

Wedding Dance

Anna and Phillip joined the group of guests waiting on a rocky point jutting out over Horsetooth Reservoir. With their backs to the lake, the middle-aged bride and groom looked to Anna as though they were either miraculously standing on the surface of the silver-blue waves or in serious danger of falling backward into the water and drowning. Anna leaned over to whisper in her husband's ear. The irony of the scene in front of them, what it said about marriage, was too much to keep to herself. But Phillip pulled away, quieting her with a stern look and a finger to his lips.

The Justice of the Peace took her place behind the bride and groom who turned to face their guests. Oh, Anna thought, this is going to be one of *those* weddings, with the couple on display, the ceremony designed as much to impress the guests as to show the couple's commitment to each other. Anna was not really surprised. It was a second marriage for both, and, as was the case in many second weddings Anna had witnessed, every effort had been made for this wedding to be completely different from any previous ceremonies either might have participated in. Though Anna had known these two since before their first marriages, she would never have put them together as a couple.

Anna shook her head. What brought two people together in the first place? Take her and Phillip. When they had met fifteen years ago, Anna was a month away from finishing her Ph.D. in art history at Colorado State. After that she hoped to run a gallery of her own somewhere, anywhere really, maybe even lots of different places before she settled down. Phillip, on the other hand, had graduated with his masters the previous year and immediately signed a long-term contract as a computer programmer with Hewlett Packard in Fort Collins. He planned on staying there until the day he retired. How did two people wanting such different things from life end up

married? Anna had often asked herself since then. She was increasingly sure Phillip wondered that, too.

Just that afternoon, when the time came to get ready for the wedding, Anna found herself reluctant to go. It was only the middle of June, and already she and Phillip had been to three weddings. It wasn't buying the presents or getting dressed up on Saturday afternoons that bothered her. It was the taste each one left in her mouth. Like old popcorn. Or soured milk. Definitely something stale.

"Better get a move on," Phillip said when he noticed she was just lying on the bed staring at the ceiling when she was supposed to be getting dressed. Anna rolled her eyes in response. Phillip frowned. "You're the one who accepted the invitation," he said.

Yes, Anna thought. That was what she did. She bought the presents and wrapped them, too. Phillip just showed up. Anna turned on her side to watch as he deftly flipped his tie this way and that until amazingly the fabric sported a neat half-Windsor knot. How many times had she seen him do that? Anna wondered. Certainly more than she could count. And each time he seemed to do the task without thinking, the same approach he took with so many things. Cooking a meal. Ironing a shirt. Working on the computer. And talking to her. As far as Anna could tell he did them all on autopilot.

Phillip complained Anna worked too hard at life. "Can't we just relax and have fun," he said, "like we did before we were married?" Fun doesn't just happen, Anna explained to him. Fun had to be planned. Arrangements had to be made. Schedules synchronized. As far as Anna was concerned, the same was true of marriage. An effort had to be made. A relationship like that wouldn't just take care of itself. You couldn't mindlessly go through the motions and expect bliss.

For a minute, Anna thought about not going to the wedding, of sending Phillip by himself. But then she remembered she had agreed to help a friend with the food. And not going would

make her a hypocrite. People had come to their wedding all those years ago. The least she could now do was return the favor.

The bride read the inscription etched inside the groom's ring. *As this gold circles your finger, my heart encircles you.* The groom answered with the words inside the bride's ring: *Circles are endless, as will be our love.* People went to such trouble trying to create the perfect ceremony, especially the vows. Anna cringed remembering that she and Phillip had been no different. Eighteen months after meeting, they had traveled from Colorado to Missouri to be married in Anna's parents' backyard. The setting was meant as both a rejection of tradition and a declaration of their love of the outdoors. Holding hands under a rented canopy, she and Phillip said in unison, *Love that endures respects all things, accepts all things, ignores the call of self, and places the relationship above all else.*

How sad, Anna thought. Why didn't couples make vows that would actually help? *We promise not to complain when our partner forgets to do something we've asked them to do a hundred times. We promise not to take every word our partner says as a verbal attack or intentional criticism. We promise to notice five positive characteristics about our partner for every negative one. We promise not to run from the union the first time things seem to be going wrong.* How different marriages might be, Anna thought, if couples prepared for the realities rather than starting off with promises no one could keep.

The ceremony ended with a kiss. The guests applauded. Phillip held Anna's elbow as they followed the bride and groom down the sloping rocky trail to a grass-covered clearing where the reception was to be held. "Watch out for rattlesnakes," he said.

Though she knew he meant well, Anna bristled at Phillip's protectiveness, heat flooding her face. "You go ahead," she told him. "I'm helping with the food."

Phillip held onto her arm as she turned to go. "Dance with me?" he said with a hesitant smile. His words did little to ease Anna's general irritation. She pulled her arm away. "Okay," Phillip said, his smile gone. "Have it your way. I'll catch up with you later."

Anna searched the guests for the woman she was supposed to work with, a good friend from college who had taken a job at the University of Colorado in Boulder. Even though she was only a ninety-minute drive away, they hadn't seen each other in two years. "Marian," Anna called when she saw her. They greeted each other with a hug.

"Can you believe we're doing this?" Marian said with a laugh. "I haven't been in a wedding in ages."

"I know," Anna said. "I've got friends whose kids are getting married. Talk about feeling old."

"We're not old. Just mellowing. Like wine."

"Or tobacco," Anna said. "About to go up in smoke." They both laughed. The immediate intimacy Anna felt with her friend made her give Marian a second hug.

"It's pretty amazing," Marian said.

"Us?"

"No, them." Marian nodded toward the newlyweds. "Think you'd take a chance on getting married twice? Not me. Been there. Done that. Divorce, too. All finished with that part of my life."

"But I thought you were happier now," Anna said.

"I am," Marian answered. "It just isn't easy, that's all."

"Like being married is?"

Marian turned to face Anna. "Don't tell me things are bad for you and Phillip."

"I didn't say that," Anna said finding a place for her purse under one of the tables. "I just

said it's not easy. Some days more than others."

"Today, for instance?"

Anna nodded. A part of her was ready to confide in her friend the way she once had, knowing she would find the attention and concern that was too often missing in her conversations with Phillip.

"Oh, it's nothing," Anna said instead. "Everyday things." What kept her from sharing her frustrations with Marian? Anna wondered. A sorrow shared is cut in half, Anna's mother had always said, and Anna knew it was true. She remembered many nights spent sitting cross-legged on dorm room beds or apartment couches with friends sharing the details of a disappointing grade or a miserable date. Having someone listen had made all the difference. But even more so, the wanting to know the details of each other's lives had mattered. That was what was missing in her relationship with Phillip. And now Anna had become so used to his lack of interest in what was going on in her interior life, she had learned to stop herself before going that far, even with someone who wanted to know.

Marian turned and swept a hand over the food on the table, cold meats and whole wheat buns for sandwiches, potato salad, baked beans, sliced tomatoes and cucumbers, three homemade cakes, each a different flavor. "Did you ever think these two would have a spread like this?" Marian said. "If anybody could afford a fancy catered affair, it would be them." She glanced up at the sky. "Hope the weather holds out."

Anna looked, too. Gray clouds were gathering on the western horizon, not unusual for a summer afternoon on the Front Range. "Maybe it won't come this way," she said.

Marian shaded her eyes with one hand. "I hope not. I doubt that was part of their oh-so-carefully-planned wedding."

"Things like that never are," Anna said, recalling her own wedding again. Her mother had insisted she and Phillip marry in June. Anna's father reminded his wife that the Midwest could be insufferably hot and humid even in early summer. "Then get married indoors," her mother had suggested more than once. "At our church. The stained-glass windows would make such a nice backdrop for your pictures."

Anna stood her ground, and once the invitations were sent there was no turning back, even when the first two weeks of June were the hottest and most humid in years. She and Phillip got married outside. Then immediately afterward everyone crowded into her parents' air-conditioned house for the reception, abandoning the rented tables and chairs to the flies and gnats and steamy air.

Marian looked up from arranging plates and napkins. "You're remembering your reception, aren't you? Don't forget, I was there, too. Stuck in a corner of the kitchen with your aunt. It was so crowded I couldn't take a step forward or back. That woman could really talk." Putting her arm around Anna, Marian said, "That's a good memory. One to pull out of the drawer when things get a bit rough."

Then she looked out over the wedding guests. "Say, where's that husband of yours? There's going to be a band, you know. And get this. They're doing folk dances. Lessons first then dancing." Marian spotted Phillip and gently pushed Anna in his direction. "Go on. Enjoy. I'll handle this. We'll talk more later."

A circle of guests had formed around the bride and groom to witness their first dance together as husband and wife, a slow waltz. Anna watched Phillip instead. He was talking to a young man she didn't know. Probably work, Anna thought. Phillip had his business face on, the one where he pulled his eyebrows tightly together to indicate great interest in what the other person said. When he tried that move on Anna after she had said he never paid attention when she

talked, all Anna could think of was how he had once told her the tighter his brows, the less he was really listening. Her telling him so had only led to another fight.

"How am I supposed to look?" Phillip had shouted at her in exasperation. "We've been saying the same things to each other for years." And he had been right. There was nothing new in their arguments. In fact, their disagreements were usually so dispirited they could hardly be called arguments anymore.

They had tried counseling. The first therapist couldn't get past the sullen silence Phillip and Anna brought to each session. The second refused to see them as a couple without individual therapy first, a journey neither Phillip or Anna was willing to take at the time. Not because they saw no reason for such work. Both were sure there were valuable insights to be gained. But to make the first move. That was the rub. For one of them to step beyond the impasse where they currently stood, trusting the other would follow. That was a risk neither had been willing to take at the time. Better they remained as they were than to take a chance on change that might not lead to the intended result.

The newlyweds finished their dance. An announcement was made about the lessons. The first dance would be a polka. Anna looked toward Phillip. He seemed to be searching for her as well. When their eyes met, Anna's first inclination was to make a face at him to indicate how silly she thought the whole thing was. Another wedding gimmick. Something stopped her, though. Once she had loved to dance. Phillip, too. Before they were married not a weekend went by they weren't out dancing at a club or a party at someone's house. It had been one of the few things they had in common. As Anna neared, Phillip held out his hand. Together, they took their place with the other couples waiting for the lesson to begin.

A man and woman dressed in Germanic folk costumes explained the steps then demonstrated the movements without music. “It is easy,” the woman said in a heavily-accented voice.

“Think that’s real?” Anna whispered to Phillip.

“Maybe not,” he whispered back. “Does it matter?” He turned his attention again to the lesson.

“Now with music,” the man said. The band leader counted out the time, and the polka began. The couple skipped and turned, skipped and turned, circling the clearing in the grass. After two times around, they waved at those watching to join in.

“Just follow us,” the woman called out.

“Come on,” Phillip said. He waited for an opening in the circling couples and pulled Anna into the line. At first all either of them could do was watch their feet. But that led to problems avoiding the couple in front of them. “You watch our feet. I’ll look ahead,” Phillip directed. That seemed to help. Now they were moving in unison with the other couples.

“I think I’m getting this,” Anna said. “Just don’t get any ideas about leading all the time.”

“It’s a dance,” Phillip said. Anna looked up and saw the seriousness in his eyes as he maneuvered them around the clearing. When he realized she was watching him, his face colored. “What are you looking at?” he said.

“You.”

“Don’t start, Anna,” he said. “Please.” It was the *please* that kept Anna from going on. She looked at Phillip again. They, too, had taken the first dance at their wedding. It wasn’t until after dark, when the backyard had finally become tolerable again. Under the strings of lights, they danced a waltz learned earlier that week in the basement of Anna’s parents’ house, her mother teaching.

“A waltz is always appropriate,” she had said, showing them the steps. “It’s what your father and I danced at our wedding.” Anna and Phillip tried the dance while Anna’s mother counted. “One-two-three. One-two-three.” After half an hour of their missteps and confusion, she said to Anna, “Not too fast. Let it flow.” To Phillip she said, “Leading means you must pay more attention.” His face had shown the same concentration then that Anna saw now.

“Relax, Phillip,” Anna said, smiling up at her husband. “It’s just a dance.”

Phillip looked down at her, tensely searching her face for several seconds. “Close your eyes,” he said.

“What? I’ll be all over your feet in no time.”

“Close your eyes,” Phillip said again. Anna looked up. He meant what he said.

“Okay. But if we fall down it’s going to be like dominos.” Phillip still did not smile. Anna closed her eyes. She saw their feet in her mind and found herself counting under her breath.

“Relax,” Phillip whispered into her ear, his grip on her hand loosening. Anna stumbled. She tried letting the music fill her mind to take her thoughts off her feet. It wasn’t so hard if she concentrated on one phrase at a time. As she listened, they began to stumble less. The notes seemed to travel down to her feet, moving them in rhythm with Phillip’s. Suddenly Anna felt like they were floating, like the weight of their bodies was being carried not by either one of them but by the music and the motion of the other couples circling the field.

Anna opened her eyes to look at Phillip and was surprised to see him smiling down at her. “It’s amazing, isn’t it?” he said. Anna nodded and closed her eyes, the two of them seemingly bouyed by the notes of the clarinet and accordion as they went around the clearing again and again.

Above them the sky continued to fill with clouds. In another half hour, heavy rain would fall. Everyone would hurry to their cars, clothes soaked by the sudden downpour. It was a

wedding most would recall for the beautiful and unusual setting, the down-home food, the unplanned ending. Anna would remember dancing.