Cultural Daily

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On Weddings

Mollie Hawkins · Wednesday, May 18th, 2016

***PMS poemmemoirstory* is an all-women's literary journal published annually by the University of Alabama Birmingham. It proudly features the best literary writing by emerging and established women writers. The following story recently appeared in PMS. To order: Print Edition Kindle Edition**

I am the Diane Arbus of the wedding photography circuit. Only not dead, or famous, or rich, or married to that psychiatrist guy from MASH, and my family never owned a fur coat store in New York. But the photography part is strikingly similar; I enjoy taking black and white pictures of people being average. Here's a black and white photo of a bride with lipstick on her teeth. There's a photo of a groom peeing on a tree because he is drunk and can't find the bathroom. And right here, a bridesmaid putting a Band-Aid on her pinky toe because her stiletto rubbed it raw.

I don't know that Diane Arbus ever cared about the people in her portraits—a popular theory is that she exploited them—but I do know that I have unwavering apathy towards the subjects of mine.

Let's get this out of the way: I hate weddings.

I really do.

I dislike the frenzy, the churches, the smell of spray tans, the waiting around for the ceremony, the waiting around for the reception, the waiting around for "before" pictures an "after" pictures and "leaving in a spray of sparklers" pictures. I hate the ritual of it: the calculated and practiced dialogues spoken in front of people that would rather be at home watching Netflix or hanging out with their cats, because who really cares about your undying love to whomever?

No one. Except—maybe—your parents.

Half the time, the couples file for divorce before they even get their wedding albums back.

Maybe I'm just bitter. I am, after all, unmarried and in my late twenties, and I spent over a decade assisting a wedding photographer (Dad).

I am okay with this, for now. I don't own any cats (one dog), and I really enjoy having leftovers in my fridge from the meals I cook that are designed for at least two. Still, I have to wonder why I have this sour taste in my mouth for weddings. I don't care that most of my friends are married. They do OK. They invite me to dinner parties and we share. And I'm extremely happy that I do not have any children. But when I get an invitation to a wedding, my chest gets that shriveled-up feeling.

Here is my earliest memory of a wedding.

I am eight years old. The wedding has been cancelled. I'm standing at the bottom of thickly carpeted red stairs in a church foyer. I'm watching irritated florists carry ferns and plastic platforms through the front doors of the church and then back into the white Pell City Florist van.

I'm wearing a Sunday dress on a Saturday, and I want desperately not to be. I constantly tug at the

back of it, the horrible white and pink lace scratching my palms, because I live in constant fear that it will be tucked into my underwear.

See, my mother's voice will follow me to every bathroom I will ever enter, until I die, shaking her finger at me and telling me how idiotic I would look showing the world my underwear. "You would look like an idiot," she'd say, "you don't want the world seeing your business, do you? No one wants to see that, fix your dress," her face twisted and stern. I am a very nervous eight year old, and my dress staying in the downright position is as important as getting voted homecoming queen of my third grade class.

There will be no wedding, and all I can think about is the food in the basement of the church, steaming away inside chrome serving dishes, with fat drops of condensation racing to a white tablecloth monogrammed with the initials "LGR".

My eight-year-old brain wonders: will they get a refund on all that monogrammed stuff?

The bride's name is Renee. She is the preacher's daughter. I see her in flashes: blonde hair perfectly in place but mascara and eyeliner black around her eyes. She has just been dumped for another woman. I'm here because my parents work for this church, both as teachers for the attached K-12 private school where my sister and I attend. Later in life I will think only of this church/school as a brainwashing scam used to fund the preacher's mansion on the lake.

Anyway, I'm eight years old and I don't understand the implications of losing someone. I find my mother buzzing around the sanctuary, helping take down flowers and unity candles. "What's happened to the wedding?" I ask loudly. "When's the reception?" All I care about is the food. I really just want some meatballs on toothpicks and some cake, and some of that fruit punch with all the sugar. "Hush," my mother hisses at me, her pursed lips a warning. She looks around the sanctuary to make sure my voice doesn't carry to the bride, who is wandering around, trying to find the number of her stylist. She has to tell her to take the day off.

My cheeks turn red. I am suddenly embarrassed for myself, and my constant craving for rich foods, but I am always just so *hungry* and so *bored.* As it was, I was tempting the limits of the zipper in my dress.

I didn't care that I was fat, not yet, but it was in the mail.

After a few hours, all that's left of the would-be wedding is a garish and grotesque white blob of a centerpiece that will sit on our family table until the white rose petals dry up and drift onto my dinner plate.

"They were such great centerpieces," my mother says with a touch of sadness. "It's such a shame."

* * *

Seventeen years later, I am standing in nylons and a blue pencil skirt inside the chapel of a church in Birmingham that I don't remember the name of, a Nikon D40 hanging heavy around my neck, digging red lines into my skin. I'm being paid $200 to take pictures as the "second shooter" for my dad's wedding photography business.

I've helped my dad shoot weddings since I was 15. At first I really, really tried to capture the great moments. The smile as the groom waited for his bride to walk down the aisle. The glisten of the knife as it sliced through the silky white cake for the first time, abstracting it onto the plate like a tooth. Then the laughter, the dancing, the merriment.

Then I realized: that's what my dad was taking pictures of. He didn't need double photographs of "the great moments," so I started focusing on everything else.

Here, a group of grandmas shoveling cake into their lipstick-smeared mouths. There, kids crying on pews with their tiny suits ruffled and untucked. This is wedding number 176, or 200, or 237. I've lost count. Bride number three-hundred-whatever is crying into her embroidered handkerchief monogrammed with the initials "CHB".

I hate monograms.

“I never thought this day would come,” Bride number whatever tells me as I adjust the veil around the black curls cemented to her scalp.

I resent my dad for making me adjust veils and fluff out dresses and hunt down the ever-scattered, ever-drunk wedding party. “Am I making my mascara run? Does it look okay?” She stares at me underneath pounds of concealer and eyeshadow.

“You look just fine,” I say, and step back to take a candid photo as she blows happy snot into her handkerchief before wrapping it around the multicolored bouquet, thick as a tree trunk. What I really want to say is, *You look fantastically mediocre, I really just want to eat the food you catered.*

But I don’t.

I smile instead.

I use the flash more than necessary.

During the reception, the bride leans over to kiss her groom in a pose, and I am squatting behind them holding a trigger flash. My dad swears by this technique. I hate it because it bruises my knees. She whispers dreamily to her groom, “Aren’t you glad we finally did this?” and he shrugs.

My dad does not hate weddings, and he is either a saint or a moron. He quit teaching when I was in middle school and started photographing them full-time. He was really good at it; he won national awards and international awards, Kodak awards and Fuji awards. He gets excited about splashes of color on bridesmaids dresses and the way the light falls over someone’s hair. He loves the way people laugh and dance and celebrate.

He doesn’t get tired of the same stupid songs, or the boring rituals, and he uses terms of endearment like *Bee-yew-tee-mus!* or *Now we’re cooking with Crisco!* when he gets particularly great shots.

He floats around on a cloud of joy while I sit in a pew and wait for flower girls to start crying or pick their nose.

That shit is worth remembering.

Mollie Hawkins’ memoir piece, “On Weddings” first appeared in PoemMemoirStory 2016. Photo by the author.

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