



small country

by Lauren Pretnar

Off the plane and into the arms of the bride-to-be. She bumps my hip with hers as we flounce towards the airport exit. "I'm getting married," she says, as if this just occurred to her, as if the words fell strange from the sky. She steers me outside to a concrete bench, laughing like a person in shock. "Married," she says.

We sit down. Her laughter has me worried. "How are you?" I ask.

Her face shuts into a frown. She pulls out a pack of cigarettes, hands me one and lights her own. "I fell in love a few weeks ago. He's coming to the wedding." Her smile trumps my surprise and I realize she has worked this out. She is decided. "I'm getting married on Sunday," she says. Then louder, "I'm getting married to a wonderful, sweet, beautiful man on Sunday." She's looking up, speaking into the air just over my head. I watch her breathe for a moment before she clutches my wrist. "You're the only one I've told. I'm so glad you're here."

I take a deep drag off my cigarette and grin. "I thought you quit these things."

"You're here." She tucks her arm through mine. "You're my excuse."

I am the first to arrive from out of town but only by a few hours. Both families descend before sunset, meeting for the first time in the couple's lush backyard. The bride is too skittish to facilitate beyond introductions. She cites her need to pack and flees the garden, disappearing into their basement apartment. The groom wanders amongst his plants, pulling weeds from the soil, rubbing leaves between his fingers, and answering all questions with a wan smile and a soft *yes* or *no*. I know him to be a quiet man, but I wonder, if she hasn't told him, has he guessed? Perhaps his instincts are troubling him and, though the easy explanation would be pre-wedding jitters, he can't shake the feeling that something real has gone wrong.

Without the help of their hosts, the families settle into cheap, uncomfortable lawn chairs and fill the air with awkward conversation. "Well, good to finally meet you. I guess we're just about related."

"Yep. Just about."

One man nudges the grass with the toe of his shoe. The other glances up into the trees as if they've called his name.

"Should be quite a weekend."

"Should be. Very exciting."

"Yup. Very exciting."

Their voices seep out of the garden, and we sit in silence, fiddling with the fabric of our shirts, staring off into the dusky distance, smiling at nothing.

"You two have been friends for quite awhile, am I right?"

The group shifts toward me en masse.

The bride's mother's question was for me. I do the math in my head. "We've known each other six years now."

"You went to school together?"

"No, she went to school with my partner. My ex, actually." I nod and keep nodding, a nervous tic. "He came home from orientation and told me he'd met one of the best friends I'll ever have."

"Are they friends, too?"

Her question makes the garden party nervous. They shift in their lawn chairs. "Absolutely," I say. "In fact, he was planning to come up for the wedding."

I'm surprised to have offered this. It's the last thing I want to discuss. But her face relaxes and I realize I've fooled her, acting like I can talk about Thomas as easily as the weather. I hear his voice in my head. *We are fine*. He used to tell me this after arguments, during lapses in our happiness, difficult times. *We are fine*, and I'd think, If he says so, it must be true.

"So we'll meet him, too?"

"Unfortunately, no. He can't afford the

trip." That's one way to put it, I think. "He's really disappointed. We all are." Again, one way to put it. I catch myself staring at my hands and turn to the sky instead.

"The sun's fading fast," says the groom. The group nods in unison relief and he approaches my chair, takes my wrist and squeezes gently, then tugs until I stand. "Let's find some light," he says. We march into the house together and return with armloads of torches that we light around the flagstone perimeter. The groom's five-year-old niece settles into the bride's mother's lap. The groom's father makes tea for everyone. We cup steaming mugs in both hands and sip contentedly between eruptions of laughter as the groom's sister recounts being trapped in conversation with an awful seatmate on her flight that morning.

"He smelled like milk." She shakes her head, nose wrinkled. "There's something so wrong about a person smelling like milk."

I tell the bride I'd like to camp out in the backyard, even though they have a spare bed. After much back-and-forth, she agrees to it, and I spend the night curled in my sleeping bag within a dreamscape of northwestern fog. I have a dream that recurs for the duration of my stay—of a night sky crowded with moons, more moons than stars, moons in all different phases. The shock of this universe falls from me after a moment and I think, Of course. It's always been this way.

I wake up to chairs being delivered. It takes me a few groggy minutes to understand what's going on, my only hints the clanging of aluminum and the fuzzy outline of legs striding back and forth past the scrim of my tent.

By the time I get out of the shower the household is bustling. I move from room to room, from backyard to basement, looking for things to do since no one will assign me a task. I feed the dog, water the garden, talk the manic bride into a lunchtime whiskey

shot. Tea seems like a good idea, so I wander around the yard taking orders. Chamomile, mint, Darjeeling, green; repeat to remember and swoop back inside to find a dark-haired woman in the bride's kitchen. Pots simmer on three of four burners and she's bent over the sink, pouring dark liquid through a too-large funnel into tincture bottles.

"Help me!" she barks without looking up. I don't know how she's seen me. I don't know who she is. I don't know which way to move. "Grab that bottle on the stove!" Her voice is pure inertia, and I follow. We stand shoulder to shoulder at the sink, our skin warm in late spring. We are strangers, wrists and arms tangling, trying, I finally realize, to move an overflowing funnel from her full bottle to my empty without spilling. The switch goes badly—I don't move fast enough—and the liquid drains out and down the sink all at once. "Shit," she mutters, dropping the funnel into the sink. I stand holding the empty bottle, feeling distinctly like I've failed a test in a subject that doesn't exist.

"What is this stuff?" I ask.

She turns to me for the first time, her eyes just as dark as the drop she licks from the tender muscle between thumb and forefinger. "A wedding gift," she says. "It's this really potent marijuana liquor I make." I run a fingertip up the empty bottle and taste for myself. She sighs, shaking her head. "Down the drain."

This, I learn, is Annabelle.

The cake will be tres leches, three dense layers piled high and soaking. The bride's best friend has no fear of her task. She flits through the kitchen in heels and an apron, smiling, smiling. I have confined myself to a rocker and sit drinking tea, keeping out of her way. After years of hearing about each other from the bride, this is our first meeting.

"Your partner," she says. "What's his name? Joseph?"

"Thomas," I correct, bracing myself. "And we've broken up. Two weeks ago."

She turns from the counter where I've



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BIRMINGHAM ART WALK "mixtape" story contest

On the occasion of the 2008 Birmingham Art Walk Festival, Friday and Saturday, Sept. 5 and 6, downtown, THE2NDHAND brings the "mixtape" reading south. We invite Birmingham- and/or area-based writers to send prose contest entries that are based on a song. Be sure to specify the song, and keep the story under three double-spaced pages (about the length of a song, read aloud). All contest entrants will be considered for participation in our Friday, Sept. 5, reading attendant to Art Walk, and the ultimate winner will get a cash prize of \$100 and publication in the Art Walk edition of THE2NDHAND. Deadline: June 30, 2008. ***Send entries in a word document or rtf file to: todd@the2ndhand.com. For more information see www.the2ndhand.com/artwalk.html and for "mixtape" story examples check out our archive of stories from prior events at www.the2ndhand.com/mixtape.html.

“Say you were an expert on ancient worms and a few other varieties of colonial organisms that once clustered around thermal vents along the ocean floor, cracks in the planet’s crust, underwater, millennia ago. This was your identity, to a large degree, studying the tracks and tunnels, mostly microscopic, in stone, stone that was, in turn, once, long ago, near cracks in the ocean crust, fathoms deep. Say this was you, in a flipbook of instant retrospection, a slideshow of memories. / Here you are, examining fossilized colonies from former thermal pockets, rock, which then lived, thriving and competing, breeding and feeding, growing, dying, and being devoured...” Say you were contemplating all of this as one of your plane’s engines blew above Kansas and said plane headed down. Such is the situation in “The Sea Beneath,” a story (excerpted above) in the collection *Songs of Insurgency* (Vagabond, 2007), by Spencer Dew, Chicago resident and contributor to THE2NDHAND—“Heart of It All,” the second story in the collection, first appeared in our online magazine in 2006. We can’t recommend it more highly. Visit vagabondpress.com, or follow the link from THE2NDHAND.com to the Amazon list we’ve compiled of books by our contributors.



been watching her body, admiring the way apron straps accentuate the drama of her waist, how her blouse graciously offers the depth of her breasts, and trying to decide whether these successes take planning or if everything she dons turns luscious simply by touching her skin. “That’s why he’s not here,” she breathes. She is clearly impressed with the tragedy of this twist. She will eat it whole. “After how many years?”

She has stopped all work on the cake in favor of giving me her undivided attention. I smile up at her. “Six years. Almost exactly six years.”

She lifts a full bowl of batter from the counter, cradles it against her stomach with one smooth, tanned forearm and begins to stir. “You must have thought you’d end up marrying him,” she says, watching my face.

I press my feet against the floor and release, tuck my legs beneath me as the rocker starts to sway. “Neither one of us believes in marriage, so it was never an issue.”

As soon as the sentence leaves my mouth I realize what I’ve done. She pauses in her stirring and then catches herself. Continues. Stops and sets the bowl back on the counter. She’s not looking at me anymore. “Still,” she stoops to check the oven’s temperature, “that must be hard.”

We are to be the only bridesmaids tomorrow, she and I. “It’s not as hard as I wish it was,” I say.

She turns back to me without the sad smile I expect. “She chose us for a reason, you know. We’re two sides of the same coin. We balance her, you and I.” The counter is cluttered with measuring spoons and cups, empty cartons of cream and tins of condensed milk, sugars and butters and flours and bowl after beautiful handmade bowl of batter. She picks up the largest and hands it to me to stir.

We pack the cars to drive up the mountain. We take two days’ worth of food for one hundred people; everything needed to cook and serve six meals to one hundred people; everyone’s luggage, sleeping bags and pads; vast amounts of alcohol, including four full kegs of beer; a karaoke machine, portable stage, sound system and television; rented chairs for the ceremony; a handmade arbor and altar; flats of flowers and potted plants; stacks of cushions, tablecloths, pillows and blankets; strings of lights, paper lanterns and painted rocks; a giant winged monster piñata; the bride’s old dog, Hazel, and Hazel’s bed.

The bride is not calm. “A small country!” she shouts. “We’re moving a small country into the woods!”

The guests create a swarm that feels three times its size. Everyone seems to know everyone except me. Instead of hovering outside their tight, vibrant circles, I spend the morning inspecting the rafters of the Ranch House, looking for the birds that kept me awake all night, the pulse of their wings scattering my vision of moons, replacing the ghostly orbs with a mobile of twisting shadows over my wooden bunk.

I give up after an hour and concentrate instead on getting ready for the ceremony. My dress is crisscrossed with sharp creases after being folded into a backpack for two days. I drape it over the railing of the loft in hopes of easing the creases away and hike ten minutes out to find a bathhouse that isn’t teeming with primping guests. When I return to fetch my dress, a large white blotch mars the brand-new brown gauze, proving the existence of the birds.

I bound down to the kitchen and weave my way through throngs of friends and family, heading for the industrial-size sink. Clearing it out to make room for my last-minute laundering becomes a tactical

maneuver involving five other people. Our progress is interrupted by an insistent knock on the window over the sink. I look up to find the bride beckoning me outside. She is talking with a dark-haired man whose face is eclipsed by the glare of sunlight on the glass. I leave my dress in the capable hands of her mother and move back through the crowd, stifling the impulse to smooth my hair in preparation for this meeting.

The field out back is yet another scene of chaos as dozens set up for the ceremony, anchoring the arbor against the wind and attempting a perfect circle of folding chairs. The bride stands far from the action, the dark-haired man hovering beside her. I look for him to be handsome and see that he is.

“I want to introduce you,” she says. He steps forward as I approach. I can tell from his face that she’s told him I know. I extend my hand and we smile awkwardly as he takes it, the bride gazing past us at her party.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I say, immediately feeling I’ve said too much. I have the urge to look for the groom, to make sure he isn’t watching, but I keep my eyes on the man in front of me. “Did you just arrive this morning?”

He nods. “I had to work last night.”

The bride touches my arm. “He works at the co-op I was telling you about.”

I notice a strange hum and feel the air move over my head. I look up and see nothing. “Did you have to take today off?” I ask.

He doesn’t seem to hear the question. He is looking at some point just above and beyond me. “Hummingbirds,” he says, pointing. Just as I turn to look up, another one dive-bombs my head. We are standing beneath a nest full of newborns and the adults are angry, threatened by our proximity.

I duck and take a few defensive steps backward. “Is that good luck or bad?”

“You don’t believe in luck,” says the bride. She turns to the man. “She’s an atheist. Faithless. Doesn’t believe in anything.” This is an old joke of ours, that I am the cynic and she the priestess. In many ways it has always been true.

I put my arm around her. “It doesn’t stop her from trying to convert me.”

She laughs. “It doesn’t stop me from considering you a human talisman.” She pushes a strand of hair from my eyes. “You are excused.”

One hour before the ceremony, my nose starts to bleed. I’ve been reading outside, sprawled across the grass on my stomach in my brown bridesmaid’s dress. Hazel is asleep on my toes. My shoulders and back are long-burnt by the sun. I decide to stay where I am and bleed into the dirt. If I hold my head at a certain angle, the blood drains to the tip of my nose and then drips down, cleanly. The guests mill around the Ranch House and wander through the meadow. Their skin gleams in the unseasonable sunlight and heat of this day. They have traded their thermals and jeans for pale print dresses and creased pants. Their distant conversations rise and hover over me like helium balloons. None of them notice me for my stillness, the warmth of my blood, my trust that this will end on its own.

We walk into the meadow ringing bells. We enter the circle ringing bells. The family follows and we ring the bells. We stop when the groom appears in the doorway of the Ranch House in his mustard shirt and brown suspended pants. We watch him smile and walk casually into the circle. The guests all turn in their chairs, watching the doorway of the Ranch House. I cry when she appears, all in beaded red, roaring red veil draped across her hair. She enters the circle and hands me her fiery bouquet, pausing to kiss my tears before joining her

groom beneath the arbor.

We pass two lengths of velvet cord from hand to hand until they loop the inner and outer circles of guests, each cord originating with a bridesmaid and ending in the hand of bride or groom. I, like the other bridesmaid, slip a silver ring onto my cord, pressing the warm metal against my palm to leave a brief imprint on my skin before sliding it to the person beside me. Then I look for the man.

He is seated almost directly across from the arbor in one of the folding chairs that comprise the inner circle. The shadows of those standing behind him cast outward, leaving him at the mercy of the midday sun. He is watching the bride’s father wave casually at a swarm of gnats near his shoulder. Their eyes meet momentarily and they grin at one another, the father of the bride shrugging his shoulders as if to say, What can you do?

I try to figure out which ring will reach the man, the bride’s or the groom’s. The couple stands patiently beneath the arbor watching their rings travel from hand to warm hand. Each person handles the ritual differently; some cradle the ring with reverence and mouth prayers while others simply smooth it along the line. The youngest guest, the bride’s four-year-old nephew, bows his head and squeezes his eyes shut, grasping the ring earnestly in his small fist for nearly a minute while the delighted crowd chuckles.

When the ring reaches the man he curls it inside a loose fist and closes his eyes. I count to ten before he nods to the woman beside him, and shifts the ring her way like a bead on an abacus.

The bride and groom are no longer paying attention. They lean conspiratorially toward one another whispering low, laughing silently. When the rings arrive, they slip them off the cords and onto their own fingers, mouthing hushed vows inaudible to the crowd. The bride winks at me and I take my cue. Spreading my arms as if to brace the circle, I raise my chin and take a deep breath.

“Forever in beauty,” I proclaim.

Forever in beauty, we say.

annabelle gets me drunk on rose petal sangria and teaches me to play “Ring of Fire” on her accordion. This is to be her other wedding gift to the bride and groom. She’s been practicing for weeks and now she wants backup. Hands through the straps like this, fingers spread and palms gripping—“Ready for anything,” she says. I tell her that just because there are two accordions doesn’t mean I need to play one, but she insists, and I work hard.

We’re out deep in the twilight meadow, drunk and dressed up, hopping gracelessly from one foot to the other in time with our music. “Lilting,” I tell her after an hour. “I don’t play the accordion. Lilting is the best I can do.”

She squeezes out a lazy fanfare, letting her notes wheeze through like the start of a sickly parade. “When you sober up you won’t remember how to hold this thing, much less play it. Let’s get everyone together and give them a show.”

The bride is doing lines with the other bridesmaid in the handicapped stall next to me. They don’t seem to realize I’m here, that anyone is here much less me. I sit still, the skirt of my dress bunched between my hands at my chest, and listen to their loud whispering.

“I’m gonna make a mess,” says the bride. Then a sharp inhale.

Her best friend giggles. “You did good, sweetheart. You’re a pro.”

They haven’t even cut the cake yet, I think. She’s only been married an hour.

“You want one more?”

“Let’s share it and save some for later.”

I feel like a kid, mystified and shaken by the adult world—naïve and romantic and easily appalled and hoping they don’t realize it’s me in here.

“I can’t believe you’ve never done this before.”

“I was waiting for a special occasion.”

The bride snuffles and unrolls some toilet paper to blow her nose.

“No, sweetie! No, no, no.”

“Oh, I get it.” She snuffles harder, sucking it in. They laugh.

“You feel good?”

“I feel fantastic. Let’s go dance.”

I tuck my toes beneath the toilet and watch their feet shuffle out of the stall. The door swings open and music, laughter, one hundred voices fill the bathhouse.

I slip out back and head toward the woods. The groom is standing at the tree line. He raises his voice as I approach, “You too?”

I take my place beside him. We smile at each other in the dark. “You got married,” I say. “Congratulations.” I extend my hand and he holds it for a moment instead of shaking it. Then drops it.

“Thank you,” he says. We turn our backs to the woods and watch the Ranch House glow from the inside out, lit now by its built-in fire pit. “It’s weird, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Married. It’s weird.” He shakes his head. “I don’t think it matters.”

“Of course it matters.” I elbow him gently in the ribs. “If it matters enough for the two of you to do it, it matters. That’s all there is to it.”

“I know.” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “I just don’t want to lose sight of the important stuff.” He turns to me. “She’s not mine. She’ll never be mine. I don’t want her to be mine. I just want her to be happy with me.”

I lean against his shoulder. We stand like that for a while.

“I was sorry to hear about you and Thomas,” he says.

My throat swells against any response but the silence thickens well, soothes the air between us into a balm. Just as I regain my composure, the bride comes bounding up. Ignoring her husband, she wraps a warm arm around my neck, presses her nose to my cheek, and pulls out her seductress tone. “Wanna play double dutch?”

I tell her, “I’ve wanted to play double dutch every day for the last five years.”

She nods. She understands.

Inside, we tie a heavy knot into the center of the two ropes, recruit two people to swing them, and jump in; first one at a time, then together. We make up tricks to wow our audience. Someone picks up a fiddle and within seconds there’s a symphony of washboard, accordion, two guitars and the crowd clapping in time. We’re barefoot in our dresses on the smooth concrete floor, whirling to the music inside the ropes, breathing fast and I tell her, “I thought I’d forgotten.”

The musicians are performing one at a time, two at a time, five at a time; a rambling impromptu concert turned sing-along. We’re in the middle of a lazy acoustic “Like a Virgin,” performed to near-striptease by the drunk bride. Annabelle and I are spread out on my sleeping bag in the meadow, accordions at our feet. She is upon me and I murmur, “What the hell. It’s a wedding.”

I fall asleep on the plane going home and dream that I’m on a plane going home. In the dream my phone rings and it’s my mother. We chat for a few minutes before I remember that all cell phones must be turned off for the duration of the flight. I panic and hang up fast but the plane is already plummeting. The ground rushes at me out the window. There’s nothing to do but guess at the angle of our descent, but descent, I think, is not the word. A 30-degree freefall. How far from the ground will we be when my mind registers its last image? My fingers mesh and flutter in my lap. The muscles around my stomach tense and relax. I’m going to be blown apart. I watch the ground and guess at our impact—now. Now.

END

Next up: *Mixtape, August '08*