

## Instinct

By Aleksa Atkinson

It wasn't the fact that I couldn't be saved, but the fact that nobody wanted to save each other. It was February 2020, before the pandemic even occurred. There were no masks, just giggly students creating memories at their Silverbell Winter Formal. Unfortunately, the dreamy pursuits at The Mall of America didn't exactly go as planned. What was the plan, you may ask? since everyone was dressed up for the formal dance, each student had brought a change of clothes for the second portion of the evening: the amusement park rides. This consisted of rollercoasters, adrenaline highs, students having a reason to hold onto their dates, and loud prompted screaming. After the first part of the dance concluded, it was time to change. Easy enough, right?

Wrong.

Unfortunately, the illusion of convenience fizzled out as everyone transitioned from the dance to the amusement park. That night, panic echoed around a single coatroom as young manicured hands reached for their belongings. That night, a hierarchy was formed, and me being an underclassman, I was mercilessly pushed to the bottom. That night, I was a helpless freshman in a hot, sweat-filled tsunami of well-dressed high schoolers. It was blatant that in a matter of minutes, everyone was standing by their newly found motto, "only I matter."

Everyone's slowly moving bodies eagerly pushed towards the coatroom. We all just wanted to collect our things and enjoy the rest of our night, but in an instant, dozens of limbs decorated in shining jewelry and expensive watches were stacked up on top of one another. Blurred colors with textures of lace and silk violently swept past me. I was caught within the elegant rainbow. The weight of unfamiliar hands rested on my shoulders. Blank reddened faces respired on my neck and next to my ear. The hot moisture of everyone's thick gasping breaths was so heavy that it gathered on my skin like condensation on a window.

The overwhelming smothering made my brain race. *How do I escape?* I became increasingly discontented with the position of being a human lifesaver. People I barely knew leaned harder and harder into me. *That's it, I'm done with this.* With all the strength I could muster, I shook the strangers off my sore shoulders and waded through the panicked crowd. At first, I attempted to be polite, excusing

myself to reach the inside of the coatroom. My polite demeanor was ungenerously rewarded with my body being harshly shoved into a group of tight-knit people. At this point, I had no control over my body. There were too many people, so much heat, and enough panic to swallow me whole. Another sudden shove from behind resulted in a small yelp to escape my lips. My heels had lost their grip on the smooth concrete and began to skitter across the floor. I instinctively grabbed onto the back of a boy's white dress shirt, attempting to not fall on my face and worsen the situation.

I tried to curl up into an invisible shell as he looked over his shoulder. His face was contorted into a confused expression.

"I am *so* sorry!" My grasp loosened as I gained my balance, I felt my cheeks burn in embarrassment.

He shrugged and his lips moved, but I had no idea what he said. My ears were ringing from the astronomical amount of noise that this human stampede had created.

At this point, an unbearable swarm of heat encapsulated my body. It seeped into my lungs and made my eyes water. I was beginning to feel faint. I had been planning to grab some water after I had gotten my belongings, but I was trapped within human walls.

My peripheral vision caught flashing lights above me. I squinted at the staircase that wrapped around the coatroom, just as packed with students as it was on the floor below. Vertically held phones, tilted towards the scene, were recording every second of our distress. I could only imagine how much footage was broadcasting in Mahtomedi's social media circuit.

I heard angry and concerned muttering behind me. I took a quick glance to see a girl clinging to her friend. Their dresses meshed together as the girl's grasp on her friend tightened.

"She needs her insulin! It is in the coatroom! Please, make a path!"

Nobody budged. I attempted to, but there wasn't a place to move into.

I angrily sighed. This girl was possibly going into diabetic shock and nobody blinked an eye.

*What was wrong with all of us?*

The boy in the white dress shirt looked back at me again. I avoided eye contact, for it was already awkward enough that I was being repeatedly shoved against him.

"What did she say?" he asked me as he scanned the scene behind us.

"They said she needs her insulin..." my voice faded, expecting him to just take the information and continue to ignore me.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asked as shifted the slightest bit closer to me.

My brow furrowed, I wasn't used to getting questions about my well-being from *strangers*, "...I'm fine," I softly replied. The body tsunami pushed us together once again, I awkwardly giggled in response and looked down at my bejeweled heels. When I looked back up at him again, his eyes were still locked on me.

"You should try to get out of here, your face is really red." he expressed, seeming genuinely concerned.

My hands shot up to feel my cheeks. They were scalding. It also occurred to me that the tips of my ears had begun to burn, which happens when I overheat.

"You're right," I looked around comedically and laughed, "But I can't get out...nobody is moving!" my politeness withered away as I pushed a person who was attempting to propel past us.

At that moment, an authoritative boom echoed over our heads. Everyone jumped, a few girls screamed. Their dates began to mock them.

"Everyone! Clear the area! You can get your stuff later, just clear the area!"

I tried to glance over the crowd to see the savior of the night. It was one of the science teachers.

The other teachers eventually caught on and ushered the students away from around the coatroom. Everyone willingly dispersed and then regrouped into their cliques, wasting no time telling their heroic stories of surviving the Silverbell stampede.

I pushed my way through the sweaty mass of people, hands reaching for the less populated areas. When I finally found a less crowded space, my skin drank the cold air and attempted to regulate its temperature again. I took a large breath and sat on the dusty floor. I didn't know where my friends were, they could've been anywhere, but I was just appreciating being able to breathe in normal oxygen without the reeking stench of B.O and cheap perfume.

I looked around again at my peers. It was funny, seeing everyone being dramatic at one moment then acting strongly in the next. Some of the boys stood up tall as they further escorted their dates from the chaos, telling them the tales of how they held up in such conditions. Others waved their hands in the air, gesturing their crazy story. They looked ridiculous, but I cannot judge. I mean, I'm writing an official account for my English narrative.

I thought it was funny because, at the time, I was thinking about the movie *Titanic*. The climax, where everyone is screaming and attempting to get onto the few lifeboats available was eerily similar to the crazy debacle that I just described. I realized that in the end, when push comes to shove, nobody is going to be your friend. They are only going to help themselves (except for that one nice guy in the white dress

shirt. I wish I could've thanked him, but I never saw him again). Who knows, maybe one day I'll find my Jack Dawson again. As I sat there, temperature regulated, I began to realize that cold and selfish behavior was the harsh reality in these situations. But you couldn't blame them, it's just instinct.