

PANDEMIC PROM

An original text by Monique Polak

Even though my bedroom door is open, I hear someone knock. “There are worse things in the world than not having a prom,” Mom says.

I am sprawled on my bed. I pulled the duvet up so it covers my face. “You’re right,” I mutter from under the duvet. “Chernobyl was worse. Hiroshima was worse. But I wasn’t around for either of those.”

Mom doesn’t think that’s funny. “You have a lot to be grateful for, Poppy. Even with the pandemic. No one we love has died. And your grandparents have had their first vaccinations.”

She wants me to say she’s right. But I don’t say a word.

Not till I hear Mom sigh and walk away. That’s when I pull the duvet down and shout, “I’ve been dreaming of prom since I was ten.”

Only now Mom’s ignoring me.

I text Jenny.

CAN YOU BELIEVE THEY CANCELLED PROM?

Jenny texts back.

IT’S SAFER THIS WAY. ALSO PROM IS LAME

Prom is lame?

This is too serious a matter for texting. So I phone Jenny. “Is this Jenny Zhu?” I ask. “Or has the Jenny Zhu I have known and loved since kindergarten been kidnapped by aliens?”

Jenny laughs. She laughs at all my jokes. “It’s me,” she says. “Wazzup?”

“Why’d you call prom ‘lame’? We’ve been looking forward to prom since forever.”

“Correction,” Jenny says, “*you’ve* been looking forward to it. Me... well... not so much.”

“But you’re on the prom committee, Jenny.”

“Only because you’re president. You’re hard to say no to, Poppy.”

“What about your dress? You and your mom went to like twenty malls to find it.”

“I don’t care about the dress,” Jenny says. “I should probably return it.”

It’s the way Jenny says that – as if there’s nothing she can do to change things – that makes me decide to take action.

I get out of bed, toss my pajamas in the laundry, and put on a fresh T-shirt and my yoga pants. Then I bring my ipad to the dining room table.

My parents have turned our former dining room into their home office. They work at opposite ends of the table.

Dad looks up from his computer screen. “To what do we owe this pleasure?”

“I need to work on an action plan.”

“That sounds exciting,” Mom says. “What kind of action plan?”

“A plan to bring back prom.”

The ideas come easily. A Facebook page. Links to studies showing how teens have suffered during the pandemic. How teens have a biological need to hang out with other teens. An on-line petition.

I send out an email to the members of the prom committee, telling them we need to set up a meeting ASAP. Tomorrow’s an in-school day. We can meet at recess.

Within five minutes, everyone has answered. Everyone except Jenny.

Jenny seems surprised to see me when I show up at her house. Her parents and her older brother Han come to the door too. With the pandemic, someone ringing your doorbell is a big deal.

“Wanna go for a walk?” I ask Jenny.

I know from the way Jenny catches her parents’ eyes she is asking for permission. Her father nods, then looks at Han.

“I’ll come,” Han says.

“Why?” It’s only once I’ve asked the question that I realize how bad it sounds. But in all the time I’ve known Jenny, Han has never come for a walk with us. He never does anything with us.

Mr. Zhu answers my question. “For protection,” he says. “To protect his sister. People can be very cruel.”

Han walks about six feet behind us.

“What’s going on?” I ask Jenny.

Jenny bites her lip. I think about what Mr. Zhu said. *People can be very cruel.* Suddenly I get it.

“Have people been saying stuff to you... about the pandemic – because you’re Asian?” I ask.

Jenny’s eyes have that glassy look they get when she’s about to cry. If there wasn’t a pandemic, I’d hug her.

“Some older girls blocked my way on the street. They blamed me for the pandemic – they called it the Kung Flu.” Jenny looks down at the sidewalk.

I don’t ask the question that’s in my head. *Is that why you don’t care about the prom?* I already know the answer.

Jenny decides to come to the prom committee meeting. She’s okay with my new plan. “Some Asian students in our community are being bullied. We need to do something,” I tell the committee. I don’t look at Jenny.

Ever since the pandemic started, people all over Quebec have put up posters with a drawing of a rainbow and the motto, “*Ça va bien aller.*” We decide to get everyone in our graduating class to make a poster, and put it in their front window. Only we’re changing the motto to “*Ça va bien aller ensemble,*” and we’ll decorate our rainbows with pictures of teenagers of every nationality, including Asian kids of course.

“What about prom?” Tyler asks at the end of our meeting.

“There are 62 kids in our graduating class,” Jenny says. “We’ll get arrested if we meet up in person.”

“Our only option is to do something on-line.” Tyler doesn’t sound too thrilled.

“We could wear our prom clothes and people can make speeches,” Elianne suggests.

“There’s no way I’m dressing up for a Zoom,” Jenny says.

In the end we agree on no dress code, no rules for speeches. Anyone who wants to can have up to three minutes to speak. We come up with a list of suggested topics: shout-outs; best memory of high school; worst memory; dreams for the future.

Prom day arrives. If there wasn’t a pandemic. I’d be getting my hair and nails done.

Madame Raymond, who runs our school’s IT department, manages the Zoom.

The principal is wearing a shirt and tie. I wonder if, like my dad when he’s Zooming, the principal has got pajama bottoms on.

Some kids are dressed up; most aren’t. Some speeches are funny; some, serious. Others are a mix.

Since Jenny’s last name starts with a Z, she’s the last up.

“I don’t want to be a downer,” she begins, “but I’ve decided to share my worst memory of high school. It happened last month.” Jenny takes a breath. “Three girls blocked my way on the street. One said, ‘Go back to where you came from!’ Another one yelled, ‘You and your people spread the Kung Flu!’ And the last girl...” Jenny pauses, “... she spit in my face.” Jenny touches her cheek.

“I cried for two days straight. But then the prom committee came up with the *Ça va bien aller ensemble* poster plan. A few days later, my brother and I were out for a walk. I still wasn’t comfortable walking alone. We saw your posters. With all the different kids on the rainbows. With Asian kids. It helped. It helped a lot.” Jenny’s eyes are glazing up, but she doesn’t cry.

She looks into the camera as if she is seeing all of us. “Thanks,” she says, “for being there, for helping me get through something I thought I couldn’t.”

My parents are standing behind me, watching Jenny's face on my ipad. I get up from my seat. The three of us clap.

I lean down to tap on gallery view. And I'm glad I did. Because all the other kids and their parents – they're standing up and clapping too.