Preparations were not as complete as I previously deducted. The manor has been completely transformed since my earlier arrival. There is not a singular surface barren. Each table, railing, chair, wall, window, and candle fixture is adorned with camellias. All of the fireplaces burst with fire as butlers tend to their flames. The doors to the garden are open and I can see the yellow dots of candles lining each walkway. The cold air outside should cause the ballroom to be chilly, but the fireplaces are more than effective at maintaining a decent temperature. Guests in elaborate wigs and fancy promenade and waltz about, their differing garments creating a whirlwind of color amongst the deep red and gold backdrop.

Many young ladies and their families have greeted me. Each interaction has been taut. We bow, share greetings, then part. Another young lady always follows the last. I've not had a moment to dance with any of them. I don't mind that part, though. I detest the act. If I take to the floor, every guest will set their gaze on me and judge every step. The young lady and I will be

stiff, as to remain perfect and conservative. I refuse to participate in a practice that will be made horrid when it is meant to be jovial.

As the orchestra plays, each note echoes throughout the ballroom. I begin to feel dizzy as I watch our guests dance mechanically to a dance I've seen hundreds of times before. After excusing myself, I walk briskly through the garden doors and sit on a cement bench near a hedge. The icy air pricks my lungs as I inhale deeply. My head begins to clear with each piercing inhale and emptying exhale.

After a few minutes of letting the cool air calm my nerves, I stand and begin to stroll through the garden. The flowers are barely visible in the candlelight, but their sweet aromas fill my nose as I walk through the hedges. I've only gone as far as the second row and I can just barely hear the symphony from inside. My foot begins to tap. I lean against a hedge, not worrying about my garments, and view my home from afar. The music, the lights, the colors, and the people are so beautiful on the outside.

A shuffle causes me to stiffen and gain my composure. I turn around but no one is behind me. To my left is a hedge. To my right is a hedge. I hear the shuffle again and decide to walk deeper into the garden. As I near the gazebo, I see a speck of gold swaying side to side. My steps slow as I take in the sight before me. A lady, around my age, twirls from one side of the gazebo tiles to the other. The thick fabrics of her shimmering, gold dress are bunched between her cream, gloved fingers. I notice her shoes set neatly to the side and widen my eyes at her bare feet, slightly red from the cold. Her nose is pointed in the air and her eyes are closed, as her olive skin glows a warm color in the candlelight. The most captivating thing about her, though, is her smile. It isn't wide. It's gentle and appreciative. *The music.*

Without warning, her eyes open and meet mine. They widen in recognition and she quickly runs to grab her shoes. I freeze. She struggles to tie the laces as her skirts cascade around her feet. Immediately, I jump into action. “Please, let me assist you, my lady.” I approach her and she tries to move away, tripping over her skirt in the process. I quickly grab her wrist before she can fall and level her.

While turning her flushed face away from mine, she mumbles, “We should not be without a chaperone, young lord.” Tendrils of raven black hair have fallen out of her updo and blow slightly in the wind. I let go of her hand, noticing her discomfort.

“You must be cold, my lady. What are you doing out here without your chaperone? You risk catching a cold, and your safety, being so far from the ball.” I still struggle to believe that this maiden of the court willingly exited the warmth of the ballroom to move freely out here. Did she not think of what could happen if she was found? Does she not care about the role we each must play in there?

After bending down, I carefully tie the laces of her shoes. Her chocolate gaze is fixed forward when I return to my full height. I tower over her by at least a foot and she has no intention of looking up. “Thank you, young lord.” Her voice almost gets carried away with the wind, which has picked up since I stumbled upon her.

We stand silently for a while. I wish to know more but do not want to pry. She obviously wishes to leave but does not want to disrespect me. *What an interesting night this has turned out to be.* I clear my throat, readying myself to ask my burning question, but do not receive the chance.

“May I speak plainly, my lord?” Her voice has raised a bar, but she stares at her hands. She winds and unwinds the satin on her left index finger. When she glances at me, my breath catches, but I nod. “I needed some air. It gets so stuffy with all of those fireplaces burning. My garments are quite thick and uncomfortable. I thought the cold would do me some good. One thing led to another and I began to enjoy the music, though the melody is soft out here. My lord, surely you’ve had music move you before. I know it is distasteful for me to engage in such foolish behavior at your ball, and I acted out of character. I apologize for the timing, but I do not apologize for my emotions and their result.” At the end of her speech, her eyes harden. I’m at a loss for words and simply nod my head again.

She begins to walk towards the building and I shake my head, releasing myself from her trance. “W-would you like to dance inside perhaps? With me?” I fumble with my words. I’ve never asked a woman to dance– to do anything, at that. The beds I ended up in were the result of gentle coaxing from the other party. I’m usually too intoxicated to care.

The lady pauses. “Ask again, but say my name.” As she speaks, she doesn’t turn to look at me. She remains facing forward, looking at her destination. My thoughts race as I try to remember her introduction. I’ve been introduced to over 20 young ladies tonight, though, and fail to place a name to her face. I wasn’t paying attention to any of them. I was going to let my mother choose a bride at the end of the night and fulfill my duties. I had no interest in purchasing a statue to be placed on the pedestal next to my own.

After a moment of silence confirming my lack, she continues towards the ball. I silently curse my incompetence and press my forehead on one of the cool, marble posts. *Surely you’ve had music move you before.* Her words echo in my head. When I was younger, yes, I would sway

without a care. Now, I am meant to exude authority. Dancing is to please the women. *Is it?* No, but that's what my father would say to dissuade me from participating in such a freeing action.

I hear the music halt abruptly and jerk my head up. I run through the garden to the ballroom doors. Upon entry, I hear gasps and the loud hums of guests whispering in alarm. My eyes quickly find my mother to verify her safety. Other than the aghast look she displays, she is well. I follow the direction of everyone's attention to the far left side of the ballroom. A crowd has gathered and there is only one person removed from the rest, her limbs frantic with movement.

"Is that Lord Beaulieu's daughter, Genevieve? What, in God's name, is she doing?" Two older women of the court whisper to each other a pace, or so, in front of me.

"I heard her mother began to scold her for disappearing and, all of a sudden, she began to dance with no warning," one woman says. I focus once more on the woman who is supposedly Lord Beaulieu's daughter. I freeze.

It's the maiden from the garden.

I lay in bed staring at the ornate designs on the ceiling. Last night's finale has kept me up all night and the sunrise begins to paint my room in a pale blue. Something happened to the young lady from the garden, Lord Beaulieu's daughter. *Genevieve*. She placed herself on display for all to see, as she flailed around. She couldn't seem to control herself as she danced around the room. Many times, she tried to grab onto a table or chair to ground herself. Such action would only cause the lower part of her to dance more vigorously, causing her feet to stumble about. Her

face was bright red with embarrassment, more so than when she was caught on the gazebo. She had made quite a mess of things as she grasped at items to halt her movements. Lady Beaulieu screeched countless times at Genevieve to stop, to which the young lady replied, “I cannot control my body!” Many members of the court shamed her and urged her mother to remove her from the premises. With the help of their footmen, Genevieve was dragged away. Her body still twisted and turned in their grasp.

Where was I? I did nothing as she fought herself for control. I did nothing as she bumped into tables and chairs, wincing with each impact. I did nothing as members of the court jeered at her and treated her as a disgrace. At that moment, my hands began to shake. I could feel my heart trying to jump out of my chest. I felt my soul pulsating against my flesh, trying to reach her. My body did not move, though. My mind kept me rooted in place. I didn’t know what to do. I felt what I wanted to do, but I couldn’t do it. I was afraid. I was afraid to leave my pedestal and be human. I didn’t want them to see me: my emotions and my desires. *Pathetic.*

I press my face into the pillow and try to silence my thoughts. The external action does nothing to assuage the internal guilt I harbor, though. I had no problem helping the maiden when we were in the garden. Why did I falter when she truly needed me?

As I groan with disgust at myself, the door slams open. I remove my face from the pillow and meet the eyes of my mother and her posse of ladies-in-waiting. She begins to fully open each curtain while talking to me. “Don’t think you’ll avoid your decision because of last night’s charade. You disappeared for half an hour at your *own* ball! I can hardly believe you at times. The Beaulieu girl has been doing enough dancing for the lot of us, considering you had no intention of inviting a young lady to the dance floor—”

“Has? As in, still?” I shoot up to a sitting position, interrupting my mother with my inquiry.

She glares at me and then proceeds to keep talking. “You need to be reviewing candidates for your betrothal. The dancing girl can wait. You may think the theatrics have postponed the decision-making process, but it hasn’t. Considering she’s been dancing all night, I’m sure we will learn more. As of now, we have more pressing matters to attend to. Lady Lambert’s daughter was quite a beauty and has exceptional hips for birthing...” I stopped paying attention to my mother’s words and began to throw on my tunic and trousers. *All night?* How could she have danced all night? She should have fainted from exhaustion. If it was some sort of emotional reaction, it would have calmed by now.

I have to see her.

“Mother, where is the dancing girl now?” I fasten my coat and bend down to tie my bootlaces.

She snorts, pausing in her recounts of the ladies from last night. “Unable to keep her still in the carriage, the Beaulieus had to halt their journey back to their estate. They stayed in an inn while their daughter continued to dance in the town center. Don’t fret yourself over a lady like her. To display herself in such a way is downright—”

I push past my mother and the servants. Her words do not register as I hastily run down the stairwell, still decorated from the night before. After throwing the main door open, the wind blasts against my face. It pricks my skin and urges me further. If Genevieve is dancing in the town circle as my mother says, then she must be freezing.

One of the stableboys fetches my horse, a honey brown mare given to me four years prior. I mount her without a saddle, as I am in a hurry, and grab hold of the reigns. Once situated, we race off. I make a mental note to thank the stableboy upon my return. The town center is located 3 miles away from my family's estate. I ride fast, only thinking of seeing Genevieve once more. I'm not sure what I'll do, or if I even can do anything. It doesn't matter at this moment. I just have to get there.

The scenery passes by in blurs of gold, crimson, and umber. Fall is at an end and the leaves have lost their green pigment. The colors are warm though the wind fiercely blows an icy breath. The umber shines through as the trees are laid bare. Every season and their transitions are necessary and glorious in their own way— such is the same with all aspects of life. Even without leaves, we all still breathe.

The town silhouette begins to form in the distance. I urge my horse to gallop faster as we near the buildings on the edge of town. The outskirts are quiet. Only a few townspeople are moving about. I've slowed down, at this point, noticing that the town isn't as active as it tends to be. Those that recognize me, bow their heads quickly and continue with their tasks. Slowly, I steer my horse towards the center of town. I begin to hear instruments playing a jovial tune as I approach. The closer I get to the music, the more townspeople I see. They seem to be crowding around a platform located on the far east side of the town circle.

I bring my horse to a stop and dismount her. After paying a stable at a nearby inn to house her, I begin to navigate through the dense crowd. Young children hold hands and dance in circles. Two men, clearly under the influence of ale or wine, guffaw at each other. I search fervently for Genevieve in the crowd of people. It seems to be a festival. I convince myself that

she is dancing and enjoying herself in the festivities. As I near the platform, my gut fills with dread.

Two women in common attire dance haphazardly, running into each other and trying to hold each other up. Across the platform, a man is lying on the wood. He seems to be convulsing, as his body moves in a semi-rhythmic way. At the front is Genevieve. She remains in her attire from the previous night. The bottom of her gown is disheveled and cakes of dried mud hang from the tattered strings. Her black hair falls half free of its pins and ribbons. Her olive skin looks gray and she has deep, purple bags under her eyes. She smiles, though— similar to the one she wore in the garden. Her movements are wobbly from exhaustion, but she tries to remain graceful. As she lifts her nose to the sky, I see dried tears streaking her flushed cheeks.

The four of them wear red shoes. I overhear from a group of onlookers that the shoes signify that they've come down with some sort of affliction. Each of them cannot stop dancing. Some of them have passed out and woken up, but continue to dance. The town decided to play music to try and get it out of their system. I look down at Genevieve's feet and see dark stains lining their soles. I wince at how battered her feet must be from dancing all this time.

A hush falls over the crowd as one of the town's priests steps on the platform. Men, women, children, and musicians silence themselves to hear his words. Only echoes of the afflicted's thumps against the stage can be heard. The priest turns to face them. "You are possessed! Go to the mountaintop to pray!" He turns to the crowd and urges us to pray, as well.

The priest's words are enough to cause the townspeople to react in fear. They throw items at Genevieve and those in the red shoes. She tries to dance off of the platform and towards the mountain. As she nears the edge, she stumbles over a cob of corn. After falling, she struggles to

get back on her feet. They crumple from her weight and she whimpers in pain as she keeps trying to stand. It is to no avail, though, as her body cannot remain still.

I run to her. I pull her off of the platform. I cover her continuously moving limbs with my own to block items from hitting her. Soon enough, word spreads throughout the crowd that I am the young lord of this town and the townspeople halt their actions. I take this moment to wrap my hand around her waist. I prop her up and use my spare hand to interlock our fingers. After placing her feet on mine and pulling her close to me, I quickly spout, “I know this is heavily improper and I ask you to please excuse my actions, Lady Beaulieu. I just hope to be of some aid to you right now.”

She laughs lightly. “This whole affair is improper. You’re rather late to the party.” Her body twitches against mine and bumps into my limbs. We both wince at the forceful contact of our bones. Her hand tightens on mine. “Well, you know my name now, don’t you? There’s no better time than now to dance with me, young lord.”

Our eyes meet. I feel it again. I feel my soul and my heart tugging my body to move— to hold her and to guide her. I want to dance with her. I want to ease her pain and her burdens. I want to participate in a task only for her sake. I don’t care about the whispers I hear rising around me. She’s beautiful— resilient. I can tell by the way she looks at me that she sees I’m more than my title. She understands what it's like to want to be free. It's bursting out of her right now. She makes a passion burst out of me. She was beautiful when I saw her dancing in the garden and she’s beautiful now.

I take the lead and we glide around the town center. Genevieve rests her legs and smiles gently at me. We never break eye contact. I don't hear or see anything else. We dance to a tune only we hear, even if it's for eternity.