the issue—the difference in the quality of the photographs and the
difference in their dresses. To these girls’ parents, however, the dif-
ference is that between two worlds, and two social classes. Their
parents send the photographs to all their friends in the countries
they have left behind as though they were Hallmark cards. This is
America—America!—these photographs say, and we have made it.

CHAPTER THREE

Dipping: Debutantes

CRASHING
When you turn onto River Oaks Boulevard, the street that leads to
Houston’s River Oaks Country Club, and you first lay eyes on the
club, your initial reaction might be like mine: Whoa! Even from
five long Texas blocks away I see the country club’s gate and behind
that, its fountain, and behind that, on top of a rise, its multi-
columned facade. The club’s architecture is like that of a capitol
building—which seems appropriate when you consider that it is the
social capitol of the exclusive residential area of River Oaks.

It’s December and I’m not wearing a coat because this is Houston
and it’s still sweetly warm out in the early evening and I hold my
sleeveless arm out the passenger-side window to feel the air. My
tuxedo-clad escort for the evening speeds down River Oaks Boule-
vard and we pass oak tree after oak tree, their trunks illuminated
with white, spiralling Christmas lights that dangle as casually as
tennis bracelets as if to emphasize that yes, we have entered River
Oaks, home to hundreds of mansions and swimming pools and
Houston’s wealthy. The entranceways to the mansions usually have
only one step up between horseshoe-shaped driveway and front
door, and in comparison, the River Oaks Country Club’s stairs seem
especially impressive: They are steep and white and look like the kind of steps that could have caused Cinderella to lose her glass slipper after the ball.

On the evening of December 22, 1997, 750 men and women, young and old, all dressed in tuxedos or floor-length gowns, climb these steps in their polished black shoes and high heels to watch fifteen young women be presented at the annual River Oaks debutante ball, a tradition that’s been going on since the club was founded in 1922. But my friend and I do not go in this way. Instead, given the limited options of the Uninvited—even after I pleaded my case in letter-form to the president of the River Oaks Country Club, I was informed that the debutante ball was for the debutantes and their families and friends—we crash.

My escort, who would like to remain anonymous because he is from Houston and once was a Houston debutante’s escort and cares about these sorts of things, has borrowed his parents’ Jaguar for the night, and the guards at the gate wave us and all the other fancy cars through. Fortunately, Escort knows the layouts of all of Houston’s country clubs—both from summer jobs (coaching tennis; making BLTs) and club-belonging friends—and after parking in a lot by the tennis courts, he takes me in through the staff entrance. Escort leads me through a series of corridors and fern-wallpapered hallways, a labyrinth that rivals that of the Palace of Knossos, until we pass a waiter, who, because we are dressed up, assumes we are lost, and directs us to a staircase that leads us up out of the bowels of the country club. We emerge into the main ballroom, miraculously (to me) having made it past the bell-shaped, ball gowned women who are checking off names on a guest list. Escort gives me a smile that is the black-tie version of a high five. I glance around the main ballroom, which has a fitting decor for the occasion: It is pink with gold trimming and mirrors, a cross between a young girl’s bedroom and Versailles.

To come out as a debutante is the ultimate anti-Cinderella story. When a young woman is presented as a debutante, society (in this case, high society) is being told she is of a good family and eligible for marriage. The debutante has no need of a fairy godmother—her family supplies her clothing and transport—and no Prince Charming has to scour the town to find her after the ball—her name is on the “Presentation Ball” program, her parents members of the country club. The age at which a young woman makes her debut is no more than an arbitrary assessment of when a girl is ready for conjugal conjunction. At the River Oaks ball, this is in the winter of a girl’s junior year in college.

Debutante balls originated in sixteenth-century England with Queen Elizabeth who supposedly started the custom of formally presenting at court young women who were eligible for marriage. Much of the ritual’s current incarnation, however, dates back to the nineteenth century, when Queen Victoria began including the daughters of the Industrial Revolution’s increasingly haute bourgeoisie along with those of the nobility and gentry. The idea of the presentation of young women to American society started in this country in 1748, when fifty-nine colonial Philadelphia families held Dancing Assemblies, the forerunner to the debutante ball. When America began to prosper during the late 1800s, debutante balls made their way across the Atlantic as a vehicle for wealthy families to introduce their daughters into a class-restricted marriage market.

Elizabeth II ended the British court tradition of debutante balls after the last presentations in March of 1958 because, as Hugh Montgomery-Massingberd writes in Her Majesty the Queen, “It was felt that since the war, the ritual of the presentations represented money rather than birth or glamour. An aspiring mama had to do no more than pay a lady who had been herself presented at Court to sponsor her daughter and perform the presentation; her daughter was thereupon on the list and inside the palace. There was not much harm in it. But it was not what the kings and queens had intended.”

Though the balls stopped in England, and in America, during the 1960s and 1970s in particular, it was often difficult to gather enough debutantes for presentations in the Northeastern United States,
debutante balls have always thrived in the South with its love of lineage and social customs. "Parents get really wrapped up in the tradition of the ball," says Jenene Fertita, one of the chairwomen of the River Oaks ball. "They get really upset if anything changes. People object if the invitations that go out to the ball don't have a gold River Oaks seal on it, because that's what it's been like in the past."

But while most parents of Texas debutantes today say that they want their daughters to be debutantes for the same reason they insist on the gold seals: tradition—because they, the mothers, were debutes, and their mothers before them were debutes—many harbor a not-so-veiled hope that the ball will ensure their daughters will date and eventually marry someone of their social class.

"I know that the debutante ball is kind of an extension of my parents trying to set me up with guys, and I've always been against that," says Elizabeth, a River Oaks debutante home from Harvard for the holidays and the deb season. She is an unpretentious, blue-eyed brunette whose face exudes warmth without irony. "I hate it, for instance, when my dad says, 'I met a great guy; you need to meet him.' I don't think my parents believe I'm actually going to meet my future husband at the ball, but they do think it's a good way to make connections, and that maybe I'll be introduced to someone through those connections."

According to Elizabeth, who says she was hesitant about coming out because she thought the whole affair was for a bunch of "stuffed shirts," she didn't have much of a choice about whether or not she was a debutante. "My grandmother was a debutante, and so was my mother. My parents actually met at my mother's debutante ball—my father was someone else's escort. I've known since the day I was born that I was going to come out."

This, after all, is a world where girls have grown up going to debutante balls—at River Oaks, the Houston Country Club, Allegro, and the one in Galveston. This is a world where some girls come out at more than one ball. "It all depends on how many country clubs your father belongs to," one debutante tells me.

Multiple coming outs are not uncommon. Many of the River Oaks debs have two presentation balls. Elizabeth came out three times—at Allegro, the all-male club her father belong to; at Assembly, her mother's all-female club; and at River Oaks, because both her parents are members.

"I was invited to come out at the International Ball at the Waldorf Astoria in New York, but my parents wanted me to debut in Texas," says Elizabeth. "I think it was definitely important to them that I come out in Texas because they want me to end up here after school and they want me to marry a Texas guy."

Elizabeth's mother maintains that the reason she wanted her daughter to be presented in Texas is because "it's home." While Elizabeth's mother is much more reserved than her daughter in speech, she's more flamboyant in dress; Elizabeth's ball gown is an elegantly simple strapless white dress, her mother's a sweet cocktail pink with a silver sequined bodice. "The point is to introduce her to my friends and children of my friends," her mother tells me matter-of-factly. "I'm not as interested in having her come out in New York or San Francisco because I don't have that many friends there."

I ask her whether she hopes that by having her daughter come out in Texas, there's a greater likelihood that she will end up marrying and settling down there. "Well, Elizabeth was at boarding school for four years and now she's been at college for three, so there's no telling what she's going to do next," her mother says with a mix of exasperation and admiration for her Daisy Miller of a daughter. "I can't dictate what she does or where she's going to settle down."

Like Elizabeth, most River Oaks debutantes admit that while coming out was their parents' idea, they have fun doing it. "I think the whole debutante ball thing is really prehistoric," one ex-
debutante with green eyes and one-karat diamonds in each ear tells me. Both the diamonds and the green-colored contacts were presents from her parents in preparation for her coming out. “But you know, my sisters did it and stuff, and my parents really wanted me to do it, and all my friends were doing it so I was like, Oh, I’ll do it, it’ll be fun and everything. It’s kind of par for the course. Every year there’s this presentation and it’s really just an excuse for a big party—maybe not for the parents, but for the debs. I mean, my friends and I are so far away from getting married.”

Regardless of whether they’re close to being ready for marriage or not, on the night of December 22, the fifteen 1997 River Oaks debutantes partake in a ritual that symbolizes that they are. By tonight, all the preparations of a lifetime, with particular emphasis on the preceding several months, have been made. The debutante’s parents have made their several thousand dollar contribution to the $65,000 it costs the country club to put on the presentation ball. The amount each family pays depends on how many guests they invite: $100 is the rate per adult guest who’s seated at the parents’ ten-person table(s) and it costs $5 per “young guest,” i.e. friend of the debutante, who sits in the second ballroom, where there’s a buffet rather than a sitdown dinner. (A number of the debutantes’ friends move into the main ballroom and stand against the wall to watch the presentation.) However, as one debutante’s mother tells me, “The main cost of the ball itself is the dress.”

Promptly at eight the ritual begins. The president of the club stands behind a podium, stage right, and introduces the debutantes, one at a time. Each of the debutantes has a first name like Kristen or Josephine, names that seem meant to be written in calligraphy, a middle name that is, in most cases, the mother’s maiden name, and a last name that is recognizable to most guests from society pages, dinner parties, and golf games.

Wearing a white wedding dress by Victor Costa or Vera Wang, or a dress passed down from her older sister who was also a deb, and with white long-sleeved gloved hands holding a nosegay of light pink flowers that brings out the flush in her cheeks, the debutante walks out on stage and stops where, unseen by the audience, a piece of masking tape is on the stage floor. The president continues in his slow Southern drawl: “Daughter of Dr./Mr. and Mrs.—; granddaughter of the late Governor/Mr. and Mrs.—; Presented by—.” From stage right, the presenter, dressed in white tie and tails, makes his entrance. Usually, the presenter is the debutante’s father; or, in the case of death or a messy divorce, her brother or stepfather. Whoever he is, he stops at his own masking-taped mark, down stage and to the debutante’s right.

When the president has finished announcing the debutante’s social c.v., the brass band at the back of the ballroom bursts out with a tune of her choice. The songs range from an orchestral rendition of the Beatles’ “Michelle” (to accompany the debut of a debutante named Michelle) to the theme from Gone With the Wind to “Deep in the Heart of Texas” (for the ex-governor’s granddaughter). And then it’s time for the Texas dip.

REBELLION, DEBUTANTE STYLE

Waffting up to the masking-tape-marked spot on the stage floor, each debutante stops, smiles a big smile, and does her Texas dip. No one knows the exact origins of the Texas dip, but it’s most likely a regionalized version of the St. James Bow—the bow debutantes did in England when they were presented to the Queen at the St. James’ Court. As its name implies, in America, the Texas dip is unique to Texas debutantes. More than anything else, tradition and a propensity for doing things in a grand manner probably inspire Texans to continue the custom while debs in the rest of the country do a simple curtsey. A Texas dip is quite literally a to-the-floor curtsey in which the debutante gets so far down on her high heels that her dress flares out around her like a marshmallow. As the coup de grace, she lays her left ear on her lap for a moment. The reason she turns her head is to prevent getting a lipstick mark on her virginal white dress.
More specifically, she:

(1) begins with her right hand on her presenter’s arm and her outstretched left hand holding a nosegay, which is essentially a bouquet on a stick, drops her hands and brings them up together, as though offering flowers to the audience;

(2) with her bouquet in her left hand, extends both arms out to the side of her body, keeping them below her shoulders, bra-line;

(3) circles her right foot behind her, so that if, when her feet are together they’re at the 12 o’clock position, her right foot goes to three o’clock, then to six o’clock, and stops behind her at eight o’clock;

(4) squatting very slowly—the slower you go the harder and therefore the more impressive—she goes all the way down and then, when she can go no further sits back on her right leg, and with her left leg in front of her and keeping her back completely flat, she reaches forward with her chin and starts to bend over; at the very last minute she bows her head;

(5) keeping her back flat, she raises it and when her spine is perpendicular to the floor she lifts her head, sighs a breath of relief and smiles.

Of course, each of these steps is supposed to be part of one continuous, fluid motion. One Texas debutante’s mother, whose daughter has come out at four balls and will probably come out at at least two more, tells me that when doing the Texas dip, “You’re not supposed to be like an elevator jerking and stopping at every floor, but like an escalator going down to the bottom smoothly, and then rising back up again.”

The point of the Texas dip is to make the debutantes look graceful, like swans. A ballet instructor attends the ball rehearsals to help the debs with their dips, and during the last rehearsals they wear heels rather than flats with their jeans; nonetheless, it quickly becomes apparent that some of the debutantes are more swanlike than others, and that years of practice or strong quadriceps can greatly aid, even rescue, a Texas dip. Upon curtseying all the way to the floor in their heels and their hoops, a third of the debutantes require the help of their presenter’s hand to get back to standing position. And even with assistance—or in some cases, rescue—from an extended gloved hand, they wobble and teeter like fawns standing on their legs for the very first time.

After observing several Texas dips at the River Oaks Country Club’s 1997 debutante ball, I noticed a pattern: the girls who smile the widest smiles before they curtsey are the ones who can manage the Texas dip gracefully on their own. The debs with the widest smiles are smiling because they know they can do it—they’ve practiced for months in their sorority houses and in department store dressing rooms, in front of any full-length mirror they came across.

The presenters of debs who have perfected a dip are fully aware of their talents as well—they stand removed from the young women, the way a magician might stand far away from a trick in progress to make sure the audience doesn’t suspect any sleight of hand.

When done correctly, the debutante looks like a ballerina resting her head on a down pillow, prepared to dream of sugar plum fairies. When done incorrectly, she looks as though drunk and on the verge of passing out, she’s doing a nose-dive into a fraternity brother’s unmade bed. Regardless of the outcome of the Texas dip, the audience applauds.

Every year there’s a girl who refuses to do the dip on the grounds that it’s demeaning to women, or simply because she didn’t feel it was worth the effort to perfect. This year is no exception. One of the debutantes opts for a simple curtsey, a mere demi demi-plié. While the adult guests collectively pause, then clap, hesitantly, the younger guests enthusiastically cheer this rebellion—and in the debutante world, this is Rebellion.

After the more or (sometimes much) less successful dip, her presen-ter walks her in a circle on the ballroom’s square dance floor, his arm through hers. The obvious purpose of this walk is to let the
guests get a better view of her dress, of her hair, of her smile, of her. Loud whispers bordering on shouts of “She’s just the prettiest. Isn’t she the prettiest?” can be heard tables away, while rumors of “Her father left the family for a much younger woman” are merely hushed utterances. The debutante smiles and nods at friends; the presenter waves or raises eyebrows at his, and, in a few cases, even gives them a white-gloved thumbs-up.

When all fifteen of the debutantes have come out on stage, curtseyed, and paraded around the dance floor, they are introduced once again and led on stage by their presenters until all twenty-nine presenters and debutantes (one father has two debuting daughters) are on stage. The president announces, “The River Oaks Country Club is privileged to present the 1997 honorees.” To the tune of “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” presenters lead the debutantes in a waltz. Photographers’ cameras flash as presenters and debutantes strike poses, foregoing a beat for the sake of posterity’s picture frames.

With the end of the song comes the moment of meaning. The president says, “Will the escorts please claim their ladies,” which sounds to me like an announcement at an airport baggage claim. “Thank Heaven for Little Girls” segues into Cole Porter’s “It’s De Lovely,” the escorts’ cue to cut in. This changing of the guards signifies that a young woman who, up until now was her father’s daughter, is ready to be some other man’s wife.

High school friends or college classmates of the debutantes, the escorts are men from good families. Rarely are the escorts boyfriends. Debutante committees strongly encourage debs not to invite boyfriends to be their escorts because at this age, you never know (the men are asked to be escorts several months before the presentations), and nobody wants last-minute fiascoes, changes in the program, or tears. In addition, the point of the debutante ball is for debutantes to be introduced to eligible young men, and so for a deb to have an escort she’s already involved with would be like bringing one’s own food when dining at a four-star restaurant.

When the escorts cut in, it’s not the sort of “may I cut in” you see in black-and-white movies, the kind that’s accompanied by a tap on the shoulder and a look of surprise on the cut-in-upon man’s face. Rather, when the escort approaches, the presenter blithely lets go of the debutante and pats the escort on the back. He turns toward the debutante and opens his arms and she hugs him and gives him a kiss on the cheek. You’d think she was saying good-bye before boarding a plane to Paris for the year, rather than just taking a spin around the dance floor with someone else. But perhaps the debutantes sense that, for their fathers, this is in fact the moment when they are saying adieu to their little girls.

Aside from the escort who’s dressed in his Naval Academy uniform, the young men don’t look much like your traditional escorts. Some sport ponytails, and despite that afternoon’s rehearsal many of them don’t know how to waltz. Judging from the way the debutantes hold the men close and comfortably, it is evident that while they may not have been actively partaking in this world of waltzes and balls before tonight, the debs have lived in co-ed dormitories, dated boys, and some, despite what their white dresses are intended to suggest, have had sex.

No matter that the couples bump into each other, that the Naval Academy guy seems overwhelmed (later, her tells me that the debutante ball is “a welcome change of scenery”). No matter that, if anything, the debutantes seem to be leading the escorts. The debutante’s dance with her escort says, I am now ready for marriage. Not necessarily with these men, but with anyone else who may be watching (or with the son of any of the adult guests who may be watching).

The day would come, the debutantes’ fathers knew, when they would have to let go of their little girls. But even if their daughters aren’t close to getting married, at the ball, the fathers seem even less ready for this prospect. Before the escorts’ song is over, some of the fathers start cutting in. This time, it is the may-I-cut-in move you see in antiquated movies and bad TV shows. Not something that was part of the rehearsal, so the escorts are taken by surprise. They acquiesce, of course, and make their retreat without so much as a good-
bye kiss on the cheek from the now-shocked but still smiling—always smiling—debutante. The fathers and the debutantes dance to a medley that includes “All the Things You Are” while, slouch-shouldered, the escorts hang out on the perimeter of the dance floor like sidelined basketball players, waiting to be called back in.

“My husband was so nervous, you’d think it was his coming out,” one debutante’s mother says to another as they sit at adjacent tables, watching their husbands dance with their daughters. Perhaps comforted after this “one last dance” that has affirmed their daughters are still—and may always be—their little girls, the fathers turn them back over to the escorts, and ask the debutantes’ mothers to dance. The mothers blush as though it’s now their coming-out and they move to the dance floor with clan.

Waltzing about the dance floor now are presenters and wives, escorts and debutantes—as if the former were setting examples for the latter: See, married life can be fun! When the dance is over, the adults continue dancing to the next song, and the adult guests join them for the one after that, while the debutantes and their escorts seize the opportunity to escape and migrate down a hallway to the other ballroom. This other ballroom is decidedly the “young person’s” room; the crowd is comprised of their friends and the band plays rock cover songs.

Unaccustomed to high heels and not wanting to spill their drinks on their dresses, the debutantes lean forward, tilting into conversations, falling into hugs. They dance with escorts, they dance with other girls’ escorts. They smile in all directions, especially if there’s a camera. They say hello to friends they haven’t seen since summer, and to some they haven’t seen for years. They receive compliments on their hair, which, more often than not, was coiffed by their mothers’ hairdressers. They receive compliments on their dresses, dresses their mothers often dream they will wear on their wedding day as well—which gives you some idea of how imminent the mothers hope this day will be. More soignée than the ebullient white flounces you’d think Southern debutantes would wear, the dresses are short-sleeved or strapless, and many have tiny silk-covered buttons running up the back, three per vertebra.

The topic of conversation among most of the debutantes is the Texas dip—one who did it perfectly claims “it was no big deal.” Another, who wobbled as though she had just been at sea, says, “At least I didn’t pull an Amanda S.—,” and all the debutantes who are gathered together smile in recognition of the name of the deb who fell to the floor the year before.

Inspired by nostalgic chivalry of days gone by, the escorts and the young male guests crowd around the open bar to fetch drinks for the debutantes and their female friends. But the girls here aren’t ones to sit around like women in an Edith Wharton novel. They’ve been to keg parties at fraternities and they forge ahead to get their own drinks. Flashing smiles in lieu of IDs, some of them say to the bartenders, who are frenetically trying to accommodate the crowd, “Could you please make it a double?”

As Dixon Wecter writes in The Saga of American Society, “In the mid and later nineteenth century, the medium [of the deb ball] might be an elaborate dance, but more typical was the afternoon reception, at which the debutante received with her mother and father and a few of her best girl friends, greeting not only young men but a liberal assortment of dowagers and old gentlemen. After the crowd had gone, an informal dinner followed, and finally a dancing or theatre party for her intimates.”

At the time Wecter was writing, in the 1930s, he noted that, “With the increasing financial wariness of these times, it is perhaps not surprising to learn from a recent tally made in New York City that only some 30 percent of a season’s debutantes now marry within the year, and about 20 percent the following year.” With such discouraging returns on their investments, he wrote, many parents were opting for one of several cheaper alternatives, such as simply sending out cards with the daughter’s name engraved below that of her mother’s.

Times have changed. Not only haye balls become the only way to come out—imagine your confusion if today you were to receive the
aforementioned engraved card—they have also become more extravagant than ever. But even the balls have taken a backseat to the private parties each debutante’s parents throw for her. “During the deb season you can blow ten thousand dollars in a minute,” chairwoman Jenene Ferrita says, and it is the parties, more than anything else about being a debutante, that flaunt the wealth behind the ball.

The parties usually have themes like the 1920s or New York, New York, or take place in unusual venues. One debutante this year had a party in a Houston parking garage; on every floor there was a different band playing. While some view this extravagance as a sign of the archaic nature of the ball and imagine the parties to be a throwback to a time when it was important to spend a lot, judging by Wecker’s chronicles, the inverse is true: Rather than getting less costly as they’ve become less relevant, coming out has become a more extravagant and expensive undertaking.

Given that it’s not uncommon for parents to spend tens of thousands of dollars on their daughter’s private party, it’s unsurprising that some view these parties as nothing more than “dressed-up dowries.” As one young woman at the River Oaks ball who, parentally clubless, wasn’t invited to come out, tells me over her buffet plate of egg rolls and diamond-shaped pastries, “The parties are really fun, but I don’t know if I believe in what they stand for. I mean, basically they’re saying, Don’t you want to marry me after seeing how much money I have? Personally, I’ve always been one for personality.”

**ESCORT SERVICE**

And what of the escorts, these men who don white tie for the night and help make women out of their debutantes—though not (necessarily) in the colloquial sense. “I’ve got to think how to say this,” confides one beer-bellied escort from Houston whose sister made her debut the year before. “So there’s a lot of crap involved in deb balls, right? It’s so old school, probably there’s some racial stuff you could tie into it. But despite the fact that it’s so traditional and old and plantation like, at the same time it’s a lot of fun,” he says, and as he takes the final sip of his strawless mint julep he tries to avoid, with considerable difficulty, getting any mint in his mouth. “You just have to acknowledge that there’s a lot of crap involved. I mean, sometimes I’m like, man, I’m not sure if this is what I stand for, like class and stuff, but at the same time, it’s a blast.”

For the escorts who aren’t from Houston, the ritual and riches of the ball can be like something from a foreign country, or something from Texas. “I grew up in D.C. and went to private school, so I didn’t think this would be that different a scene,” says one escort whose mother made him get a haircut before the ball. “But I have to say that I’m so overwhelmed. I’ve never seen anything like this.” He gestures around the room. “I mean, the expense itself.”

Elizabeth’s mother, who met her husband at her coming-out, tells me that many of her fellow debutantes met their future husbands at parties during the deb season. “The men we met were other girls’ stags,” she explains.

But these days it seems the other girls’ stags aren’t as interested in meeting the debutantes. Two escorts confess to me that between the rehearsal and the deb ball itself, they did call on some ladies... at a local strip club. “We had some time to kill because both our debs’ last names are in the beginning of the alphabet and so they take those pictures first,” the younger looking of the two tells me. “So, we thought, why wait around?” In their tails, they jumped into one guy’s car and sought other forms of entertainment.

“I think I’ll tell my deb’s parents on her wedding day,” says the second escort, and licks his lips as though relishing the prospect of it. “That way they’ll be relieved I didn’t marry their daughter.”

**A CONFESSION**

“Being an escort was the worst experience of my life,” confesses one ex-escort. “Watching the too-young-to-be-overly-made-up-and-overly-dressed-up girls curtsying made me want to puke.”

“That is,” he hastens to explain, “all of them but my date.”
This last qualification is only a nicety because, you see, I was the date.

What I'm talking about here is me when I was seventeen, and something I rarely talk about, my coming out as a debutante, albeit California style. My best friend's mother was on the invitation committee and half the girls who had gone to my all-girls' elementary school were invited to come out. Unlike the debutantes in Texas, many of whom told me that for them debuting was something they'd been groomed for from an early age, something they were expected to do ("like piano lessons") and something that, like piano lessons, they would one day be happy they'd endured, my parents didn't even really know what a "debutante" was. There was no country club they belonged to and therefore no club behind the cause—only a hospital charity that they decided donating $1,500 to was a good thing. My mother, after all, is a nurse, and it was sold to her as "a nice way to celebrate your daughter's graduation." Being from Sweden, she didn't know the ritual had anything to do with marriage. And if she did, I don't think she would have asked me to do it: Unlike most mothers I know, mine told me to wait until I was thirty-five to marry. Thirty-five, at least.

And so, with my hair still growing out from where I had shaved half of it off (I had a rough adolescence) and with an ex-boyfriend as an escort, I was presented. Being presented at the Pacific Presbyterian Deb Ball was a truly California event; while most balls are a nod to the distant past, the Pacific Presbyterian Ball (Pacific Presbyterian was the name of the hospital the proceeds went to) was started in 1964. This was when debutante balls were practically dying out in all other parts of the country, save the South. This was the year when Free Speech demonstrations opened an era of protest across the bay, at Berkeley.

What did coming out mean to me? It meant a June full of two, sometimes three events in a day—mother-daughter lunches followed by pool parties followed by a ball at a country club with a band playing standard rock covers—that I fit in between my shifts working at a bakery. I was one of the two debs out of thirty not to have even one party. In short, it didn't mean much. Later, I wished I had given it more thought. Not because I thought the money given to charity was a waste, or because the parties weren't in their own way fun, but because it wasn't me. I was inducted into a scene that I would no longer be a part of. I would soon go to school on the other coast, rarely coming back home. For me, it was more of a good-bye than a debut.

In his novel Already Dead: A California Gothic, Denis Johnson writes, "We do what we have to do to make it all come true." I think he captures California in that sentence and I think he captures something, too, about the Presbyterian Ball. Whereas in most places, the debutante ball is a reminder of connections to the past—in New York, for example, there's the Mayflower Ball, which is held only for descendants of those who came to this country on the Mayflower—in California, it seeks to create connections. It's a way for Californians to establish themselves as part of society, because, like my parents, many Californians, almost by definition, are completely rootless. Here I think of Gertrude Stein's ironic line, "What good are roots if you can't take them with you?"

My re-emersion in the deb scene while writing this nine years after my experience prompts me to call some women I know from San Francisco who were in my "deb class" and now, postcollege, reside in the city.

One ex-deb I grew up with who now works for a national clothing chain tells me that she's proud of having been a deb. "I still socialize with a lot of the women who were debutantes and come into contact with a lot of them in my job as well. The deb ball also introduced me to a lot of parents who have helped with my career. I don't dwell on the experience, but I think that it was good in terms of keeping a certain social order working, I mean that in the sense that nowadays it has more to do with female friendships than marriage, per se."

But another ex-debutante who works in San Francisco as a high school teacher tells me that she feels it still has a lot to do with
marriage. "Originally it was supposed to introduce a girl into society and signal to men that she was ready for marriage. Well, what's so different about that now? There are plenty of families who are pleased their daughters and sons are being introduced to each other and forming friendships. The summer of parties and that winter are an entire summer and winter break that we spend with a certain group of people. The only difference is that the debs aren't getting married right now like they were fifty years ago. The purpose of coming out is still effective in that regard, it's just a bit delayed and not as concretely stated as it was before."

**GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

The night before the debutante ball Escort takes me to a party given by two former River Oaks debutantes. It's held at one of the hostesses' family's River Oaks mansion. The women at the party—most of them members of this unofficial sorority of ex-debutantes who have all come out in the past ten years—are so friendly that I think I finally understand what is meant by "Southern charm." In part, this is true. But the other reason they're so welcoming to me is something my friend and I hadn't anticipated: They assume I'm his intended, or at least someone he's serious about. This emphasis on couplings is something they've inherited from their parents. I think of their swanlike dips and how some birds mate for life and how the ex-debutantes seem to want to make certain their friends do, too.

Because of their parents, because they were debs, I expect these women at the party—most of whom came out eight years ago—to be married, and about half of them are. Here's the catch: They haven't married the guys their parents probably expected them to marry when they came out; they haven't married men who were escorts or sons of their parents' friends, or sons of the friends of their parents' friends. Instead, the former debs have married men who, like most of them, are teachers, or men who, like them, are in graduate school. (So much for the notion that debutante balls can be chalked up as financial investments parents make in their daugh-

ters' futures.) The escorts have all gone their own ways and the ex-debutantes who have married into their parents' lifestyle cannot even be counted on the fingers of one glove. I wonder if this non-entre to their parents' world is typical of Escort's friends, or typical of all debutantes coming out in Texas today. "I do know a few debs who married and are in the Junior League, but they're the exceptions," one ex-deb, a high school teacher, tells me. One guest at the party who's married a doctor tells me, "I wasn't even asked to be a debutante."

When the hour is late and all the Christmas cookies have been eaten, we move outside. Under a Texas sky that brims above us like a big cowboy hat, the conversation turns to a memory game: "What song was playing when you went on your first car date?" asks a guy in a Gap denim shirt and khakis. We are sitting in a circle of lawn chairs by a Hockneyish swimming pool, and people take turns responding.

"Tainted Love," one guy says.

"That song from Erasure," says the girl to his right.

When it comes to my turn, I admit I have no idea and have to pass. But the woman sitting next to me remembers exactly—Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA." I'm stunned by the capacity of everyone's memories and the fact that they had official dates, not to mention "car dates"—a term I've never heard before. But then I remind myself that this is Texas, where adolescence entails dates and cars, and therefore car dates. This seems so circa 1950, so circa the time their parents were dating, but these young women go through debutante balls because their mothers did, because their parents expect them to. Why shouldn't other aspects of their dating rituals emulate their parents' as well?

Back in the house, the ex-debutantes' parents are talking of their "missing children"—that is, their sons who couldn't make tonight's party. "He's escorting Dr. So and So's daughter," one woman says, and sips her scotch on the rocks.

"Oh really," another replies, her eyebrows arched. Obviously, the name makes an impression.
"They're going to Mr. So and So's daughter's deb party," the first mother continues. "Do you know them?"

"Of course," the second mother replies. She turns to her husband and tells him that Dr. So and So's daughter is coming out.

This is a world of "sons of" and "daughters of," a world of pedigrees. The debutante ball gives the illusion of being all about the young woman, but in truth she is merely a player in her parents' ongoing narrative, one that in Texas, unlike in California, was scripted before the debutantes were even born.

As early as an hour after the presentation of the debs at the River Oaks Country Club, it's evident that coming out as a debutante is no longer a passport into the world of dating—not to mention marrying—the sort of men who are escorts, the sort of men who are "the sons" of their parents' friends. In fact, as the night wears on and the music gets louder and the guests more inebriated, many of the escorts have abandoned the debutantes in favor of other female guests. As one escort tells me, his speech slurred, "A lot of the guys use the ball as a chance to come back and scam on girls they haven't seen for years—some even since high school. We've seen the debutantes—they're always out and about." He pulls at his white tie, as though it's restraining him. "It's the other girls—the ones we thought we've never see again—who we're psyched on."

With their hair freeing itself from hairspray and Bobby-pinned buns, with slumped shoulders and torn hems, and some even missing their gloves, the debutantes wander to and fro, from the adult ballroom to the kids'. The adult room is where all the tradition takes place, introductions of "this is my daughter" to a young man's parents as the band plays "In the Mood." In the kids' room is where the aforementioned young man (whose parents are being introduced to a debutante) is most likely wooing a nondebutante as they dance to "YMCA" and "Brown Sugar."

By midnight most of the debutantes are leaving the ball. It's not a matter of having to run home before their carriages metamorphose into pumpkins: These girls have limos that will take them to whatever afterparties their hearts desire. Tonight, the big afterparty is at the Velvet Elvis, a dive bar that has spent a great deal of money trying to look like a dive bar. Before heading off to the Velvet Elvis, debutantes change from their white gowns into casual wear, not because they're afraid their dresses will turn to rags, but for the sake of comfort, and because outside the confines of the country club, the whole debutante thing seems a bit embarrassing.

Their mothers don't go to the afterparty, but remain at the ball until the wee hours, drinking and dancing with their husbands, and the fathers of other debutantes, and those of escorts as well. This, after all, is really their party. Before heading off to the Velvet Elvis myself, I go into the women's lounge to see the debs change into casual wear, but none are to be found. Instead, I feel like Pip in Great Expectations when he meets Miss Havisham and finds her dressed for her wedding day, cake and all. The Miss Havishams I see, however, aren't women preserved for their wedding day, but two debutantes' mothers acting as though it's their night to debut. I watch as the deb mothers study themselves in the mirror, brushing their mascara wands over their already mascaraed eyelashes and lipstick-sticking O-shaped mouths with Chanel red. Having painted her lips, one mother pauses, puckers, and kisses a Kleenex. "Did your daughter enjoy yourself?" she says, addressing the other debutante mother's reflection.

And the second one, who's wearing a debutante-white dress, says, "Oh, yes," and explains. "Tonight I think my daughter finally learned how fun it is to be the center of attention." Through the fabric of her dress she cups her breasts in her palms and pushes them up so that cleavage, albeit oversunned and wrinkled, spills over her low-cut neckline. "I'm happy for her, I really am," she says and stares at her own eyes in the mirror with visible sadness. "I discovered too late in life that I love being the princess."