

Belle of the Ball

“How about this?” Julia holds up an impressive stiletto—golden quarter with sheeny turquoise vamp, the heel at least four inches tall—and smiles mischievously.

“Hah!” Lina says. “You trying to kill me, bitch?” They giggle together.

“I know, right? *I* couldn’t even handle these.” Julia sets the shoe down and they amble to the next display.

It’s late morning in a small boutique on Fifth Avenue in Midtown. The store has a half dozen or so women in it at the moment, not counting the three saleswomen, one of whom happens to be the famous actress who owns the place and occasionally makes an appearance to chat with the clientele and introduce them to her new shoe designs. The two friends whisper to each other while splitting their gazes between the elegant merchandise and the other customers being helped.

“Just go up to her after she’s done with that lady,” Julia says. “I bet she’ll remember you. Everyone does, right?”

“Ugh, when you say it like *that*.”

“Oh, please. That supercrip thing is gold and you know it. I’m just living in your reflected glory, queenie.”

They laugh again, louder this time. Lina’s long, blonde hair jounces slightly. Her upper lip lifts and her pink, beetling gums with their nicely rowed teeth debouch into the world proudly. She edges past Julia to approach a kaleidoscopic wall of rear-facing heels. She walks toward the wall unsteadily yet with hard-earned assurance. She is pigeon-toed, the bottom half of her legs splayed like supportive rafters to steady her torso that cants forward while her rear juts backward just enough to reach equipoise. Her arms sway as needed for balance, akimbo in the

air, her hands hanging like tassels. When she steps, the ball of her pensile left foot usually hits the ground first, brushing along briefly before finding its grip. Her gait is singular in a way that prompts the other customers to glance in her direction before tactfully pulling their eyes away.

Lina scans the display wall, chooses a shoe, then puts it back. She reaches for another near the top. A middle-aged woman browsing sequined flats on the next shelf turns and gives her the grandest of smiles. She asks, “Do you need help reaching anything, honey?”

“Thank you, but I’ve got it,” Lina smiles.

Julia suddenly appears on her other side. “Check out this bad boy.” She holds up a black-strapped peep toe heel. “Don’t tell me you wouldn’t slay in this tonight.”

“Ooh, that’s sexy. You think I can stay vertical in it all night, though?”

Julia sighs emphatically. “You told me to come with you so you wouldn’t pussy out, remember? So here I am. Besides, what’s all that shit you’ve been talkin’ about that special CP Pilates class you’re in? Telling anyone who’ll listen how your core’s all strong now. Wearing bikinis and everything.”

“Yeah, I know,” she squints. “I don’t think I’ve fallen down in like a year. Haven’t sprained my ankle since that time at the High Line.” She takes the shoe from Julia, admiring its silky profile. “But look at this heel, it’s at least three inches. I don’t know…”

They stop talking as the shop’s proprietress walks over to greet them, her face brightening when she catches Lina’s eyes. “Well, welcome back!” she exclaims. “I helped you a couple months ago, right? With those lace-up oxfords?”

Lina beams. “Oh my gosh, yes! I can’t believe you remember!”

“Of course! So how are you liking them?”

“I love them. I’ve been out on, like, five date nights with my husband in them.”

“That’s so good to hear!” The three of them stand smiling at each other for an awkward moment before the actress speaks again. “I’m sorry, sweetie, but I don’t remember your name.”

“Oh, no, no, that’s fine. It’s Lina. Lina. And this is my friend, Julia.”

Julia waves slightly and nods. “Nice to meet you. I’m a big fan. Lived here for almost ten years and I think you’re now officially the most famous person I’ve actually met.”

“Ooh, who have I dethroned?” she asks with mock intrigue.

“I ran into Mary Kate or Ashley down in SoHo once. Still not sure which one it was.”

“I still can’t tell them apart!” They all laugh, eyes gleaming. “So what brings you in today, Lina?”

Lina explains that she’s hoping to find a new pair of shoes to wear to a gala fundraiser that evening. “It’s for a non-profit I’m involved with,” she continues, “for kids with cerebral palsy. Very fancy affair: red carpet, big name emcee, silent auction and all that. Gotta look my best, right?”

“Of course,” the actress agrees. “I remember you mentioning last time that you worked with some charities. That is just so lovely, so important. To see someone like you, who’s overcome so much, out there just working it. So inspiring. And what an example for those precious kids!” She leads them to a beige loveseat, watching Lina’s easy, tottering shamble with a solicitous smile that seems to hold out invisible hands for her, just in case.

Lina sets herself down heedfully toward the edge of the seat and Julia sits next to her on a clear acrylic vanity stool with a thick cushion. One of the saleswomen joins them and the actress makes introductions. “Adrienne, this is Lina. She’s got a big soiree tonight and wants to be the belle of the ball. Let’s see what we can do for her.”

Adrienne had seen her when she came in. She smiles profusely and gently takes Lina's hand. "So nice to meet you, Lina. So, what do you have in mind? I suppose we should start with your outfit; what will you be wearing?"

Lina looks at Julia. "Do you still have that picture from last week?"

Julia scrolls her phone for a few seconds and then holds up the screen. "Pretty killer, right, ladies?" They ooh and aah.

"We have some nice flats that would go marvelously with that dress," Adrienne motions to a table nearby. "Or even a few kitten heels you might like." She looks at the actress. "Maybe Divine? Or Spy?"

"Just what I was thinking." She hears her name being called and looks across the store. "Excuse me, I have to go talk to them real quick. But I'll come back and check on you, ok?" She grips Lina's shoulder and pats it a couple times before leaving.

Adrienne asks for Lina's size and goes to the back of the store. Lina turns to Julia, narrowing her eyes. "Shut up," she says. "I'll tell her when she comes back."

"You better. 'Cause you know I will if you don't." Julia punches her friend's arm. "You gotta speak up for yourself!"

Adrienne returns with two boxes, sets them down and begins to open the first. Julia clears her throat and widens her eyes. Lina starts, meekly, "Um, these are beautiful, but I already have nice flats. I was hoping to maybe try some... some taller heels. Nothing too crazy, my balance obviously isn't the best, but I like those Mary Janes right behind you." She points to a little single-strapped number with an oval buckle sitting on the display table, shimmering there in silvery iridescence. "Could I maybe try those?"

“Ah, the Tartt. It’s one of our most popular. And it has a nice, thick block heel, so it should help with your…” she hesitates.

Lina smiles kindly, assuaging the other’s discomfort. “It’s ok to say it, I don’t mind. I mean, c’mon, it’s not like it’s hard to notice. I have cerebral palsy, in case you’re wondering. I’m trying to be more open about it, so it’s actually nice when it comes up like this.”

“That’s wonderful,” Adrienne gushes. “And so brave, I have to tell you.”

Lina tries not to notice Julia’s slackened eyebrows and open-mouthed sneer. She keeps looking at the saleswoman kneeling in front of her. “I think you’re right about the block heel, too; more stability definitely won’t hurt.”

“Well, let me go grab them for you, then.”

As soon as she’s gone, Julia starts sounding off in whispers about ableism and paternalistic bullshit. Her sibilant rant ends midstream, though, when Adrienne returns. The attentive young woman kneels with her legs tucked under her and puts the shoes on Lina’s feet. Lina takes the hand that’s offered to her and is helped up.

“Let’s see what they look like in motion,” Julia prods from her stool.

Lina steps cautiously at first, testing her inner gyroscope. Finding it sound, she walks across the store, then back. Julia catcalls her with a slow whistle, making Lina laugh and even sashay a little, taken up in the moment. The actress returns jubilant with her arms thrown out.

“Lina, look at you! And those shoes! You go, girl.” By now most of the patrons have dispensed with discretion and moved their attention plainly to the uplifting scene. Lina hasn’t noticed the shift.

She lowers herself back onto the loveseat as her attendants take care of the shoes. They ask her what she thinks, if these are the ones. Flushed and satisfied, she says, “I love them, yes.

I'm gonna get them." She looks at Julia and continues with excitement, "And while I'm here, I want to try those red ones over there, too." She points at the wall of heels across from them.

The actress and Adrienne look over for a second, then to each other. "You mean... the stilettos?" the actress asks. Her eyes go to Julia, then back to Lina. The gears in her face stop moving for a moment—"Are you... sure?" she asks—before her delicacy and expression return. "Pardon me, of course. Those are... lovely. Let's, let's give it a shot." She runs to fetch them, Adrienne right behind her.

Julia leans over with an amused look. "*Let's give it a shot?* You're giving that poor little celebrity a heart attack, you know. She's probably gonna make you sign a liability waiver!"

"Shh-shh-shh," Lina pleads under a faint titter. "Not so loud!"

They return in a procession with the box. The actress sets it down and takes a knee in front of Lina. She fixes the sleek, v-shaped stilettos onto her feet, intent in the task. The others in the boutique have become sanguine onlookers, watching the event quietly. Lina glances around and some give her nods or reassuring smiles when their eyes meet hers. Two young women near the register whisper to each other.

"Do you need some help up, sweetie?"

"Thanks, but I think I've got it." Lina stands erect, wavering only a moment, and begins walking several inches off the ground. Her dangling left foot skids gently as usual and manages to find its place with each step. Her bent arms extend out slightly more than before to shift some mass away from the newly reduced pivot point. The adjustments are minor and straightforward, but her ungainly, marionettish frame appears teetering to the audience, more precarious than before. They watch her like she's a funambulist over a chasm and the wind has picked up. She

jokes to Julia as she turns to come back, “Whew, this feels dangerous. Might get a nosebleed up here. But I think I got it.”

“Of course you do, babe. Never a doubt.”

Lina strides past and continues toward the door. She’s focused on the endeavor and doesn’t notice that all other activity has ceased; everyone’s eyes are on her. When she swivels at the door and starts back, the actress calls out, “Way to go, Lina! Nothing can stop you!”

Adrienne lets out a small woo-hoo, pumping her fist in the air. Someone begins to clap, then another joins, and another.

Lina suddenly reddens and shrivels under the vitiating applause. In trying to hurry back to her seat, she shifts her center of gravity a touch too quickly and catches her toe on one of her last steps. Her ankle buckles. She jolts forward as though shoved from behind by a malicious classmate, collapsing onto the waiting sofa.

The spectators stop rubbernecking at once. They look to each other, or to the floor. The actress and Adrienne rush over as Lina pushes herself upright. Julia watches for a signal to help—she’s been there for numerous falls, she knows the drill—but, as usual, there’s no entreaty in Lina’s expression or bearing: only a serene, *Good Lord*, head-shaking private chuckle of self-deprecation that follows after the reflexive flash of white hot dignity. She shakes her head calmly with eyes closed, then looks up at everyone. Finally, she burlesques a seated bow, “Ta-da!” They all exhale simultaneously and quasi-laugh along with her. “For my next trick in the show, I’ll be biting the head off a chicken. Stick around, y’all.”

The actress looks concerned. “Are you sure you’re ok, honey?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Lina says. “Happens all the time. I was pushing my luck with these beauties anyway. Guess they’re not meant to be.” She removes the stilettos and holds up one of

the block-heeled Mary Janes, rotating it in the light. “But I love these ones. So sparkly. They’re gonna be perfect tonight.”

“I think so, too,” the actress says. An ushering, vaguely rushed quality enters her voice. “I’ll get them wrapped up and Renée over there can check you out. It was *so* nice seeing you again, Lina. You keep letting that light shine for the world to see, all right?”

They say their goodbyes, take a selfie together, and then Lina and Julia walk slowly to the register, half browsing a display case of purses along the way. “Never a dull moment with you,” Julia teases. “Maybe she’ll give you a part in something next time, huh?”

“Shut up,” Lina elbows her. “I’m just glad I tried them.”

“Me, too, Lina-bean.” Julia puts an arm around her and leans in, squeezing.

Lina pays for the shoes and is almost free before she’s hit with a parting shot. The cashier wears the familiar look—benevolent, charitable, obliterating—as she hands her an overfull bag. Seeing the extra box inside, Lina squirms and shrinks privately. She starts to protest, to claw back what is hers, but she’s silenced at once, pinned down by the kindness.

“Complements of the store,” the cashier smiles with all the sincerity in the world, nodding over at her boss. “She insisted.”

Lina lifts the lid off the box enough to poke aside the tissue paper and see the hard, red gloss underneath. She manages the feeblest of “thanks,” pivots carefully on her tender ankle, and pushes Julia out the door.

Bio:

Ryan Pollard is a clinical professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. His debut publication was nominated for the PEN/Dau Prize and his fiction has appeared in *Bellevue Literary Review*, *South Shore Review*, *Litro Magazine*, *Twelve Winters*, and *Pigeon Review*. His stories typically center the experiences of people with disabilities.