

## The Debutante

September was the 'Season', once a year, in Mountain View,  
a northern mining township I hold dear.  
In spring, the green of hillsides merged with jacaranda blue,  
and skies stretched endlessly so bright and clear.  
The month was filled with functions, mostly in the Shire Hall,  
the Flower Show, School Concert, and the Anglican Deb Ball.

The debutantes spent many months in planning for the night,  
each hoping to be chosen as the Belle,  
and agonizing over things that had to be just right –  
the long, white dress, white gloves, and shoes, as well.  
Of course, there were the bouquet and more flowers for the hair –  
to add a touch of sparkle, diamantes everywhere.

Let's not forget the partners worn, with pride, upon the arm,  
as tall and dark and handsome as could be,  
without the grime and grease acquired from sawmill, truck, or farm,  
hair brilliantined, all dressed up to the T.  
Now, that was where the competition caused a spark or two  
for handsome lads were very scarce, and 'homely' wouldn't do!

Each year, the Mountain View Deb Ball observed the same routine,  
and all went well till nineteen fifty-four.  
The line of debs, sixteen that year, the most there'd ever been,  
sashayed, with partners, through the entry door.  
An unexpected 'Debutante' then happened to appear –  
Miss Lily Agnes Letterman, un-partnered, at the rear.

Lil's outfit was 'expected'. We had seen it all before,  
at all 'events' that happened in the town.  
The off-white dress was ankle-length where once it swept the floor:  
we all believed it was her wedding gown.  
Accessories were riding boots, a string of lustrous pearls,  
three magpie feathers trailing through her snow-white, upswept curls.

The Bishop rose to take his place with customary flair.  
The debutantes paraded slowly past.  
Meanwhile, Miss Lil, quite unconcerned, purloined the Bishop's chair,  
relieved to find a resting place, at last.  
She'd ridden, horse-back, six dark miles, to share the debs' grand night,  
to see young ladies at their best, find joy in their delight.

Lil sat and watched proceedings, gentle smiles upon her face:  
her eyes, however, seemed to gaze within,  
as if her mind had occupied another, distant place  
where once she'd seen her youthful dreams begin.  
She didn't know I watched her, while the couples waltzed nearby:  
she didn't know her inner sadness made me want to cry.

At suppertime, Lil didn't move – stayed seated in her chair;  
but she was never one to join the crowd.  
I sat right down beside her. She seemed pleased that I was there.  
“Perhaps, we'd find the supper-room too loud.”  
She leant towards me as she spoke, “Let's have a little talk.  
Arthritis is a problem and I find it hard to walk.

“This is a London dress, you know, designed for my debut.  
My dear, departed father was an Earl.  
So, Windsor Castle, April fifth, in eighteen ninety-two,  
Her Royal Highness met **this** Aussie girl!”  
Confused, I asked, “Which Highness, Lil? Elizabeth, you mean?”  
“Oh, no, my girl! Her Majesty, Victoria – the Queen!

“My gown was made of Crepe de Chine, with tucks across the bust.  
The pleated skirt swathed stylishly, right down.”  
Lil shook her head quite sadly, finding smallish spots of rust,  
and vainly brushed a larger patch of brown.  
“These ribbons near the shoulder held the mandatory train,  
three yards of filmy sheer and lace I'll never wear again.

"You go and eat your supper, Child – no need to sit with me.  
You mustn't miss out: use your common sense.  
I didn't pay for supper, came to see the debts, for free,  
and have a laugh at Bishop Breen's expense.  
She struggled, standing upright from His Holiness's chair,  
then rubbed her arms and shivered, thanks to late-night chilly air.

It's time that I was leaving since I have a cold, dark ride:  
I seldom travel anywhere at night.  
My horse and hound have been restrained along the fence outside.  
To leave them there, too long, would not be right.”  
Lil glanced towards the wide, front door, then, smiling, said, "Farewell.  
Just keep my secret for a while, then it is yours to tell.”

*There comes a time, for all of us, when stories should be told  
and many, many years have come and gone.*

*It pleases me to let Lil's story finally unfold –  
the truth of that great lady should pass on.*

*Beneath her pin-tucked bodice, lay a heart so kind, serene –  
a loyal, proud Australian, once presented to her Queen.*

**Irene Timpone**

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