

After the Wedding

Hank dropped wearily into the Adirondack chair outside the wedding tent. He pulled off his bow tie and stuffed it in the pocket of his tux. Zoe kicked off her rose satin pumps and wiggled her toes. From inside they could hear the band starting to put away their instruments, and the clatter of the caterer's staff piling trays, packing away china and glassware.

"Thank god, they're almost all gone," Hank said

"Well, that's that. It was a beautiful wedding." Zoe stretched her legs. He noticed the run in her stocking. "Marina seemed happy with everything."

"Why the hell not? It cost enough to buy a battleship. Anyway, I still don't get it. Why all the hoopla? They've been living together for six years. Especially . . ." He stopped himself. What was the use?

The night air was cool, and a half moon cast a soft light across the lawn. Hank sighed. "Not the wedding I always thought we'd make for her. I need a drink." With a soft grunt he pulled himself out of the chair and wandered into the tent, emerging a few minutes later with a half-empty bottle of scotch and two paper cups. Zoe's eyes were closed. He stood for a moment, looking at her. Still a damned good-looking woman.

She opened her eyes, and he handed her a cup.

“They packed all the glassware already. Would you believe there are still a few people hanging out near the bar? Probably too drunk to get up and find their cars.”

They sipped their drinks quietly, accepting the thanks and congratulations of a couple who straggled out of the tent. Hank recognized the man as one of the partners in Eliza’s law firm, but couldn’t remember his name. “Beautiful wedding,” the woman said.

“That Eliza, she looked gorgeous. Great couple,” the man said, The man, his voice slurred with alcohol and fatigue. He staggered a little as they turned to find their car.

Zoe smoothed the skirt of her rose satin dress. There was a dark splotch on the front, like one of those psychiatry inkblots. Oh well, Hank thought, she said she’d never wear it again. Too mother-of-the-bride. And he sure as hell would never put one of these monkey suits on again. The shiny rented shoes pinched his bunions.

The caterer approached them, exhaustion burned into his eyes. His white jacket was flecked with food stains. “We’re about ready to pull out. I’ll send some of my guys back for the tent and tables in the morning. I hope you were pleased with everything?”

Zoe smiled. “The food was delicious. Everyone raved about the tournedos.”

The caterer looked pleased. “Eliza was great to work with, she knows just what she wants. And she’s got good taste. She was a beautiful bride. And so was . . .” his hesitation was barely perceptible, “the other bride.”

“Yeah,” Hank said. He wanted to be in his bed, wanted this night to end. He held out his hand for the piece of paper the caterer was holding.

“That’s the balance. If you don’t mind, I’ll take a check now. Gotta cover the checks for my staff.”

Hank put his cup on the arm of the chair and leaned forward to peer at the bill just as the lights went out. "Uh oh," the caterer said, "I hope they didn't short anything out when they were packing up. I've got a flashlight in the truck, I'll get it." Hank watched him walk away and wondered: why do they all have to walk like that?

"Christ, did you see that bill? Fourteen thousand, after all we already paid him."

"You knew what it was going to be, don't make a scene. We've got the money," Zoe said. He felt her watching him nervously as the caterer came back, following the beam of a big flashlight.

Hank took the light and examined the bill. "Christ. When my wife and I got married it cost \$2,000 for everything. Flowers, musicians, everything."

"And Hershey bars cost five cents and beer was a quarter. That was forty years ago," Zoe said. "And don't forget to tell him how you walked three miles barefoot in the snow to get to school."

The caterer laughed and leaned forward to shine the flashlight on Hank's hand as he wrote the check. Hank could smell garlic and something else, rosemary, maybe, coming from his skin. As he handed over the check the lights came back on.

"Well, that's over," he said, as the caterer walked away. "Shit, Zo, I didn't think it would be like this." He finished his scotch and refilled the paper cup.

She took a deep breath. "Don't go there. Not tonight." Through the haze of alcohol he was aware of tears slipping down her cheeks. Zoe didn't cry often. He ticked off the occasions: when her mother died, when the doctor confirmed that her father's forgetfulness was Alzheimer's. She'd cried through her perfectly applied bridal makeup, leaving trails on her

cheeks that made him want to lick them off. She'd shed tears of anxiety when four year old Eliza's fever was so high that she'd had a seizure. She'd cried sitting on Laura's bed after Laure left for college, the closet emptied, dresser drawers open with nothing but single socks and torn underwear left behind. And at Laura's wedding. Why the hell did women cry at weddings?

Laura came out of the house. "I can't get the baby to sleep. Ray's walking her for a while. Too much excitement, I guess, all the new faces and the music. How're you holding up?" She leaned over and kissed her mother's forehead. "You look gorgeous, mom."

Hank looked at his younger daughter. Laura. Poor Laura. Couldn't have been much fun being Eliza's younger sister. Always in her shadow. Worked hard to do things that Eliza just tossed off. Still, she was crazy about her big sister. When they were small, if someone offered them a new food, she would ask "Do we like that, Eliza?" Laura was usually picked last for team sports; Eliza had trophies for soccer and swimming. After college she married Ray, a reliable, nice guy, maybe a little short on humor. Two years later she presented them with Marissa, who, Hank acknowledged only to himself, was a blotchy baby with wispy hair sticking out from her mostly bald scalp as if she'd had chemo. Zoe thought she was beautiful.

Hank would always remember the night Eliza had come out to them. It was a few days after she graduated from Penn. He'd refused to talk about it, other than to say she'd get over it, that probably this was just a reaction to a guy who'd shafted her or something like that. But Zoe believed her and wanted to understand better. He remembered Zoe coming home from a meeting of PFLAG and saying that it had felt like a pep rally. She read books Eliza had

recommended, looked at websites Eliza had told her about. At the office, his door tightly closed, Hank ventured onto an internet chat room for parents of gay men and lesbians, but was turned off by the self-righteous response one unhappy mother got from another who saw herself as “evolved.” He spent hours thinking about Eliza as a little girl, wondering if he’d been a bad influence in some way, tried to make her too much like him. In a household of females, where he’d quickly learned always to put the seat down, he’d longed for someone to sweat out Red Sox games with him, to celebrate when Rpgger Clemens was named Most Valuable Player. He remembered buying her a catcher’s mitt and hurling increasingly fast balls as she squatted on the lawn, the knees of her jeans stained with grass. While Zoe stayed at home with baby Laura, he and Eliza had taken arduous hikes, slugging down warm root beer and eating peanut butter sandwiches. He’d taught her how to wrestle, tumbling around the family room until Zoe yelled at them to stop. And then, when she was twelve, she had backed off, started to take more interest in clothes than in baseball. He’d hear her giggling secretively on the telephone, and started to spend more time in her room. Maybe he should have tried harder not to show how disappointed he was, how lonely he felt without her easy knock-about presence.

Yet everything he read assured him that he was not responsible. The books asserted that if a girl had the unqualified love of the person who was the most important man in her childhood it would help her to make a good adjustment as a heterosexual woman. We’ll, she sure as hell had gotten plenty of unqualified love from him. Fat lot of good it had done.

Sometimes Zoe would complain. “You worship that child,” she’d say. She would urge him to do things with Laura: You’ve got two daughters, Hank. Well, he’d tried. He’d played endless games of Candyland and Chutes and Ladders, followed by Monopoly, at which Laura

had an agonizing time deciding which properties to buy. Mostly she wanted to play pretend games like princess or school, but after a few minutes he would lose interest and retreat to his workshop, claiming he had work to do for his latest project.

“It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it,” Laura said, squatting down in front of them.

“You guys both look wonderful. And wasn’t Eliza a gorgeous bride!”

“It’s a good thing the wedding wasn’t a month later, she’d be showing,” Zoe said.

Laura stiffened. “What do you mean?”

“Didn’t she tell you? I thought for sure you knew . . .”

“You’re saying she’s pregnant and she didn’t even tell me?”

“Oh, honey,” Zoe said, reaching for Laura’s hand. “She was so busy with everything—the wedding and work and all . . . and maybe she wanted to tell you in person.”

Laura stood up and stepped back from them. “She could have called or emailed. She must have known we wouldn’t have time to talk before the wedding. And I was having such a hard time getting the baby settled, and then all the guests started arriving . . . Damn, I wish someone had told me.”

Zoe rose and put her arms around Laura. “We’ve only known for a week. Apparently they’ve been doing all this sperm bank research and arguing over desirable characteristics. And then she said the first try didn’t take.”

Laura pulled away from Zoe and laughed bitterly. “You mean Eliza actually failed at something? But I guess now she’ll produce a wonder baby with all the right genes. The next president, or the person who’ll find the cure for cancer.”

Hank could see that Laura was on the verge of crying. She turned and walked back toward the house, her shoulders hunched, her arms wrapped around herself.

“Go after her, Hank,” Zoe said. “How about if for once you reach out to that girl?”

He sighed. “She’ll be all right. Eliza will talk to her when she gets back and make it okay. I’d just, I don’t know, muddy the waters.” He wanted to hold Laura and wipe her tears and tell her he was sorry he hadn’t been a better father. He wanted to say it’s okay, I don’t even care if Eliza has a boy, the boy I always wanted. I’ll play Candyland with Marissa and read her books about fairy princesses and she can be the mommy or the teacher or whatever the hell she wants. I’ll make it up to you. And if Eliza’s son has the genes of a goddam genius or somethin, and he never cries and throws a ball like Sandy Koufax used to, it won’t change anything, because she broke my heart.

But he knew that he’d never say those things, because they weren’t true. He knew that at some point he would hold his arms out to Eliza and tell her, come here, babe, and give your old man a hug.