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The Wedding March

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JULIANA GRAY

THE WEDDING MARCH

“I can’t wake up your father.”

Sue, the woman who had been my stepmother for less than a day, half-called, half-whispered to me down the hallway. I was rolling luggage out of my room, slipping away early from the hotel where the wedding party and most of the guests from last night’s ceremony were staying. The sooner I could escape this morning, the sooner I’d arrive at the summer writing camp where I would teach eager high school students, visit friends, and drink lime rickeys on a shady Southern porch.

But there was Sue, dressed in an ivory satin nightgown she’d doubtless bought for her honeymoon, rushing from door to door, tapping too softly to rouse the sleepers on the other side. She saw me coming and turned, twisting her heavily ringed hands. “I can’t wake up your father.”

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MY FATHER AND Sue had been seeing each other off and on for about six years, after meeting through Match.com. Dad was dating a lot in those days, enjoying the single life after he and my mother finally divorced. Each time my sister and I visited him, we had to be introduced to a new

girlfriend, indistinguishable from the others, middle-aged divorcees who laughed like roosters and wore too much makeup. Dad lived in a small town in Georgia, and the dating pool was shallow. He wanted someone to drink with and take to restaurants; then he could come home to his bachelor pad and watch Quentin Tarantino movies on his colossal flat screen. Let him have his fun, I thought. I met few of his girlfriends twice.

Except Sue. A widow, she had seen her first husband drop dead in front of her as they were gardening. Perhaps it was a stroke, or a heart attack; Sue never knew for sure. Despite her sunny blond hair and wry humor, the sadness of this loss hung over her. As we chatted, cooking dinners in Dad's kitchen, I'd occasionally notice her turning her mouth as if biting off a comment to a listener who wasn't there, or peering like an oracle into her wine glass. "She never got over him," Dad said. I think it endeared her to him; he knew this was a woman who loved deeply. Unlike the girlfriends who continually touched his arm with their French-tipped hands and brayed desperately at his every joke, Sue gave him a hard time, teased him about playing the same CD all night or drinking so much that he forgot to put the steaks on the grill. He'd laugh and give her a kiss as I looked down and scrubbed a pot.

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PEOPLE OFTEN CLAIM a kind of premonition at turning points in their lives. "As soon as I heard X, I knew," they begin. People say this, and it's a

cliché, but that doesn't make it untrue.

The hotel suite was dark. Like a Greek hero entering the underworld, I could already feel the old life, the sunlit world, falling behind. I was Eurydice in reverse, desperate to look back, change time, get in the car and drive far, far away from this room and the unmoving shape in the bed.

Too late. He lay heavily, an unnatural slump in his chest, a dusky blue tinge in his face. His cheeks seemed puffed out. A sheet covered his lower body; afterwards, when I could not stop replaying the moment, I guessed that Sue must've thrown the sheet over him, covering the nakedness of his wedding night, before seeking help. I touched his shoulder.

Knowing there was no need for an ambulance, I ran for an ambulance. Instead of using my cell or the room's phone a few inches away on the nightstand, I ran to the hotel front desk. Families eating breakfast in the lobby, in line to make fresh waffles, watched me sprint past. I am a runner; Dad and I used to do 5Ks together. I ran, but not as fast as I could have. Too late, too late for all that.

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I GOT MARRIED at 25, divorced at 31. At the time of my wedding, my parents had been married almost thirty years, but whatever bond once held them had long since corroded. They worked together on the

wedding plans and gamely posed for pictures, but at home, my younger sister reported, they rarely spoke to each other without some cut or harshness, usually from Dad. Two years later, when they finally split, I learned that Dad had been having an affair. Maybe he was already seeing this woman as he toasted me and my new husband, grinning and wearing the cap he'd ordered online. "Father of the Bride" read the swirly script surrounded by dollar signs.

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THE AMBULANCE IDLED in the parking lot; there was no rush. I gave the EMT his full name, date of birth, address. My voice was steady, for now. In my pocket I could feel the reassuring weight of a corkscrew. While the still-groggy wedding guests watched the EMTs load his body onto a gurney, I'd spotted it on a bedside table and, without thinking, palmed it. It was a pretty thing, inlaid with wood. Mahogany, maybe, or maple. A souvenir. "He just got married last night," I said.

"For real?" the EMT asked, then shook his head, permitted to say no more.

• • •

"ROLL TIDE!" I'd say when Dad picked up the phone. "Oh, Roll Tide!" he'd reply. I liked to call during halftimes of Alabama games, when

I knew he'd be home and, if the Tide was ahead, lightly buzzed and in a good mood. By that time I was divorced and living in Alabama, as did my mother, while Dad lived a hundred miles farther away in central Georgia. I knew he had been cruel to her, treating her with cold contempt for many years, deliberately driving her away; yet I'd always been my father's daughter. I visited on long weekends, and we'd watch bad action movies, eat fatty foods, drink wine, listen to Dylan. While I washed dishes, he'd sit on the patio, making phone calls to girlfriends. He'd quit smoking years before, but had secretly started up again, and we both pretended that I didn't see the glowing cherries or the butts in the clay chiminea. Sometimes girlfriends invited themselves over, and though he flirted and returned their little sweet nothings, he seemed more at ease when they left. If the girlfriend was Sue, she might spend the night, but then she went home again. Dad and I were alike, I thought; we both enjoyed our solitude too much to sacrifice it again.

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How DOES A man simply stop breathing? How does the body, that fine machine, fail to perform its most basic function? Pendulums swing; weathervanes point out the wind; yet the lungs and heart stop doing the only things they have ever done. How does the sleeping man just keep sleeping?

Sue wanted an autopsy; she never knew how her first husband

had died, and couldn't stand not knowing about her second. My sister and I numbly agreed. Within two days, the results came back: sleep apnea, with clear toxicology. What were we supposed to do with this? Dad had snored like a freight train, but sleep apnea? Hours after the ER doctor told us he was dead on arrival, my sister and I had torn through his medicine cabinets, looking for prescriptions that would reveal some diagnosis-- heart failure, cancer-- that he'd concealed from us. We'd found antidepressants, eyedrops, Viagra.

Sue was wrecked. Whatever the autopsy results, she would've been wrecked. "Early in the morning, he gave a funny kind of snore," she sobbed. "What if I'd woken him up? What if I'd kicked him, pushed him out of bed to wake him up?"

I had other suspicions: about the medical examiners, about rush jobs in the deep South, about lies that might be told to comfort a widow. I was a true-crime show junkie, and knew that toxicology reports took weeks, not two lazy summer days. Internet searches backed me up, and also told me sleep apnea was most common in men (check) who were older (check), overweight, and smoked (check check). Though sufferers might complain of sleeping poorly, they were usually unaware that their breathing stopped completely several times during the night. The condition is exacerbated by muscle relaxants and alcohol abuse.

Oh, the wedding night. How many glasses of wine had he downed? How many champagne toasts had he drunk? And then the late-night scotch and cigars by the pool. And then, Sue confessed, he'd asked

her for a Xanax when they went to bed. He usually took one to help him sleep-- he always had such trouble sleeping. We assured Sue that it wasn't her fault. Still, either the toxicology report was wrong, or the ME had told a well-intentioned lie. I managed not to pronounce this, but I nursed it, ground my teeth on it throughout the funeral and the days that followed. If he hadn't had so much to drink, hadn't taken that pill, he might have woken up.

On the worst days, I harbored another belief. If he hadn't gotten married, he would have lived. Marriage killed my father.

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I HAD BEEN married for only two years when my parents divorced, and I studied their negotiations and careful steps through the process. My marriage had a lot of problems, common ones-- poor communication, bad sex, depression, infidelity-- for which my ex and I both bore the blame. But one of the fundamental problems, I came to realize, was that I hated being married. I was just bad at it. I disliked sharing a space that he would inevitably disarrange, leaving a slippery pile of mail on the floor beside the coffee table, or failing to run water over dirty dishes in the sink, where melted cheese cemented between the tines of his forks. I hated adapting my schedule to his, making compromises, listening, sympathizing, giving in. There's a Seinfeld episode in which George, frustrated at his fiancée's requests for greater intimacy, complains, "Why

can't there be some things just for me? Is that so selfish?" "Actually," Jerry replies, "that's the definition of selfish." My husband once quoted those lines to me, and I didn't disagree. I was selfish, and miserable. After we divorced and I moved into a clean, bare apartment of my own, I missed a great many things about my husband, but my overwhelming emotion was relief.

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WHAT WONDERFUL, HORRIBLE luck to have so many pictures. Here's the whole family, Dad's and Sue's, arrayed before some shrubbery. Here's the bride in her champagne-colored cocktail dress. Here's my sister in black and white, me in purple, both of us as tall as Dad in our heels, standing on either side of him. He's in a black suit with a pale yellow tie. His face, always ruddy, looks flushed. I'm trying hard not to blink, but I almost always blink. Here's the couple before the ceremony; the white rose had fallen out of his boutonniere, leaving him with only a sprig of baby's breath pinned to his lapel. I'd run back to his hotel room to look for the rose, but couldn't find it. He didn't care.

Here's the champagne toast. Here's a kiss. Here he is with the best man, walking to the ceremony, impatient. The camera clicks on their backs as they walk away.

• • •

IN THE DAYS that followed our father's death, my sister and I lived in his house, cleaning out his refrigerator, closets, liquor cabinet. A spiral notebook beside his computer held addresses and passwords, most of them outdated. Underneath the notebook, in a crisp manila folder, was a printout of Sue's Match.com profile. Her smile in the small photo was shy, but hopeful. The date printed at the bottom of the page was 2004. He'd saved it, then recently dug it out again. Perhaps he was planning some romantic gesture, having it framed and presenting it as a gift. Perhaps he would simply have shown it to her, told her that he loved her, had always loved her.

• • •

AT THE CEREMONY, held on the patio of an upscale restaurant in Macon, I volunteered to run the music. This meant standing discreetly around the corner, behind the audience, close to where the wedding party would emerge to walk down the makeshift aisle; I could be helpful without joining either group. Dad had carefully selected the particular recording of the wedding march, some Vivaldi, the recessional by Mendelssohn.

But when I hit play, the wrong song came belting out of the CD. Flustered, I stabbed at the buttons while the audience chuckled. What the hell? Why were the songs out of order? Had his iTunes been set to shuffle when I burned the CD? I flushed and swore. Dad and Sue peeped around the corner, giggling and making faces of mock consternation, until

I finally found Wagner.

To soaring violin chords, they walked down the aisle, holding hands and smiling. No one would give them away; they gave themselves to each other. I queued up Vivaldi at the proper moment after the prayer, but midway through the song Dad gestured at me, cutting his fingers across his throat. The song was too long; he couldn't wait. When the minister began the vows—"Do you take this woman?"—Dad interjected with a booming "I do," and everyone laughed as the minister said that was fine, but there was more. Both of them were smiling and laughing, squeezing each other's hands.

Standing in the rear, holding my head high and my shoulders back, as Dad had instructed me when I was a little girl, I felt a smile on my own lips. It was early evening, hot; we were shaded, but the sun flared red off the Georgia dirt in the nearby lot. Soon we'd be inside, drinking wine in the private dining room, and Dad's reception playlist would sing to us from the speakers. He was proud of that playlist, had been working on it for months—Sinatra, Billie Holiday, Tony Bennett, Emmylou Harris, Elvis, Bobby Darin—no Dylan, at the bride's request, but a little Stones, a little Jerry Lee Lewis, just to keep it fun.

The minister told another joke—really, he could tone it down—and they kissed. I joined the audience for a few handclaps and hit the button for Mendelssohn, which lilted correctly over the applause. They walked past me, grinning like kids. I can't remember now whether Dad looked at me, or whether his eyes were fixed on his wife. He'd had his

teeth whitened; they gleamed like polished marble. The old man was so clearly, so palpably happy. He wouldn't remember my mistake with the CD, only that I'd been helpful and supportive on his wedding day. I'd pack up the CD player and stash it in Dad's car after the music finished. I wanted a glass of wine. I stood up straight and smiled. Yes, I agreed with some passing well-wisher, it was a lovely ceremony, a beautiful evening after all.