**Gold**

Deepa Paul

The dress is a soft shimmering slip of a thing.

It doesn’t object, it doesn’t make a sound as Jay lifts it by delicate straps from a plain paper bag with hands that are large like a man’s but still tender like a boy’s. In the gentle hands of my first love, the dress glides like a whisper and beckons like a promise, late afternoon sunlight sparkling off hundreds of gold sequins heat-pressed into sheer panels of flesh-colored fabric. His tutor brought the dress back from the States; he wants to buy it from her for me. Jay gathers up the gold and offers it to me, holding his breath for my reaction. Would I please, please try it on, just to see?

I slip into the bedroom I share with my older sister, where the windows are veiled with midnight blue *papel de Japon*, tissue-thin sheets layered to shield our teenage bodies from the eyes of the construction workers next door. I undress in the indigo shadows, my Catholic girls’ school uniform falling to the floor.

First, the pressed white blouse with its pointed collar, knife-edge pleats and stiff string tie knotted tightly at the throat; then the white cotton undershirt (because a bra is a temptation that should never be seen). Next, the black and gray plaid box-pleated skirt, never shorter than two handspans below the knee (because decent girls are modest); the white knit ankle socks, no colorful embroidery or trendy designer logos (because respectable girls must never stand out, only blend in); the plain black leather Maryjanes, no flashy side-stitching or chunky heels (because good girls are simple).

In the mirror everything is dark, except for me. In the gold sequin slip dress, I am radiant.

Can I trust this mirage? Is this glowing creature really me? At sixteen, I’m never sure of anything, least of all the voice in my head that murmurs: *but* *you have nice ankles* or *look, you have pretty hands*. I float back to Jay on bare narrow feet that scarcely brush the polished parquet.

His unabashed pleasure, the unspoken adoration in his eyes drinking in my reflected light, tells me everything I need to know. In the mirror of his sweet tender face I see: I am beautiful. I am special. I am gold.

Years later I will wonder if that shy adoring boy still exists somewhere. Did he look at his wife that way on their wedding day, when she first appeared in her white dress? Did he have daughters, and did he buy them pretty sparkly dresses too?

I slip into my mother’s bedroom on a cloud of gold gossamer possibility. *Mom, look! Jay wants to buy this for me!*She gazes at me, dimples deepening, teeth flashing, then laughs and shakes her head.

When my mother emerges, Jay says all the right words: the polite *good afternoon*, the reverent *po* and *opo* of our formal Tagalog, the way good boys from decent families address a girl’s parents to show respect.

She lavishes him with bedimpled gracious charm, speaking in fragments to soften the blow. *Thank you, it’s very nice but see, look at her arms, you know, her arms are too big for a dress like this, it doesn’t look nice, she’s too macho*(here she laughs)*, look how big, she can’t… like that, you know, sleeveless, maybe exercise first, so they look nice, otherwise… How much is it? One thousand? That’s too much! It’s too expensive, keep your allowance, don’t spend your allowance on Deepa, your mommy might get mad, thank you, but no*.

Because she is my mother, I believe her.

Because people who love you are always to be believed.

If people who love you say you are not worth a thousand gleaming possibilities, not worth adorning with golden light, not allowed to shine, if they say your body must be hidden, covered, ugly, they must be right.

People who love you have no reason to lie to you. Their word is gold; it must be true.

He doesn’t object, doesn’t challenge her nor look at me. He only nods, murmurs and accepts. *Sige po, yes po, thank you po.*

She disappears into her bedroom and closes the door.

He whispers: *I just wanted to see you in it. That was enough for me.*

The gold sequin slip dress vanishes into the paper bag in a crumpled heap.