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***Gerl Night Out***  
**Short Story**  
**Appomattox Reg Gov School**  
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**Grade 12**  
**American Voices Award Nominee**

There are too many dresses in the Lonesome Shimmerland Dress Shoppe down on Beautiful Woman Blvd. Each deserves their own painting, and some, Gerl thinks, would look the most beautiful on no one at all. She could take any one of them and lay it out to relax beside a thick-aired river, then compare sparkle to sparkle, moonlight sheen to moonlight.

And in the mirror of the fitting room, down in the distant back left corner of the mile-long Dress Shoppe, Gerl finds herself looking like an ox. Aunt Arlene's reflection probes the regency neckline of a purple lace-top lying under Gerl's clavicle, handles the tulle-peacock-fluff skirt trilling down the sides into a flowing tail so long it pools into a pit. "This... thing," Aunt Arlene's mouth tucks into her teeth, "makes you look like an ox."

Gerl sees, in the mirror, the bust over-stretching across a strong-shouldered back to the heavy front of her chest, the odd way the drapery falls and covers all the open space between the four stuck legs, as if they'd existed to frame a still image of nature between them. But the ox has rudely decided to close the curtains on it all. At the very least, the horns are symmetrical and the ears fall like pigtails.

Aunt Arlene *tsks*, "Back into the field," she sighs, and together her and Gerl make their way into the glimmering land of the Dress Shoppe, where every gown is a waterfall. They go back to swimming through the aisles of fabrics crowding each other, thick tulle merging across the walkway. The fear of stepping on something delicate leaves Gerl on her tip-toes.

Gerl wishes Aunt Arlene were pickier—everything with potential has found its way into the fluttering fabric pile in Gerl's arms. A choir is singing live through the intercom, localized on a stage from the other half of the shoppe, about a quarter-mile westward. A blonde girl (Gerl can tell by the voice) is leading with a thin and rhythmic squeal, like something has shocked her into song. Under her is a frog-toned brunette who must sing with a sour-looking face.

Aunt Arlene lies another purple stained dress, tight-looking and reeking of the 80 nervous girls who must've ancestored it, into Gerl's arms, which are already hefting a mountain of sequins and faux fur. "Tight at the back," Arlene hums, "you'll need it." She plucks another purple one, this time wide and short and made for a middle-aged woman. There's the smallest slit where the left leg would lay. This is something Gerl's choir teacher would wear in church if she were feeling frisky.

"Wide at the bust," says Aunt Arlene. Gerl nods as she stiffens forward, readjusting her grip as the dress lands atop her chin-high pile. This piece in particular would look the best lying on a patch of grass rather than Gerl's wide set shoulders.

More and more gleaming dresses land into Gerl's arms. Eventually, when she starts melding with the pile and it becomes clear that one more dress will topple the mountain, Aunt

Arlene veils a glittery thin gown on top of Gerl's head instead, and the next pile forms a nun-ish habit as Arlene decides wisely, economically, that Gerl won't mind drowning too much as long as the water is pretty.

Gerl follows her aunt's voice like it's a leash until, at her feet, she steps forward and there is no floor. Arlene works her way down the aisles, "Watch your feet," she says, too late, "there's a step ahead," and Gerl can't see a thing because everything is shrouded in fabric, and as she's falling, the light of the store windows shine through the shimmering veils of purple, painting the available world to Gerl like the choir room in church after sunlight hits through the arching stained glass. Sparkles fall across Gerl's face and it gets in her eyes, her nose, and she's always sneezed like an exorcised devil but today it's that times a billion, and Gerl thinks that in rustled action, the dresses are even more beautiful. Maybe what would really make a painting is if all these fabrics were still bodiless but somehow twirling, or cascading, so that the moonlight can gleam the way it should over runny things, like on a lazy river.

Gerl's head hits a floorboard and the air dulls as she lands. Aunt Arlene has placed another purple dress into the arms of empty air two aisles down, "slim-shouldered," she mutters as she walks on. The shadows of sheer skirts lie on each other, collectively forming a shell around Gerl's body. The floor is paneled hardwood oak, and the horizontal edges dig into her cheek.

A throat clears in front of Gerl, emanating from outside the pool of gleaming dresses. The sequins rattle in anxious conversation as a surly hand forces itself through them, inches from her nose. "Hey, Gerl," speaks the hand. "Give me that really tulle-y one. By your foot." The hand flicks a finger around, steering Gerl's eyes here and there and then towards her left, grey sneaker.

"Glittery, too. It's right there." Gerl scrunches and unscrunches herself, turning at angles that hurt her shoulders to reach around. Her hand grabs blindly at the closest fabric to her shoe, and she thrusts forward the first dress she reaches. It's ballroom-style, but something about it feels like it shouldn't be worn in one. Gerl feels like if she could see it clearly right now, it'd look the most beautiful hanging from the tip of this waiting finger, allowing a true cascade beyond the insufficiency of the human body. She places it in the hand, attempting to glimpse at how it falls from the way the thumb and forefinger pinch by the waistline. The hand contemplates, examining the dress's texture, weighing how it lies on its palm.

The hand drops the gown uncarefully, like a brute would do, like an ogre.

"Not that one. *Obviously* not that one."

The gown, in its puddled state, puffs like the chest of a brooding pheasant. The ogre hand gestures around like Aunt Arlene does when she's stopped by charity workers outside of the grocery store. "It's blue, and, like, I don't know. Prettier than everything."

Gerl didn't remember seeing a blue dress, only purple and purple and purple and more purple, but sure enough as she looks back, a slim, light blue dress, with a slit from ankle to mid waist on each side is lying in the open right under her left, grey sneaker. In true moonlight it could look like the feathers of a swan, how they tint a calm, baby blue within the nighttime shadows of shrubbery. It is prettier than just about everything.

"See it yet?" The hand opens and closes like the mouth of a monster. It doesn't deserve a dress like this.

Gerl collects it, folding the fabric into a prim square to hang over her arm. She shifts to a crouching position in her cocoon of fabrics.

“Gerl?”

Gerl jolts up into straight legs, pushing the mountain of dresses to fly off and attack the body of the hand. The body stutters as a thick corset collides with his torso, heavy voice sputtering as the flowing cotton skirt smothers the body’s face, and, for now, the monster has been blinded as he falls onto the creaking, oak hardwood.

Gerl turns on her sneaker, light blue beauty in arms, and runs into the sea of aisles. Aunt Arlene is entirely lost somewhere between the racks. There’s an older woman entranced by a hat display. A cashier stares at someone outside the window. The choir girls on the intercom are a quarter-mile away. Gerl is covered in about a billion things, each and every one creating a barrier. The dress bears a muddy shoe mark from Gerl’s grey sneaker, but the contrast reminds Gerl of a tranquil sky made with rough, uneven paint. What the sky goes through to be beautiful.

Her arms cage the dress close to her chest. Her head swivels to search for heads poking from the tops of the aisles: somewhere in here, someone is worthy of wearing it.

A shrew, frogged voice clears at the rack behind Gerl, a girl’s brunette head poking through. She’s pretty, but she’s most certainly the brunette from the intercom, and the harmony is utterly ruined without her there. She glances at Gerl sideways, then pulls the rest of her body from out between two huge dresses with thickly-boned, enforced hips. One falls halfway off its hanger and she does nothing to correct it.

She’s quiet, with large doll eyes, icicle blue. She stares and sticks her face too close to Gerl’s, wet snout to snout, and deep down Gerl knows this is a person looking at her but everything about her demeanor, from the white gown to the empty eyes, reminds Gerl of a taxidermied deer in headlights.

The choir on the intercom is a mess. The shrill girl, the blonde one, she’s reciting her notes more than shaping them. The other girls are afraid to overpower a voice so thin, so they sink lower and quieter, a background’s background. Without this brunette there, the blonde is without a rope to latch onto.

“So,” speaks the girl, unexpectedly frog-less, more akin to the sound of a spear piercing a rock. “I’m a detective,” she says with her eyes wide and ugly, “I’m a detective, and I’m really good at deducing things.” The girl’s thick eyebrows lay heavy into the thin beginnings of her nose as she hinges her head towards the swan-dress. “And I deduce,” she edges her taxidermied snout closer, “you don’t know what you’re doing here. Yeah?”

Gerl is unmoving and, for some reason, the shoulders of this girl are so bony and frail that taking a deep breath must hurt, must pull the clavicle bones too close together, and the thought intimidates Gerl into breathlessness. This girl could fit in the dress just fine, though. She’s almost nothing as she stands. The dress would flow about her like a pair of wings.

“I’m Mary,” she smiles, “Mary McMary Mae. Named after my mama, Mary McKae Mae.” Her hand thrusts forward and snatches up Gerl’s. “Don’t worry, Gerl,” she says, testing the velocity of their hand swing. “That dress—I’ll find you a better one.”

Or maybe, if Mary wore the dress, she'd look at herself through the mirror of the closest river and decree it beneath her, even if she did it kneeling, her knees digging the shimmering blue into dirt.

Mary seems to know the store like a second home. She says, "Over there are the hats," and, following Mary's finger, over there lay the hats. She says, "Over here is the break room," and, lo and behold, outwalks a worker from the wooden doorway she nodded her head at.

"Move it, punk," says her taxidermied head to the worker in the door. And his head swivels like an owl's, or a demon's, or a devil's, and his 360 degree gaze lands on Gerl, and then onto the dress in her hands. "We're grabbing refreshhhments," she says like a secret. But the guy doesn't bat an eye. His gaze is locked onto the gown.

"Hey," says Mary, "Did you hear me? Refreshhhments. Move it—"

"Gerl," he says, and he sounds like the ogre hand. Gerl tries unraveling her fingers from Mary's to no avail.

"Hey, punk," tries Mary again, shooting him the gaze of something dead, and angry about it. "I'm a detective, you know that? I'm very good. And what I see, is a—"

Somewhere above, the blonde girl's voice on the intercom breaks on the way Gerl's does in her nightmares, and the world goes silent like in the aftermath of an avalanche.

Mary's look goes grey. She looks sick. Her hair is perfect, though. And if she started singing right now, Gerl's certain she'd almost be on key. Though—if the dress found its way onto her body *right* now, not any other moment, Mary'd kill it, freeze it to her body and turn it into a still image.

"You'd think," breathes Mary, turning to Gerl, her clavicle looking about to snap. "You'd think more people in the world would look at that dress you have and burn it all up."

The blonde girl starts singing again, and her voice heats the air around everyone's faces. Gerl tries to rip her hand away from Mary's firm grasp, but she can't. "Give it," says Mary, and the hand of the guy's body rushes toward at her. "Can you see it, Gerl? In his eyes? He's gonna buy this rag and cut it all up even more, and throw it into the river, or something."

"No—no! Dibs. Give *me*, Gerl, c'mon, I saw it first," defends the man, but Mary doesn't seem to care about dibs, and yanks Gerl's hand to the side and into a mannequin as she grabs the dress like the thing will feed her. Gerl's elbows lock tight around the fabric, holding like cement to the yanking Mary.

"Dibs!" shouts the boy, "I already—dibs! You'll rip it!" He puffs forward to grab his own corner of the skirt. "I'll do anything to—"

And sure enough, all it takes is another horrid break from the blonde girl on the intercom to make Mary's beady eyes spark into something more than empty and she rips off the shoulder-slip sleeve she'd been grasping, and falls into her own chest as the broken threads force everyone back into the nearest wall, or rack, or mannequin.

Mary heartlessly releases her corner of the dress, the poor thing slouching onto the ground, downtrodden and emotionally trampled. "I'll go," she says. "I'll go and... get you the most perfect dress for next Sunday's service. Don't you even worry." She looks down at Gerl and

sighs. Only—she starts walking away to where she'd pointed to the choir stand, far, far distant from the Sunday-wear.

Gerl is face to face with hardwood.

The boy is in a pile of disarrayed, thick-boned corsets barely hanging on to their hangers. His head hurts, and the shred of blued skirt in his hands is as beautiful as heartbreak, but he is nothing if not a settler, and he and his big hands drop the shard of fabric and go on to shift through the fated piles around him. Gerl thinks he'd have been too beautiful for the dress anyway.

In her hands is a shredded piece of trash. One-sleeved, half-skirted, wrinkled, and printed with shoe-mud, and half the sparkles have fled off to newer surfaces. If Gerl put it beside that river in the moonlight, or twirled it into a waterfall, or set it onto a taxidermied deer, or hung it limp on a finger, all it would be is scrap. Gerl presses her forehead into the hardwood, hugging the blue thing to her chest. What it had deserved was a world that made it loveable.

Another hand reaches around Gerl and takes the once-shimmering beauty, rolls the fabric into a ball. Aunt Arlene nudges Gerl's shoulder. "This dress is..." she rolls the ball around, "...so out of style. But go try it on. Maybe it'll work."

There are too many dresses in the Lonesome Shimmerland Dress Shoppe down on Beautiful Woman Blvd. And in the mirror of the fitting room, Gerl stands in one of many shambled gowns. The thing is muddy, and ripped, and wrinkled, and dull, and skimpy, and brutish, and dead, and hasn't been twirled not once by the 80 or so girls who must've anastored it. Aunt Arlene sits in the corner staring into the opposite wall with her arms crossed. "You look beautiful," Arlene says to the wall, quiet and ill, "Do you like it?" And yes, in the distant back left corner of the mile-long Dress Shoppe, the intercom has been shamefully silent for hours now, and the boy in the dressing room beside her is crying, as under the stall she can see every unfit dress that fell like a dead thing on him, too.

An ox in a prairie stares outside of its painting. And the animal is beautiful—on top of its symmetrical horns, lying across its body, is a shredded piece of the sky. Gerl would do anything to make it ugly. But she can't. The ox was made to wear a dead heaven.

When Gerl opens her mouth to answer Arlene, her voice cracks like it's never spoken before.