

Into the night, I dance

I find a quiet corner just as the band goes on stage. To my relief, only a few people dance to the first song. Tom is one of them.

I observe a guy from one of the older classes. He must be fourteen, maybe fifteen. I believe his name is Peter. He stands alone, holding a Jolly Cola in his hand and slowly sways to the music. I've always found him nice looking, always stolen discreet glances at him whenever I could. There's something sophisticated about his tight jeans, the green shirt, the way his sleeves are rolled up so very meticulously. His thick, dark hair stands out in this crowd of blonds. He doesn't see me looking at him, his eyes are fixed on the dance floor, maybe on one of the girls he fancies. He looks a bit shy, but in a charming way. Unlike my shyness that always prevents me from enjoying things. I am the most uncomfortable person in the entire school this evening.

I keep checking my watch. We are not even one hour into the party and I don't think I can bear being here until the end, two more hours. I don't know what to do with myself. After a while, Ane from my class comes over.

"Do you like the band?" she asks.

"They're ok," I reply.

"I like this song," she tries. "It's good, isn't it?" She stares at me, expectantly.

I nod. I usually like to talk to Ane, and at first I'm relieved to no longer be alone. But I don't know what to say to her. Whenever she asks me a question, I reply with a yes or a no. Tonight, I feel uneasy in her nearness. I worry she likes me. My face is blushing, my whole body aches from anxiety. The dance floor is filling up now, everybody looks like they are having fun. She surely wants me to take her out for a dance, but I'm unable to make a move. I don't like to dance, I don't know how to.

And I just want to remain here, invisible, unnoticed, until it's time to leave. After a while she gives up on me. Not understanding why I'm not interested in her, I'm sure. "See you on Monday," she says as she walks away.

I now realize it would have been perfect to dance with Ane. I wouldn't have to be alone and maybe time would fly if only I could relax and enjoy her presence. I wouldn't have to explain, next week, why I spent the entire evening alone. But she's gone. It's too late.

I move close to a pillar where it is easier to hide. Luckily, they've dimmed the lights. The teachers are all standing by the walls, chatting and laughing and observing us, their pupils. I think I spot my Danish teacher looking at me. The air is already heavy with sweat and heat from the moving bodies. Tom dances closely with one of the best looking girls. So at ease as he moves, whispering something to the girl. I look around and we are now only a few who don't blend in, all standing in our own discreet corners, trying to hide yet unable to be entirely invisible.

It is the first time that we've had a real rock band play at one of the school parties, and everybody seems to be in awe of them because they're from England. We all listen to the music coming out of London, the excitement of discovering who's number one in the charts in the mid-seventies. The band, Monkey Soul, is completely unknown, but here, in our little town in Denmark, they're becoming an overnight sensation.

I sweat and start feeling lightheaded. I think about the lack of sleep, the tiredness accumulated throughout the week. I feared this was going to happen. I knew I would once again find myself in this situation, alone and unable to let myself go like everybody else. The thought of the hotdog I just ate when Tom and I got here makes me nauseous. I search for a chair but there aren't any. I think I'm going to pass out. I lean against the pillar and close my eyes for a minute. It feels good to

block out the world. Maybe I can just stay like this, maybe people will leave me alone.

“Do you want to dance?”

In my tired, dizzy state, I think I must be hallucinating. I want it to remain a hallucination. But I slowly open my eyes.

In front of me stands the guy I had been watching earlier, Peter, and offers me a slightly nervous smile. I look at him, then around me, feeling the whole room observing us, waiting for my response, ready to find out who I really am. That I am like my brother. I feel the weight of the teachers’ attention, the sweat and the dancers and the school and our little town just waiting for me to finally be the laughing stock.

And then, as if the word “no” is no longer part of my vocabulary, I quietly nod, maybe strangely relieved for a second before I can really think this through, and we head for the dance floor together. It is only once I am out there that I grasp that I am now in the middle of the ballroom floor of my school, and the person opposite me is a boy, a young man, and not a girl, as it should be. As it must be. I realize I should have said no, but I am always so pleasing so I never say no, I never dare to say no, I think, but here I am, it is too late now, and Peter is dancing a few feet away from me, almost looking as if this is a natural situation. I try to pretend it is normal, too, but am unable to relax. The song has just started and I pray it will be short. I’m able to register that it’s a song I like, Ballroom Blitz, and luckily it’s upbeat. I hope the band won’t play any guitar solos, nothing to extend my exposure.

I try to find out if Peter is serious, or if this is a joke. I scrutinize his face for signs that he is like me. As if I should be able to detect that from watching his eyes, his mouth, his nose, his long, dark hair. My face is hot from the weight of being in

the middle of the room, from everyone now able to see the real me. Sweat is running down my face.

I notice people around us, all the couples dancing. Several girls dance together, but no boys, only us. I spot Tom in the distance. He seems absorbed with the girl. I'm certain the teachers are focusing on us. I imagine their worried faces, them starting to talk about me, the quiet pupil, the one that never makes a fuss, and there he is, dancing with another, older boy. I don't dare to look at them. Are they talking about how they will deal with this situation, with me, next week, or will they just pretend it never happened, that - come Monday - it will be forgotten?

We keep the same distance throughout the dance. I try to imitate his movements, hoping it will look natural. Hoping I look at ease. A couple of times, I catch Peter's eyes, and it looks like he wants to meet mine and smile, discreetly, but I am unable to smile back. My whole face is frozen. The longer I dance, the more terrified I am. I never knew this song was so long. I have the record at home, I play it all the time, but it always seemed too short.

I try to calm myself. I try to tell myself, this shouldn't be so wrong, this is maybe what I've been dreaming of, try to accept that Peter likes me, and this is why he has chosen me, and taken the risk of asking me out for a dance. All these contradictory thoughts, wishes and fears, keep circling around my already weary mind. I am unable to appreciate his company - I won't allow myself to enjoy the beauty of his eyes, his hairy arms.

I think about this book I stole from my brother's bookshelf, about a man coming out to his friends, his family. About the loneliness, the lack of acceptance. About how long it had taken him. And here I am, the real me, for all the world to see, age thirteen. I can't wait for this to be over. I don't know who I am, I don't know what I want.

Yet a part of me that is not quite conscious, that I don't quite comprehend, or won't allow myself to, wants this to last.

Finally, the song ends.

We look at each other, and Peter quietly says thank you, and holds out his hand to shake mine. I try to respond, but I've become mute, I feel like a fish out of water, gasping, and I'm unable to touch him. I watch his arm suspended in the air, then finally, as he absorbs my lack of reaction, he lets the arm fall and hang down along his slender body. I make him understand that I need to use the bathroom. I sense the limpness of his arm, the disappointment on his face, as I quickly make my way toward the exit, maybe he really does like me? I know his gaze is following me, I just know. I visualize the surprised sadness on his face as I hurry toward the exit, trying not to look up, trying hard not to be noticed.

I enter the dark night, a safe landscape into which I can disappear and, finally, be alone, invisible. I'm out of breath as I dry the sweat off my face with my shirtsleeves. The late September air is cool, heavy with threats of rain. I look behind me, fearing, hoping, that Peter is following me. I am shaky, as if my body is allowed to react, now that I can finally be myself.

I wonder if it had been set up, if somebody had found out about me. If Peter had agreed to test me. Maybe somebody had noticed that I had stared at him earlier. It was okay for girls, but had I ever seen two boys dance together? I feel certain now that Peter had been watching the girls on that dance floor, that they had been his real focus of attention. Of course, that had to be the truth. No one else here is not normal, no one else is like me.

I think about what would have happened if we had been dancing closer, after a while, if it would have made me feel more comfortable, if it would have made me forget about people watching. If Peter had reached out his hand, held on to me, if I

had dared let my arms find his back, and then closed my eyes. If we had stayed on the dance floor longer and I had finally had the courage to be the person I am and kissed Peter in front of the entire school. This school party that I have been fearing would instead have become a triumph for me. I would finally have overcome my biggest fear, my painful secret.

I am all alone with my confusing thoughts as I walk around the schoolyard. I take a few deep breaths while closing my eyes. I feel a need to get further away from them, from everybody that has an opinion about me. I walk toward the soccer field where I have always despised going. I think about all the times I've spent there just waiting for a soccer game to be over, constantly looking at my watch. Thinking about avoiding the ball, avoiding being noticed by anybody and hoping that Tom would protect me. Tom, the most brilliant soccer player in school and my close friend.

I walk the whole length of the soccer field, anxiously pushing my shoes into the wet grass, as if I am trying to tear it up, punish it. The only thing on my mind is Peter standing in front of me, asking me out for a dance, about my blushing, about how surely everybody was watching and waiting for my reaction. I think about my hesitation, about how long it had taken me to answer, why I hadn't simply pushed him away in disgust like any sane boy would do. Why I hadn't just taken the opportunity to show the world that I was just like everybody else.

I look behind me. The schoolyard is still empty. I can hear the bass, the vibrations of the rock music from the ballroom, and I imagine Peter now standing in the middle of a group, laughing and telling everybody about me. That now he knows, now they all know, now it's been proven, it's very obvious, isn't it? Surely he would have followed me, had he been serious. I think about Tom and wonder if he noticed, if he was watching me, us. If he will still be my friend, after this. If I can still count

on him, as I have done since our first day of school. Will he now worry that I'm attracted to him, that I fantasize about him?

I arrive at the goal. I have never been inside one, never been the goalkeeper, and never ever made a goal for my team. I reach up for the barrier and let my arms lift me up. I look up at the few faint stars that are visible on this cloudy night. The physical exercise feels good despite the tiredness of my body. It makes me feel in control, of something. I count to ten and then lower myself slowly to the ground. I sit on the humid grass and feel the wetness invade my jeans. It almost feels good, like a self-inflicted punishment, and I don't care. I don't really care anymore if they find out, if everybody pronounces that word and I lose my popularity with my fellow pupils, with the teachers, with Tom. Don't care what my parents will say when they find out about the incident at the school ball. It is their fault. They forced me to go, they told me it would be good for me to socialize more. I can't pretend anymore. I almost feel ready to face the consequences. For a brief moment, there's a courage in me that I have never known. But as soon as I catch a glimpse of it, I lose it.

I hear a girl's voice in the distance. A couple is leaning against the clubhouse, the place we go to change before the soccer games. The place I fear and long for, where I discreetly watch the other boys undressing and showering. So ashamed of my own body and those thoughts that make it impossible for me to become part of them.

It is Tom and the girl. They are kissing and I see Tom reach for her breasts. I know he's already had sex. He has told me about it, enough for me to know that it must be true. I recall being excited about him having sex, as if our relationship got closer, more intimate. They haven't noticed me, the darkness and haze hide me. I sit completely still and watch Tom make love to the girl, next to the clubhouse, never looking around them, never seeming concerned that someone could see them. Tom

doesn't need to worry. He is proving to everybody that he is becoming a man, a real man. He is doing what you're supposed to be doing, growing up. Following the rules.

As I watch them, I fantasize that Peter has been looking for me and finds me, here, on the soccer field. I imagine him walking over and saying no, it was not a joke, that he has watched me from afar all year. That he is attracted to me.

Maybe even that he loves me.

I imagine him hovering over me. He is much taller than me and I admit to myself that I have always liked his face, his smile. There is an inviting softness to his eyes that makes me feel comfortable. I picture him sitting down next to me and carefully taking my hand, my hand that is now cold from the autumn chill and the wet grass and my fear of rejection. He will just sit there, hold on to me, try to give me warmth, and at first, I will feel stiff, then slowly I'll get used to having him there. Eventually, I will lean against him, close my eyes, while I listen to Tom and the girl making out.

I don't know how long I sit there. My jeans are getting more and more wet, and coldness invades me. I start to shiver and think about how I need to get back to the party in time for my father's arrival. I look over at the clubhouse. Tom and the girl have left, I haven't even noticed. I use the pole of the goal to lift myself up, brush the grass off my jeans and get ready.

Then I see him, in the distance.

He is leaning against the wall of the school building. I now realize that the bass has died down and wonder if the party is over. I hear some yelling, echoes from the schoolyard. Some of the other pupils must have gone out for fresh air, maybe the musicians are simply taking a break. I look up at the sky. The few stars have vanished.



He walks slowly toward me. In the dark, I notice red ashes from the tip of a cigarette, the warm smoke rising.

Then I know.

I remain in the goal, mesmerized, wondering what he is doing there, how he's found me. I thought he was at home, listening to his music. Alone in his room, next to mine, empty. Maybe this is where he goes, to be alone, to smoke.

He finally reaches the goal, reaches me. He stands there smoking his cigarette, not saying anything, and I observe the smoke as it leaves his mouth and disappears into the dark night. His face is motionless. I look away from him. I can't think of anything to say, suddenly finding the situation ridiculous, suddenly realizing that I am soaked, as if I had wet myself like I did when I was in kindergarten. When I was too afraid to ask for permission to go to the bathroom. I worry that he knows. Of course he knows, I think. A brother knows. I worry that we will finally have to talk, that he will pronounce the word. That word that both of us have been trying so carefully to hide, from everybody else, but especially from each other.

"I saw you at the party," he whispers. He lets out another puff of smoke, then continues. "Peter is mine. Do you hear me? I've had my eyes on him for a long time. Don't you dare take him away from me."

It takes me a while to think of something to say.

"What do you mean? I'm not interested in Peter. I'm not interested in anybody." Then I add, "What are you doing at this school, anyway? This is no longer your place." I worry that I sound angry. I'm shaken that he's here. He began attending high school, in the nearby city, a year earlier.

He inhales again, deeply. I look at my brother's smoke as it burns its way through the thick, humid air, until the smoke is indistinguishable from the mist. It

dawns on me that this is the first time I've seen him smoke. Although I've always known. That, and the other thing. He's not even trying to hide any of it, anymore.

"Don't tell anybody, do you hear me?" It's almost as if he reads my mind. I've never heard him speak like this. He's never threatened me. I think about what this means, that he is finally coming out to me, that I should ask him more about it, maybe he's already been with a man? Maybe instead of being somebody I fear, because of what he represents, because of what he makes me realize about myself, he can be an inspiration? But no, I quickly think, no, that will never be possible.

"I won't," I say quietly. "But - why?" I try to say it in a kind way, as if I really do care for him. He just looks at me. Maybe he is pondering my why. There is a look in his eyes, bewilderment, sadness? I can't quite tell what it is. His aggressiveness wanes. He leans against the goal, sighing. He looks toward the school. Maybe my father, our father, will already be there waiting for me. I should go, leave my brother behind, avoid hearing more, live in the unknown, and when I see him at home, I can just pretend that nothing ever happened. That Peter asking me out for a dance didn't happen, that my brother never appeared, smoking, pleading me. That I never sat on the soccer field, spying on Tom and his girlfriend. That my pants didn't get wet. That nobody knows anything about me, that I can keep everything to myself, forever live my life alone without having to deal with this thing that's contaminating my mind.

I can pretend that I will never have to deal with my brother as a gay man.

"I really should be going," I try.

"No, don't go, not yet," he says. He looks tired. He finishes the cigarette, then takes out the packet, ready to light a new one, then hesitates for a moment before offering me one. To my surprise, I accept. I've never smoked before. I try to hold it between my lips and feel my whole body tremble, not just from the cold. He expertly

lights my cigarette, then his own, and smiles shyly at me when he lets out the smoke. I try hard not to cough, pretending to have smoked before. He looks at me. There is a different expression on his face. Not that the sadness has entirely disappeared, but there is something else. I can't quite see what it is. Almost like – a caring smile. I try to smile back at him, as I continue smoking. I don't know how to inhale but do my best to imitate him. To be like him.

Voices from the schoolyard, echoing toward the soccer field, break the intimacy of the moment. Bring us back to now. The music has finally stopped.

The party is over.

I hear cars' ignitions, doors opening and closing, people saying goodbye, a girl laughing. I think I even hear Tom's voice from far away, but maybe I'm imagining it, wishing I hear him. Wishing he were here.

I look over at the clubhouse. No one is there. The clouds are slowly dissipating, and when I look up, a few stars are back. The air is still heavy with mist, and I realize my shirt now also feels humid. But I am no longer cold, I no longer shiver, as I stand there in the dark night, smoking a cigarette, next to my brother.

As of one mind, we set out together, away from the goal.

We slowly walk toward the school where I know our father will be waiting.