

## **A Brief History of Prom**

### *and Post-Quarantine Prom*

I spend too much of my time imagining life as a movie. When I was younger, I would form sentences in my head, narrating my surroundings or my actions as if I were in a novel. Now, that has shifted to me picturing the world as scenes and thinking about how well songs match those scenes. Sometimes this urge gets overwhelming or annoying<sup>1</sup> and I have to pull myself back into reality.

If my life were a movie, more specifically a coming of age narrative or romcom, prom night would have been the climax. In the weeks leading up to it, even the mention of prom would send my mind into a spiral of self doubt. I'm in my junior year but the only other dance I have attended in high school was one in early October<sup>2</sup> and that had ended with me crying and leaving after barely more than two hours. I felt like a failure for getting overwhelmed at a school dance and figured prom couldn't possibly go any better. But I also knew that if I didn't go, I would regret it even more. That would be letting my anxiety win *and* what's a movie without a little tension?

School dances seem to be fairly polarizing like this; either people hate them, or they love them. This stereotype is pushed heavily in media, starting in the 80s when many of the classic coming-of-age movies were released. Bitchy-prom-queen, quirky-underdog-who-ends-up-winning, boyfriend-whose-only-personality-is-boyfriend, are common tropes<sup>3</sup> in these films. Many of the movies painted prom as a crucial night to every teenager's life and soon pushed the importance of it into high school culture.

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<sup>1</sup> I have on occasion been sobbing, only for my brain to turn my thoughts into poetry lines that get stuck in my head, which only furthers my distress..

<sup>2</sup> And before that, the last dance I had gone to was one in fifth grade.

<sup>3</sup> Another big one is the transformation montage.

Prom's roots, however, aren't even connected to high schools. The dance, shortened from "promenade," started as social events put together by colleges for their graduating classes in the late 19th century. These gatherings were closer to galas and typically involved dinners more than dancing. After the turn of the century, proms morphed into extravagant tea parties, where they also shifted to a younger audience; highschoolers. This is the first point we see prom as a coming of age ritual where mostly young women, were introduced into society<sup>4</sup>. Then, as Americans started having more disposable incomes and leisure time in the 1950s, proms became large dances where families would spend lots of money on creating a perfect experience for their children.

In general, prom is seen as an occasion where people break out of their typical clichés. Even students who refuse to go to any other school dances or events will go because, well, it's prom. There is a potential element of anxiety about missing out<sup>5</sup>, with people believing if they don't go they'll regret it for the rest of their lives. Much of this stems from the aforementioned surplus of media attention to prom, but at what level does this importance switch from artificial to real?

This has been made even more relevant in recent years when proms had to be canceled due to the pandemic. Suddenly, something that seemed constant, something that seemed promised, was taken away from people. Many highschool students count on being able to attend prom, at least senior year, as a celebration of all they have accomplished. But Covid has made it clear that nothing is too small to take advantage of. Especially because attending prom has come to symbolize a moment of coming of age, the cancellation of them has only magnified their importance.

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<sup>4</sup> Similar to debutante balls or quinceañeras.

<sup>5</sup> This is sometimes referred to as FOMO, which is one of the nastiest abbreviations ever so I will not use it, but technically it gets the point across so it is relevant.

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The 2022 New Mexico School for the Arts prom was a little different than most proms because all four grades were invited to come<sup>6</sup>. This difference is due to the small size of our school<sup>7</sup> with our student population barely surpassing 300. The small size of prom actually helped me feel more comfortable there, I think a larger dance would have been much more overwhelming. But despite the small size, the venue didn't feel any less beautiful or formal than any other prom may have been. It still felt special.

By the time we arrived<sup>8</sup>, it was twenty minutes past eight. A line of students trailed out of the doors leading into the concrete building prom was held in. The line poles outside were wrapped with artificial flower garlands. The line moved slowly with ticket check-ins, bag and coat checks, and random breathalyzer tests<sup>9</sup> clogging up the flow of things. A red piece of paper lined the floor into the dance, our own faux red carpet, where teachers clapped and cheered for students as they entered<sup>10</sup>.

Strings of lights hung from the high vaulted ceilings. There was a projector projecting art that was allegedly at the Louvre<sup>11</sup>. White chairs lined the edges of the dance floor and pop music played on the speakers as a few people danced. Further back, tables were set up in front of an impressive food display<sup>12</sup> and mocktails<sup>13</sup> created by a teacher who would rather not be named.

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, guests from outside schools could come as long as they had the right forms.

<sup>7</sup> And also because the prom council wanted to make as much money as possible.

<sup>8</sup> I went with my friend group of five people, including my girlfriend, and one person who goes to another school.

<sup>9</sup> Breathalizers check for levels of alcohol content in a person's breath, but alcohol isn't usually NMSA students' drug of choice. Basically they were useless.

<sup>10</sup> This was my least favorite part.

<sup>11</sup> The theme for our prom was "Night at the Louvre," though I can say with certainty Vincent van Gogh's "The Starry Night" is actually at the MoMA, contrary to the excessively themed decorations of the aforementioned piece.

<sup>12</sup> I had three chocolate covered strawberries. They were very good.

<sup>13</sup> These were not good.

Before the night of prom, my friend group had a discussion about mask wearing. We all still wear ours at school but NMSA has been mask option since coming back from spring break in March. We decided to bring them just in case, but the general consensus was masks would be left behind for prom. And it seems like that's what the rest of the student body decided as well. Many people I know who regularly wear masks at school didn't wear them for prom<sup>14</sup>. It felt like a giant, "why not?"

After a certainly not picturebook high school experience, having such a classic coming of age movie moment felt so normal. It almost felt like the pandemic wasn't even happening<sup>15</sup>. These moments of levity are important now more than ever, but they also might be part of the reason why prom has stayed so relevant. Senior and junior years are often the hardest, so giving students a night where they can relax and have fun with their friends is something for them to look forward to.

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There has already been talk of 2023's prom, with most people saying they want it to go back to being upperclassmen only, and I have to agree. One of the biggest factors for prom's importance is its exclusivity. It always has been, not always for the best. Right after schools were desegregated in the 50s, Black students were still not allowed to go to their school proms which led to Black parents throwing their own proms for their children. Or even farther back, when proms were held at colleges where only those affluent enough could attend.

Prom's significance was virtually faked until it just *was* important to people. There is no clear reason why it is so important; to me, it seems like we've just been told how special it is for so long we've started to believe it. Or even more blatantly obvious, maybe people just like to

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<sup>14</sup> In total that night I probably saw three people wearing masks and most of them took them off by the end.

<sup>15</sup> Which may not have been the case for some of the kids there who were/are more affected than I am personally.

have fun, put on fancy outfits, and dance without thinking about the responsibilities life puts on them. In a world that can seem doomed so often, moments of carefreeness are vital for humans to keep being human<sup>16</sup>.

I didn't hate prom like I thought I would. I might even call it fun if you catch me at the right moment. I was still too nervous to dance, but I can't say I regretted going even for a second. Getting to wear a pretty dress, seeing my friends<sup>17</sup> all dressed up, watching people I see everyday dancing and laughing, was well worth it. It wasn't a movie, and I don't think I changed as a person from that night. I didn't suddenly discover I wanted different friends or decide I didn't want to live a life of solitude anymore. I am still me. Prom stops being fun when we start pressuring it to be something it's not. Maybe prom doesn't have to be a night of change like we've been told to be fun. Maybe it's just fun to put on a dress.

*-Sarah Peralta*

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<sup>16</sup> Maybe that is too far of a stretch, but it's the one I am leaving you with.

<sup>17</sup> And girlfriend.