

## *The Wedding Party*

I'd moved into Ernie Prewitt's basement room for thirty-five dollars a week. He was a mechanic at the marina where I worked, and he'd set me up with a cot nestled between his worktable and an array of props and grease-blackened engine parts. My fiancée was living in our apartment with her sister, though they meant to move inland, she told me. Here, there was a transom-cracked skiff laid down and propped underside up against the far wall with a few dried-up barnacles still in a crowd on the hull. There was a single light: a hanging bulb and a chain, which rattled from Ernie's footsteps through the ceiling. The floor was unvarnished cement and cold and damp during the heavier rains. Sometimes, Ernie's wife had leftover dinners, which she would leave for me in foil at the back door.

In the evenings, I went to drink at this no-place, seaside bar called Renny's Yard, where the wood-paneled walls were decorated with old harpoons and paddles and green glass fishing floats in sacks of netting. A paling of liquor bottles lined the mirror-backed bar and seemed to double by its reflection. This night, as the sun went to a drab little ruby and slipped, still glowing, into the ocean, a wedding party showed up. I noticed them come in, all sunburnt and raw-eyed from the ocean water. They bought their drinks and set up in the corner by the shuffleboard and the twin pool tables and broke into a few groups, except for one young woman who trailed off aimlessly toward the bar. She wore a little coral swimsuit cover-up and her bikini straps up, back, and tied behind her neck and her black hair pinned messily. The way she looked was something I felt in my guts. Her face was as small and round and as delicate, it seemed, as a bowl, which you might turn up in your hands and drink from. And before the shame of all my life could well up in me, as it usually did on such occasions, she came over and said, "You wanna buy a maid of honor something to drink?" So we sat there for a while and got drunk on vodka sodas.

She told me her little sister was getting married tomorrow. She asked if I could believe that, and I said that I could. "She's beautiful, isn't she?" the maid of honor said. A couple of the guys she'd come with noticed her talking with me, and they seemed to discuss this a bit before losing interest and returning to their games. "Over there," she said. "See that

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guy—the one with the hair? See that guy they’re all crowded around? That’s her fiancé.” She took a drink and then rolled the ice cubes around in the glass and saw that the drink was finished. “He kissed me once,” she said. “Back when him and Jen just started dating. Funny, huh?” She put her elbow on the bar and dropped her chin down into her upward palm and looked at me as though I’d have something to say about that.

You should have seen her, how young and how like a TV lover she looked, her skin lucent in that blue light from the neon beer sign mounted behind the bar. My fiancée had cystic fibrosis, which was why she was so small, and which was why she’d had me, in the mornings, beat on her back with my open hands to knock the mucus loose from her lungs. What a vision of love, I thought. Her hollow little body, her naked back, thumped like a drum in the paleness of the morning. And when, after she’d woken, she first spoke, her voice passed as softly through the room as the shadow of a bird. I knew from the start that I would outlive her, even as she and I sat on the linoleum in the cold light of an open refrigerator door and drank champagne from mugs. The most lonesome thought of my whole life is that someday, like a stranger, I will hear it through the grapevine that she’s died.

“What’s your name?” I asked the maid of honor.

She looked at me with this bored expression that sliced right through me. “Do you have any cigarettes?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Let me have one.” She hopped up from the stool, and I followed her out through to the patio, which was strung with strands of white Christmas lights. A Springsteen song was coming from a set of speakers by the hedges, and an ashtray sat on a metal-mesh table, giving off the last few wisps of a dying cigarette, which somebody had forgotten there.

“I don’t smoke,” she said. “But I feel like one right now.” I gave her a cigarette and lit it for her and lit one for myself. “Not that I care if you think I smoke or not.”

“All right.”

From there, we could see her party through the window. All of them were carrying on without her. Her sister really was pretty too. She looked to be one of the last sober members of the party, standing on the sidelines of a game of darts. The rest of them looked joyful and disarrayed, amused at the poorness of their aim at darts and pool. I sat on a bench by the door, and the maid of honor plopped down onto my lap. She asked me what I did for a living, and then she said I’d need to make more money if I was ever going to marry her.

I told her I didn’t think that we’d get married.

“Guess how much my sister’s ring cost,” she said.

"I don't know."

"Guess."

I told her I didn't care at all how much it cost, which made her laugh, and then we kissed there for a while beneath a fluorescent wasp lantern hung from the awning.

The guy with the hair, the groom, came outside after a while and said, "Hey, Callie, Jen's looking for you." He was wearing a pastel pink, button-up shirt, a cigar in the breast pocket. He had a chin built like a truck, and the strawberry hair of an angel. That was true. He was a good-looking man. Sure, he was one of the most beautiful humans I'd ever seen in my life. I had the brief impulse to concede this to him.

The maid of honor propped herself up with an elbow on my shoulder. "So tell her I'm out here."

"You can tell her yourself. Come on, Cal."

She spoke into my ear, but not in a whisper, so that I'm sure the beautiful groom could hear it all. "This is the one. This dreamy fella is the one marrying my dear little sissy. Did I tell you?" She said this into her hand cupped around my ear, and her breath was hot on my face.

"Did I tell you that he kissed me?" She tossed her head back and laughed viciously. "And he'd have done more than that too, if I'd have let him."

And then she asked me, "Wouldn't you too? Wouldn't you do more if I let you?" She pressed her other hand lightly on my chest. "Oh, baby," she said. "That's what he kept saying—kissing my face all over. 'Oh, baby.' 'Oh, baby.' Like I was the prettiest girl in the world."

"Christ, Cal," the groom said. "You're shit-faced."

"Loosen up, handsome," she said.

The groom stared at us for a moment, and then he nodded at me. "Who's this guy?" he asked.

I began to say my name, but the maid of honor spoke up. "This is my boyfriend tonight. He's going to marry me just as soon as he gets a better job."

"I don't need this," he said.

And the maid of honor replied, "So run along then." She kissed me right there, with her eyes still on the groom. He sighed and went inside. I watched him through the window talking to the bride, gesturing at us, shrugging exasperatedly. The maid of honor took my chin in her fingers and directed my attention back to her, perched on my lap, and she kissed me again. Her breasts, dolloped sidewise on my chest, gave me a vaguely homesick feeling.

"Would I be the prettiest girl you ever slept with?" she said.

I thought about this and lied. "It's hard to say," I said.

She took a drag from her cigarette and turned her attention out to the dark, out that way, where somewhere the ocean was heaving faintly.

“Where are you all staying?”

“What’s that?” she asked. Before I could repeat myself she groaned and said, “God, I’m so bored. If you marry me, you can’t be so boring.”

“Are you always this way?” I asked.

“Listen,” she said, “my sister is the sweet one. You’d like her better than me.”

“I think they’re talking about you in there,” I said, nodding to the window, where the bride and groom had sectioned themselves off in a corner. The rest of the party went on, and those two discussed something, it seemed, seriously, tiredly, and occasionally, they still gestured this way, to the maid of honor and me.

She watched her sister for a while, for a good while, with her hand set absently still on my thigh, as if it were not a thigh.

“Poor Sissy,” she said. “She’s apologized for me her whole life.” She was quiet for another moment. She said, “All the troubles of my life, I made for myself. I know that. But even so, it never felt like I had much say in any of it. Are you listening?”

“Sure,” I told her.

“It doesn’t matter anyway. Listen,” she said, “you should leave me alone for a minute. I can feel it. I’m just going to be mean to you. I can’t help it. Come back in a minute, and I’ll be better to you, darling,” she said. “You’ll hardly recognize me.”

So I left her alone for a minute. I slipped out from beneath her and settled her onto the bench, left her my pack of cigarettes and the lighter, and went off toward the bathroom. The wedding party, as I passed, grew quiet, and the boys leaned against their upright pool sticks with one arm over the other and the sticks heeled against the floorboards.

In the bathroom mirror, I saw myself and decided I was a bit drunk. I wasn’t matching up quite right with my reflection. Though, I thought, being drunk was all right, since I’d never had much luck with women when I was sober. Even my fiancée, though she didn’t drink much, she and I had seemed to spiral through the room when we first met.

Then I heard a sort of commotion come muffled through the door. I went out to see. An argument had broken out between the maid of honor and her sister, and the groom was in the center shouting along. The sister, for her part, never much raised her voice. She was crying though. I motioned toward them, but a couple of the groomsmen with their pool sticks shouldered into my path and one held up a hand and said, “Hold off there, guy.”

“It’s all right,” I said.

Another groomsman shouted over, "You've had enough fun, buddy. Why don't you get on, huh?"

The groom had reached for the maid of honor's wrist, and she'd yanked it away and went on now even more loudly.

"All right," a bridesmaid shouted. "We're outta here. Close out. Load up."

The members of the wedding party abandoned their games half-finished and settled their tabs, while the groom and the bride and the maid of honor tussled out the door. I slipped out through the hall by the bathroom, through the back exit, and stumbled into the ocean night, where the lonely lamplight undid the small relief of the moon and the stars and threw everything past a certain distance into deeper obscurity.

I watched them argue for a while by a car with the door open. I couldn't hear the argument well, but now it had fallen to the maid and to the groom, while the sister sat partway in the passenger seat of the car with her face in her hands. "Just get in the car, Cal," I heard the groom say.

And then she saw me here, half-shouldered into a yew shrub, and she lit up with all of her loveliness. She made for me, but the groom, from behind, wrapped his arms around her, pinning her arms against her sides, and began dragging her back toward the car. She kicked her legs up madly into the air, and her pale skin shimmered faintly red in the car's parking lights.

"Darling," she shouted. "Darling, help."

I had emerged into the lot now, it seemed. Already, I was just a pace away from them, and already, I was prying the groom's arms from her waist. I'd only meant to set her loose, but in that wrestling mess of limbs I cracked the groom in the face. Even if it's on accident, when you inflict an injury like this, especially against someone bigger than yourself, you can't leave it half done, and so, though sure I didn't want to, I cracked him again as good as I've ever cracked anyone. You understand: he might have murdered me if I let him. He and the groomsman might have savaged me with pool sticks and with pool balls heavy as stones in their hands.

He buckled over and clutched his nose. "What the fuck?" he shouted.

The bride was screaming. She rushed to the groom and tried to remove his hands from his face so that she could see.

Seeing the groom with his nose in his hands and the bride wailing on her knees made me feel monstrous. I was prepared to face the consequences and receive the beating of my life. I deserved it. But then the maid of honor took my hand and hurried me off. She stumbled to her

knees once and I lifted her up. “Come on,” she said. “Your car. Where’s your car?”

It was there, I told her, at the end of the lot. She hopped around at the passenger side for a moment, yanking at the door, which I had to open from the inside because everything I owned was half broken.

“Go, go, go,” she said.

So we tore off through the lot, clipping a curb as we went, and then a mailbox, which exploded behind us in a poof of envelopes. The groom recovered himself and chased after us, and then the groomsmen, and the bridesmaids after, stood there empty-handed in the empty street looking like lovers abandoned at the platform. Then we vanished around a corner, northbound onto Highway 101 with the coast beside us.

For a while she just laughed. She said, “You hit him. I don’t believe it. I bet he’s never been slugged like that in all his life. Oh god,” she said, and laughed again. “We’re drunk. We’re dumb drunk. You shouldn’t be driving. It doesn’t matter.”

“I didn’t mean to slug him like that,” I said. My skin felt electric with adrenaline. A vague apprehension of dread lingered on my thoughts, like the sort that comes from that dream you struggle to recall.

“It doesn’t matter. Where’s my bag?” she asked as she wrenched around. “Never mind, I don’t have it.”

It occurred to me then that my hand ached badly. There was a heartbeat in my knuckles. My three middle fingers went hot and stiff. I worked the shifter with my palm and my thumb and pinky and let my injured fingers turn purple and tremble aloft, as though they commanded, strung beneath them, a miniature marionette to act out the shivering jig of my anguish. The highway was thin, and empty, and wove us along the coast, in and out of the tree line, the ocean coming in and out of view, like a dream, I thought. Dark ahead and dark behind. It was getting cold, but she opened the window anyway, and the cool, wet air tossed her hair around dimly in the cab.

“You rescued me,” she said. “Now you probably expect things of me, huh?”

“Or I stole you,” I said. “Probably that’s how it looked to them.”

“To who?”

“To your party,” I said.

“Oh right. My party. Maybe it did. Maybe you’ve kidnapped me.” She let out a shriek of laughter. “I’ve been kidnapped,” she shouted joyously. “My fiancé’s a lowlife, kidnapper after all. Isn’t it fitting? Where are you taking me, Killer, darling? What time is it?”

"I have a room that way," I said, pointing northwest into the shape of the hills rising against more distant hills, vaguely distinguishable as deepening shades of black.

"No," she said. "Not there. They'll find my blood all over your floor. Even if you wash it away, it'll light up in those special lights, like in the movies."

"Where then?"

"Somewhere else. I shouldn't know where. It should be a secret."

"All right," I said.

"Oh god, his face. You caught him good. Sissy will need to put make-up on him for the ceremony. Imagine it," she said.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "Don't get off here."

"I have a room that way."

"That's too depressing. God, I couldn't bear going to your room. Keep going. Good god. Keep going."

"OK," I said, and turned off the blinker. And we went on, past a pillared rock formation out in the water and a few beach villages and the untenanted shopping center, and past the city that had fallen asleep without us.

"My grandparents lived down there," she said. She tapped the window. "Just there. Every summer when we were kids, we were just there," she said. "Grandma's living with Mom now, but that's where the house was. Look, that's it."

The little seaside neighborhood was laid out in neat rows and lit with lampposts so that I could make out from above the grid of streets and homes by the lighted vertices, swerving around a bit on the road as I did.

She said, "That's why Sissy's wedding's here. Right? I'd probably do it the same way if it were me. Not now. But I would've, if I'd married first. No, I don't want you to get off here. Anywhere but here."

She put her hand down upon mine on the shifter and squeezed my crooked fingers. A lance of white agony carved, in an instant, up my arm and rattled my eyes like pill bottles.

"I wasn't getting off," I managed.

"You'll have to bury me. Knock me over the head first," she said. "Do you have a shovel, or will you dig my grave with your hands like a dog?"

I told her to cut it out. "It's not funny anymore," I said.

"Don't be so dull," she said. "Good god. Imagine me being murdered by a dull man. Good god! What are you even doing here? You don't live here do you?"

"Yeah," I said. "I have a room back that way."

"I wonder sometimes—I used to wonder—passing through a Podunk spot like this: who the hell ends up living here?"

"I have a fiancée," I said. "That way."

"Do you?" she laughed. "When's the wedding?"

"She's moving to the city."

"So you don't have a fiancée, not except for me."

"Maybe so," I said.

"Don't mention her again," she said. "Please don't say anything else about that."

"All right."

"Do you have another cigarette?" she asked.

"I left them with you."

"No, you didn't."

"Then no," I said, "I don't have any left."

We went on like this, not saying anything, until it seemed like time to turn back, and she told me to pull off at the approaching exit. "Here," she said. "This is a good spot." And so we traced up this little peninsula, low against the ocean.

She asked me the name of where we were tonight, but I didn't know. I hadn't seen the sign. The road was old and frayed to hunks at the edges, and the spike rush lit up in the headlights. A roadside ditch of brackish water. A few old houses. A few short, picket fences. Gravel parkways. Unlit windows. No, I had no idea where we were. We parked where the road turned to dirt at the foot of some larger building, which extended on stilts into the water, and we saw, revealed in the headlights on a weatherworn sign, that it was a cannery. The maid of honor tumbled from the car, leaving the door open, leaving the interior light pooling on the uneven lot. She darted off into the dark, and I went after her.

There were great, pale mounds silhouetted against the nighttime, heaped as tall as trucks around the lot. I studied them for a moment from a distance, and her weaving lithely between them, but I didn't know what they were. "Come here," she said, returning to me, and she took my outstretched hand, my good one, and pulled me against her, and she kissed me, and she collapsed with me down onto a mound, which crunched beneath our weight, and jutted into my back. It shed a clicking skate of oyster shells over us.

"Shucked shells," I said, taking one in my hand and tossing it. "It's all oyster shells." The smell was like the gut of the ocean: sweet and salty and ruined. But what of the meat and what of the pearl? Was it all boneyard beneath us?

She took a shell in her hand and stood up and studied it, pushing her thumb across its nacre belly. She thought about this a moment and then looked around. I watched her for a while. The shadow shapes of the place—the oyster middens, an outhouse down the way, rusted trailers

and rusted barrels—from the corner of my eye, trembled by the beating of my heart and seemed alive. And her: was she cold, I wondered? Were the hairs on her arms standing up? And what wordless thoughts were pulsing there in her dumb-drunk head as she peered from that dimness into the dark?

“I think I’ve been here before,” she said. She took a few steps one way, paused, and then took a few steps the other way. It was a birdless night. Only the sound of the combers off shore, rolling the sea over in the black and the far away. “Why’d you bring me here?”

“You told me to,” I said.

“I think I’ve been here before.”

“Where are we then?”

“That way,” she said. “Out that way, there’s an old schoolhouse with red shutters. If it were light out, it’d be right that way, and you’d see it. And there was a pier. Did we pass it by? I’ve been here before,” she said. “We ate oysters at a table on a cannery deck.”

She walked on slowly through the low grass, which was dipped with moonlit puddles. We navigated the shallow slope like the blind, down along the unpainted siding of the cannery house, until the earth turned to rocks and submerged into the coming and going of the tide.

“When I was a kid,” she said, “there was a boy I used to run around with. He took me here. His daddy had died just before, and he drove me around in his daddy’s old truck all up and down the coast. I haven’t thought about him in years, until just now, and all of a sudden I sort of miss him again.”

I stood a few paces to her back and watched as she wrapped her arms against herself and braced against the ocean breeze, which whistled lonesomely through the grass.

“Has that ever happened to you?” she asked.

“Which part?”

“Something like that.”

“Maybe so,” I said. “I can’t remember.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“What for?”

“Oh, I don’t know anymore. Forget it. Sometimes I have this feeling like I’ve never once said what I really meant to say.” She dropped the shell at her feet and went off to the car. “I’m ready to see the place where you live now,” she said. And so we went there.