

Belle of the Ball

by
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Pinki Sen had a dilemma. Her parents didn't understand her one bit. They seemed to want to ruin any street cred she could possibly find and ruin her chances at a cool life. At school she was liked and got on well with her classmates. Her best friends were Alice Beesley and Clare Turner and the three of them spent every moment they could together discussing the highs and lows of their existence – music, Eastenders, fashion, celebrity gossip.

One day while they waited for Mrs Graeme to appear for yet another deathly boring physics class, Alice blurted out the great news.

'Oh my god! I can't believe I forgot to tell you! Are you guys going to the ball?' she screeched across the lab desk.

'What ball?' asked Clare coolly.

'I can't believe you don't know. Once you hit year ten you're allowed to go to the summer ball. Dinner and dancing, very elegant.' Alice jumped out of her seat with excitement and started singing and twisting.

'Let's twist again, like we did last summer,
Let's twist again, like we did last year.'

'What d'you wear to a ball?' asked Clare flatly, always annoyingly practical.

'Tell her Pinki,' said Alice. 'Honestly Clare you're such a Neanderthal.'

'I don't know do I?!' said Pinki laughing at her friends.

'Pinki! You're useless! You wear a ball gown,' said Alice as if this were the most natural word to come out of her mouth.

'Oh. Right.' Said Clare dryly. 'I'll just select one from my ball gown wardrobe.'

Pinki giggled.

'You can hire them. For the night, from Dallas and Stone,' said Alice, the fount of knowledge.

'Really?' asked Clare, interested now.

Mrs Graeme entered and the girls had to focus on magnetic fields for the rest of the morning.

After school Clare and Pinki waited at the bus stop together.

'What d'you reckon to this ball then?' asked Clare.

'Sounds good,' said Pinki longingly. 'The chances of my mum hiring me a ball gown are slimmer than me passing my chemistry test though,' she said kicking the floor.

'I know what you mean,' replied Clare. 'Tell you what, let's ask them tonight.' Pinki looked doubtful. 'What d'you reckon?'

The two girls made an agreement to approach their parents that night.

When Pinki got home her mum hurried to the door to greet her. In the background Grandma Leela was playing her favourite song from 'My Fair Lady'.

'I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night,
And still have danced for more,
I could have spread my wings and done a thousand things
I've never done before.'

‘Where have you been? You’re late,’ said Mrs Sen tucking the end of her sari firmly in at her waist.

‘Buses were full. Wouldn’t stop,’ said Pinki irritated already.

‘You should have called. That’s why we bought you the mobile,’ fussed her mum.

‘Yeah, right mum,’ snapped Pinki and bolted up to her room.

‘D’you want some snacks sweetie?’ called her mother getting upset. ‘Pinki? Answer me?’ There was no reply. Mrs Sen let out a deep sigh and looked at herself in the hall mirror. Where was she going wrong? She only had to open her mouth these days and Pinki was angry.

Mrs Sen’s thoughts were interrupted by the sharp voice of her own mother. Grandma Leela stood in the hallway in her customary white sari swaying to the music.

‘Give her a break darling,’ said Leela, ‘she’s fourteen going on forty. She needs a little break from her parents hmmm?’

‘Don’t give me lessons in handling my own girl,’ replied Mrs Sen tightly, ‘Shouldn’t you be lying down or something?’ And with that she was gone, back to the kitchen, to lick her wounds, away from the prying, all-knowing eyes of her mother.

That evening after dinner Pinki approached her mum.

‘Ma?’ she asked. ‘There’s a ball at school next month and everyone’s going. All you have to do is hire a dress cos it’s a posh do and the tickets are £20. Can I go?’ Pinki looked straight at her mum knowing she would say no, knowing she didn’t understand how important this was.

‘A ball? At your age?’ started Mrs Sen.

‘You never let me do anything,’ exploded Pinki. ‘It’s a school thing. Alice and Clare are going. Why can’t I?’

‘Calm down sweetie,’ said Mrs Sen, ‘It’s just that money is a bit tight at the moment. Hiring a dress and £20 on top....’

‘Yeah right,’ said Pinki scathingly, ‘and if it was free you’d find some other excuse to keep me in. I’m fourteen mum. I need to express myself.’ Mrs Sen said nothing and within seconds Pinki had stormed off upstairs.

Mrs Sen looked down at her magazine but couldn’t see anything for the tears in her eyes. Why did her daughter hate her so?

‘I don’t understand,’ she said to herself thinking she was alone. But Grandma Leela was snoozing by the fire and she heard her.

‘Don’t you?’ she asked. ‘I would have thought that you of all people would understand.’

‘What d’you mean by that mother?’ asked Mrs Sen sharply.

‘She’s just like you were,’ said Leela, ‘head strong, wanting her independence. To be an individual.’

‘But life is so much more complicated now,’ said Mrs Sen, ‘there are so many things to worry about.’

‘Sex, drugs and rock and roll you mean?’ asked Leela.

Mrs Sen was shocked.

Leela laughed. ‘The specifics might change but the concerns are the same. You’ve done a great job my darling but you do need to let go a little. Let her try out some of the stuff you’ve taught her.’

‘Maybe,’ said Mrs Sen doubtfully, cross with her mother for butting in. ‘Anyway, we

can't afford it and that's that.'

Back at school Pinki found out that Clare's parents had said yes. All Alice and Clare talked about was what they were going to wear and what a shame it was that Pinki couldn't come. Pinki felt rotten. A couple of days later, Grandma Leela braved it into Pinki's room.

'Permission to enter?' she asked at the door.

'Yeah, come in Grandma.'

'How are you?' asked Leela. The whole sorry story came out about the ball and how unfair it was that she couldn't go. 'I've been to a few balls in my time. In Calcutta. Your grandfather and I would go together. How I loved dressing up. You know a sari is a spectacular outfit. If you wear it well it can be a show-stopper.' Pinki looked sceptical.

Leela went to her room and returned with a gorgeous pink silk sari with a silver border that had been hand stitched. 'This is one of my favourites.' Said Leela.

'I'll look silly,' said Pinki, 'I'll trip over it.'

'Let's try it on and see,' said Leela.

So, begrudgingly, Pinki allowed her grandmother to wind the soft silk round and round her, tucking and pleating until it was done. Pinki looked in the mirror, it looked beautiful. 'I look so grown up!' said Pinki amazed.

'Sari's are one of the most flattering things you can wear. Shows up curves you never knew you had,' said Leela. 'You look beautiful darling.'

Mrs Sen was doing some work at the dining table and listening to the radio when her daughter entered in the sari. Leela hovered in the background.

'Pinki! You look...you look...'

'You think I look silly don't you?' and Pinki turned to go.

'No, no, wait. I can't find the word.' Mrs Sen considered hard. '...you look exquisite.'

Pinki grinned. Leela beamed. Mrs Sen hugged her daughter.

'I've been thinking,' said Mrs Sen, '£20 isn't all that much.'

'And she won't need a dress now,' said Leela proudly.

'Thank you,' said Pinki suddenly realising how hard this was for her mum.

'You'll be the belle of the ball,' said Mrs Sen. The music on the radio swelled as Leela turned it up full volume.

'Shall we dance? On a bright cloud of music shall we fly?
Shall we dance? Shall we then say goodnight and mean goodbye?
Or perchance, when the last little star has left the sky,
Shall we still be together with our arms around each other
And shall you be my new romance?
On the clear understanding that this kind of thing can happen.
Shall we dance?

Shall we dance? Shall we dance?'

Leela grabbed her daughter by the hand and Pinki by the waist and they danced round the living room till they were exhausted.