

## At Least There'll Be Cake

I met Greg at Long Beach Island, Jersey, in September. The weather was getting cooler so there weren't many people around. I used to go when I was young, with my father. We would bring blankets and hot chocolate. He brought books of poetry and read his favorite ones out loud. We picked words we thought were beautiful and drew them in the sand with our hands. When my father died I vowed to carry on this tradition alone, and it had been running strong for five years.

It was in the midst of this ritual when Greg came over and sat down. He interrupted my meditation cheerfully, and too loudly. I wasn't eager to get to know him, but I did. I was moved by the spirit of my father, who was always open to new people, new experiences.

At first he annoyed me – just little things, like how he would click his tongue when he didn't know what to say. But six months later we were married; one morning I woke up and I loved him. Then another morning, six years later with a four year old girl, I didn't anymore.

Maybe it was because he worked ten hour shifts for minimum wage because he never went to college even though he could have. Maybe it was because he never told me I was pretty anymore; never even looked at me twice. Maybe it was because he hadn't made me laugh since Annabelle's third birthday. Maybe it was because we hadn't had sex in two years.

Maybe it just went sour.

That night I drank a glass of merlot. Then another, and another, and just one more for good luck. And I went to bed. But before I fell asleep I turned to my husband;

“I don’t love you anymore.”

Then there was silence. A silence that pressed on my eardrums with surprising force, threatening deafness.

And then: “I know.”

Another silence – but soft, relieved.

“I’m sorry.” I said, my throat tight.

“Me too.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. I remembered wanting him. I remembered the chills that used to run up and down my spine because of him. I remembered what his lips felt like.

I remembered being happy.

I got a blanket and slept on the couch.

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One morning, a year after the divorce papers were signed and the custody worked out, another woman – Beth – woke up and loved Greg too. A year later and it brings us to today: June 10th. A save the date notice taped to the side of my refrigerator, a picture of the smiling couple glaring back at me in contempt.

It's days like these that I think about my mother. As a therapist, there was no shortage of "advice". When I was younger it bothered me more than I care to admit, but after her death two years after my fathers, I found myself missing it. Even now, I can hear her as if she were alive and sitting me down, using her "gentle voice":

"Isabelle, it's okay. Sometimes we love. And we learn. And we move on."

As a fourteen year old girl getting over her first break up, I did not handle the kind comment with grace. But as an almost forty year old divorcee looking at the invitation to my ex-husbands wedding, I needed to hear it more than anything.

And I needed to focus on the "moving on" part.

But "moving on" does not entitle going. And I was not going to go. Under no circumstance was I going to be anywhere near that place of matrimony. No way. But then... Annabelle cried. A lot. And would not stop until I promised I would go with her. She even went so far as to say she would refuse to go if I wasn't with her. Thus a circumstance grew that forced me to reconsider my priorities. And it was touching, really. I also knew that Greg would be eternally wounded if Annabelle was not at his wedding – add insult to injury when he finds out it's my fault; so I decided to go. When I called to R.S.V.P. I tried to deal with the disappointment in Beth's voice with poise, but it was difficult.

"Hello?" She answered mid laugh – a noise that made my stomach churn.

"Hi, Beth, it's Isabelle." I sighed, resigned, into the phone.

"Oh, hi." The sound of laughter stopped there.

“So, um, I’m calling to R.S.V.P. to the wedding.” I tried to imagine myself five years from now, with my sexy twenty year old boyfriend, laughing about this. I tried not to think about the negative possibility of having a sexy twenty year old boyfriend.

“Oh, yes, for little Annabelle?”

“For me, too, actually. Both of us.”

“Oh?” Her voice was strained. High pitched. I could picture her losing her shit over this.

“Yes, she really wants me to go.” Should I apologize? The thought made me want to throw something.

The silence from the other line was taught. Hard. Formidable. Would it be considered rude to hang up the phone now?

“Right.” She said, the word crisp and swift. “I’ll write you both in. See you then.”

“Okay. Remember not to let the groom see you in your dress. Greg saw me in mine and look where we are now.” What? Why did I say that?

Beth said nothing. What could she have said? That was probably the dumbest thing I ever did.

“Ha-ha. Just kidding. Bye.” I said in a vain attempt to salvage any kind of peaceful co-existing relationship we could have had. I hung up the phone before she could figure out something to say.

But did she really think that I wanted to go? To see her expressing love to a man that once did the same to me? To see her marrying the father of my child? I hoped she wasn't so naïve.

I chose to wear black; I've heard it's a slimming color. Annabelle was graced with the job of flower girl and wanted to wear a princess dress – like a Disney princess dress, like a Cinderella princess dress – but she wasn't allowed. Beth wouldn't have it in a million years. She wouldn't want her wedding to be a “joke”.

Unable to avoid the unavoidable any longer, together we shuffled out of the house, heads bowed, neither of us in a princess dress. With the thought of “moving on” in my mind, I tried not to look like I was dreading this wedding more than anything in the whole world.

“It's not so bad, mom,” Annabelle said, her newly six year old wisdom shining through, “at least there'll be cake.”