

## The Navy Dress - Georgie, Year 12, NSW

“Who are you bringing to formal?”

They ask it like they’re asking about the weather — casual, harmless, a shared language spoken between girls who know what kind of answers are allowed. Someone reapplies lip gloss in a cracked compact. Another girl ties a ribbon in her hair.

I shrug. “Not sure yet.”

Which is technically true. But not really.

I look down at my knees, pressed too tightly together. The bell hasn’t gone yet. Someone talks about fake tan. Someone else tries to remember which boy had the mullet at that party in Year 9. The air smells like hairspray and heat. I nod like I’m in it, like I belong to it, like I could pick a name out of a lineup and it wouldn’t turn my mouth to salt.

“Who are you bringing to formal?”

The truth: I want to bring a girl.

Not a specific girl. Not yet. Just a shape, a feeling. Someone who would take my hand in the foyer without flinching. Someone who wouldn’t laugh if I wore the navy dress with the low back. Someone who would meet my eyes under disco lights and not blink it away.

But there are rules here. Silent ones. Unwritten, but spoken with every side-eye and every half-joke that lands too hard. I know how to navigate this place — a smile too wide, a laugh at the right moment, a shrug that says nothing. I have learned to wrap the sharpest parts of myself in silk and call it softness.

In the bathroom mirror, I fix my mascara. My eyes look bigger when I don’t cry.

Mum asks if I’m excited. I say yes.

She offers to help me pick out heels. I say I’m thinking of going alone.

“That’s brave,” she says, like she doesn’t mean brave. Like she means something else.

The group chat is full of dress links and hair inspo and screenshots of texts from boys named Max and Henry and Jack. I leave it all on read. Send a thumbs-up when someone says, “We’re all going to look so pretty.”

That night, I scroll through my camera roll — photos of girls at the beach, arms thrown over each other's shoulders, all tanned and effortless. I try to imagine myself in the photos, try to figure out if I'm looking at them or wanting to be them or something quieter in between.

I remember the Year 6 disco. Mum bought me a sparkly dress with tulle that itched at my collarbones. I tugged at it all night. Like wearing someone else's skin. All the girls danced in circles, squealing, glitter sticking to their arms like second thoughts. I stood at the edge and said my shoes were too tight. That part was true.

Last Saturday, Mum took me to the shop. The one that smells like carpet cleaner and artificial rose. The racks were organised by colour, but everything felt the same — stiff, sequinned, not mine. I tried on a satin one that cut too close across my ribs. A halter neck that made me look older in a way I didn't like. A red one that clung in all the places I try to forget.

Mum said, "You look beautiful" every time, but her voice got softer, like she was hoping one of the dresses will say it loud enough for me to believe it.

I tried the navy one last. It was quiet. No beading, no slit, just a dip in the back that felt like a secret. I looked at myself in the mirror and try to imagine being seen.

"That one," Mum said.

I nod. I said nothing.

Later, we ate hot chips in the car. Mum dipped hers in tomato sauce and talked about her own formal — how she wore a black dress because she thought it would make her look older. She said she went with a boy she barely knew, but he was nice, and that was enough.

I thought about asking her if she ever wanted to bring someone else. If she ever didn't know how to say it.

But I just nodded and said, "That sounds nice."

Luce used to plait my hair in Year 8. She said I had the kind of scalp that made sense to her. I didn't know what that meant, but I let her do it every Wednesday. One time, she tied a pink ribbon at the end and whispered, "Perfect," just loud enough to ruin me for a week.

One time, while she combed out a knot, she said, "You're so quiet all the time. Like you're thinking in another language." I didn't know what she meant, but I thought about it for weeks. I started writing things down just to see if I could translate them.

She's bringing someone now. A boy who plays rugby and wears sunglasses indoors. He sent her a picture of his tie, said, "Will this match your dress?"

I think I might throw up.

I spend the night before lying on my bed, staring at the ceiling fan spinning slow circles. I keep imagining how it will feel to walk in alone. Whether people will notice. Whether they'll care.

At pre's, the lawn is too green and the sky too sharp, like everything's been turned up a notch. Everyone's parents are there with phones held high, saying things like, "One more!" and "Smile, girls!" There are canapés no one eats and a table of champagne flutes no one is old enough to drink, but they do anyway.

I stand to the side, trying to look casual. Like I'm just waiting my turn. Like I'm not watching them all pose in pairs, adjusting ties and leaning in with practised closeness. Like I don't flinch when someone says, "Get one with your date!" and I realise again that I don't have one.

A girl in a lilac dress asks if I want a photo. I say maybe later.

She smiles like she gets it, but I don't know if she does.

Instead, I go to the formal. I wear the navy dress. I dance like I'm not counting the exits. I laugh when they point out who's kissed who. I smile for photos. I hold a glass like it's a shield.

Someone's perfume makes my eyes water. The music is too loud, and it swells with every bass drop. At one point, I catch sight of my reflection in the window and for a second, I don't recognise myself — like I've become the version they want. I wonder if that's a kind of magic or a kind of surrender.

When they take the group photo, someone says, "Come closer," and our arms all overlap. I feel someone's fingers brush my waist and I flinch too late. I laugh it off. They don't notice. I hope they don't notice.

I stand with everyone and still feel like a gap in the group shot.

In the bathroom, a girl I barely know says, "You look really good tonight."

I say thank you, and for a moment, I want to tell her everything. I want to ask if she ever looks at someone and bites it down before it blooms. If she's ever traced a thought so gently that it started to glow.

But I don't.

Instead, I fix my lipstick. I breathe. I walk back out.

There's a slow song playing when I return. One of those old ones they put on to make the teachers nostalgic. Everyone sways like they were born knowing how.

I stand at the edge of the dance floor. For a second, I pretend someone is coming toward me. That there's a hand reaching through the music. That I get to choose.

Then the lights shift, and someone trips over a speaker cord, and the moment breaks like a plate.

We take one more photo. My smile doesn't crack. My shoes hurt. The lights blur.

At home, I hang the navy dress back on its hanger. It looks different now — like something borrowed, like something I didn't quite deserve. I wash off the lipstick and stare at my bare face for too long.

The night folds in on itself.

I pretend that means it's over.