

# Beau of the Ball©

## A Short Story by Cherie Clement

“Mum, can I go to a ball?”

“Mmm. Whatever,” I reply distractedly, my mind grappling with the dreaded weekly task of balancing the family budget. “Ball? What ball?” I query, looking up with a start as the question eventually sinks in to my number-sodden brain.

“Didn’t think you were listening properly,” James, my sixteen-year old grins good-naturedly as he plonks himself down beside me, negligently brushing all my carefully arranged receipts to the floor as he does so. “Is it OK with you if I go to the local amateur dramatic society’s annual ball with Sasha?” Sasha, his current girlfriend, is one of the leading lights in the local dramatic society.

I blink in surprise. Is this really my son? This smiling, sunny-faced individual seated beside me? It certainly looks like my son, but it can’t possibly be. This wonderfully polite apparition speaks in whole sentences. My offspring only verbalises in grunts or one-syllable words, leaving me to guess at our supposed conversation, and all without a smile in sight! I decide to test the waters.

“A ball? How much is it going to cost?” Any mention of money should soon prove whether or not this is my real son.

“It’s OK, mum,” his voice is as soothing as the accompanying pat on my arm. “It’s only £15 a ticket, and that includes food. Sasha’s parents are paying for her ticket, so it’s just the money for mine. And they’ll come and fetch me and bring me home, so you needn’t worry about me coming home late.”

I frown suspiciously at this stranger who’s taken my son’s place. Normally any questioning on my part regarding the strictures of the family budget on his social life result in a few disgusted grunts and him storming off in temper. So, who is this delightful child and what has he done with my son? Mind you, I think I like this version better. This James seems to be a very good bargain for £15 – perhaps I can swap him!

“What sort of an event is this ball?” I ask conversationally.

“Dunno.” Now this is more the sort of reply that I’m used to, but he surprises me by expanding further. “Sasha just said it’s like a dinner and dance with a bit of speechifying thrown in, that’s all. She usually goes with her parents. She just thought it might be nice if I could go with her this time.”

“Well, it would be nice,” I reply slowly, my mind busy grappling with figures. I had a few extra hours’ work this month from my part-time office job, so my pay was a little more than normal. If we have bangers and mash instead of a Sunday roast for the next few weeks, I should be able to manage it.

“So I can tell Sasha yes?” his smile lights up his whole face. It’s so very rarely these days that I’ve seen that smile of his that I haven’t the heart to say no.

“Yes. All right. But find out a bit more about it please.”

“Such as?”

“Well, for a start, when is it and what are you supposed to wear? Is it smart casual? Or are you supposed to wear a tux?”

“What’s a tux?” He frowns.

“A posh dinner jacket and trousers. You wear it with a fancy white shirt and a dickey-bow.”

“You’re kidding!” James’ eyes nearly pop out of his head.

“Nope.”

“Where do we get something like that from?” Then his face fell. “It’s going to cost a fortune, isn’t it? You’re not going to be able to afford it. I won’t be able to go if I’ve got to have one of those.”

“It’s all right, love,” I reassure him, though my fingers are tightly crossed. “You might not need one but, if you do, we can hire one. It shouldn’t cost too much.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure. Now go and ring Sasha and find out a bit more about it.”

A half-hour later after many phone calls back and forth, he announces triumphantly, “Sasha’s got my ticket, and it is a posh dress do, and it’s on Saturday night.”

“Saturday?” I query, horrified. Today’s Wednesday. That leaves me with just two days to hire a dress suit and sort out any accompanying paraphernalia he might need. I realise that I have absolutely no idea where to begin!

“Susan,” I ask my colleague and fount of all knowledge the following morning in work. “Where would I hire a tux from?”

Susan's bespectacled face peers around her computer screen and eyes me consideringly. "A tux wouldn't suit you, Jennifer my love. You're too short and plump."

"Oh, ha ha, very funny! It's not for me, you idiot. It's for James. He's been invited to the dramatic society's ball on Saturday night, so he needs something suitable to wear. At least, I think that means that he's going to need a tux. It is a pretty formal sort of affair, isn't it?"

"Oh, yes," she assures me. "Our local amateur dramatics take themselves very seriously indeed. It is a *very* formal affair. Frilly shirt, cummerbund and bow-tie to boot."

"Oh, Lord! Where am I going to get all that from? And how much is it all going to cost?" I wail.

"Well, you should be able to hire it all from Timothy's Menswear in town. That's where I always get my Rob's hire stuff from. But I haven't a clue how much it'll cost. Why not ring them up and find out? You'd better be quick though. They might not even have anything left for Saturday."

Good grief! I hadn't even thought of that! However, the shop assistant on the other end of the phone is very helpful. "Yes, madam. We should be able to organise a suit for Saturday for you. What size would you be requiring?"

"Well, he's sixteen, six-foot-two, thirty-inch waist and thirty-four inch inside leg."

"My, my. He is a tall, slim lad, isn't he? We'll probably have to send off to our other branch for something to fit him. You'll need to bring him in to be measured today in order for us to have it ready for you by Saturday."

"OK. Well, I can have him there by about 1.30pm. You are open at lunchtime, aren't you? Oh, and how much will this all cost?"

Assuring me that the shop is indeed open all day, she then proceeds to tell me exactly how much it's going to cost, leaving me to spend the rest of the morning frantically reworking my budget.

Collecting James from school and dashing to the menswear shop in town to get him measured up soon takes care of my lunch break for the day. And the money for the hire of the suit, plus extra for hiring a dress shirt and tie has taken care of my meagre budget for the remainder of the month as well. Still, the excited chatter of my son's conversation over supper that evening is well worth the sacrifice of a meal consisting of beans on toast.

Friday afternoon, James arrives home from school looking miserable. I sincerely hope he hasn't fallen out with Sasha after all the expense she's put me to! "What's wrong, love?"

"My hair apparently! Sasha says it's too long and it'll make me look too scruffy because we're sitting with the Mayor tomorrow night. As if he's even going to notice."

He's been painstakingly trying to grow his hair for the past few months. But going from a virtual skinhead to a ponytailed-popstar style is going to take a little while to cultivate. He's got to the stage where it merely looks scruffy and sticks up all over before he smothers it with a layer of greasy-looking gel to slick it back from his face. I can't say it's exactly my favourite style but I put up with it, like mothers do.

I manage to hide a grin as I try to be a little tactful about his appearance whilst silently blessing Sasha for her comment. "How about we nip down to the hairdressers and see what they can do to make it look respectable enough for tomorrow? All it needs is a little tidying up. Besides, a trim will probably be good for it. Help to strengthen it a bit before you carry on growing it."

He considers this for a while, but then grudgingly agrees. A few snips later and an animated James is staring delightedly at his reflection in the mirror. "You know mum. I really like this style. I think I'll keep it like this."

As I hand over the money to pay for his cut and blow-dry, I must admit that I'm rather hoping he'll change his mind - growing his hair is far cheaper! But the style really does suit him. Saturday morning in Timothy's Menswear shop sees me brimming over with pride at the sight of my handsome son all dressed up to the nines. Far from looking tall and skinny, the suit makes him look very distinguished, broad shouldered and slim.

"Are you sure I look OK, mum? It's not naff, or something?"

"You look wonderful," I assure him, tears prickling my eyes. But all my reassurances obviously aren't enough. He spends the short car journey back from town busy sending text messages on his mobile phone and not long after we arrive home, a group of his friends call round, all eager to see the suit.

Eavesdropping unashamedly outside the door to his room, I hear his friends' encouraging comments.

"Fabulous. Really elegant," approves John.

"007 watch out," quips Ben.

"Very distinguished. You even manage to look sophisticated." I recognise Andrew's voice. "Really? So I look good then?" James queries anxiously.

"Good enough to eat," Jessica purrs. "And I love the haircut." (Now I've always thought that Jessica would be the better girlfriend, but James maintains that they're just friends.)

"Mmm, very sexy," Helen agrees. "I never realised that your shoulders were so broad. So what sort of shoes have you got?"

I clap my hand over my mouth in horror. I hadn't even thought about shoes! Like most teenage boys, except for his Doc Martin-style school shoes, the only thing my son wears on his feet is trainers. Neither sort of footwear will look right with formal wear I realise in dismay.

Thudding footsteps rush to the door as I hurriedly tiptoe my way back to the living room. "Mum!" shouts James in a panic.

Two hours later, footsore and weary having trudged around every single shoe shop in town, we arrive home in triumph, the proud bearers of a shiny new pair of size eleven, smart black slip-ons in their brand new box clutched safely in my son's hands. And, what's more, my overused credit card is only a little worse off as we were fortunate enough to secure the last pair in his size in the sale.

I tot the figures up in my head as I'm waiting for him to put in an appearance prior to Sasha's arrival that evening. Ticket for the ball - £15. Tux and shirt hire - £55. Shoes - £25. That's a total of £95. And that's without the haircut! It's enough to feed us both for a month I realise in dismay.

But as I see my son walking towards me, handsomely elegant in all his finery, a radiant smile on his face, I know that, to me, it's worth every last penny. What's more, I've had three full days of civilised, interesting conversation with a sociable human being for a change, and who can put a price on that?

"I had an absolutely fabulous time. It was really great. Plenty to eat and all the drinks were free as we were seated at the Mayor's table. And all for £15!" James enthuses on his return from the ball.

"Yes, love," I reply. "A real bargain!"

**The End**

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