



SUZI Q. VARIN

Readers Write
WEDDINGS

WHEN MY BOYFRIEND MIKE'S PARENTS went out of town, he and I would romp in their adjustable beds, raid their refrigerator, and watch movies in their bedroom. One night, walking into the kitchen in my underwear, I noticed a new folk-art family tree that Mike's mother had made.

"My name should go there," I said, pointing to a bare apple next to Mike's.

With that, Mike got some paint, and I wrote my name in. From that moment on, we considered ourselves husband and wife.

Our parents, who were all divorced, insisted that we weren't really married, but we just laughed. Look at all the good their church weddings had done them. "At least paint can't be erased by a good lawyer," Mike would say.

Ten years, two houses, and one daughter later, Mike and I still hadn't bothered to get wedding rings or to exchange vows. Then Mike got a new job, with benefits, and we decided to get married so I could be covered by his health insurance.

Without telling anyone — or even making an appointment — we went to the justice of the peace on a Thursday afternoon. We brought our daughter with us, and I was wearing jeans. When the clerk said that the wedding room wasn't available, we pleaded with her just to marry us anywhere.

We found ourselves in a storage room among piles of broken typewriters and three-legged tables. Mike recruited a middle-aged woman and her daughter from the "Eviction Notices" line to be our witnesses. We offered them twenty dollars for their time. When they saw where we were getting married, they probably thought we needed the money more than they did. We tried to tell them that, really, we were already married, but it was too hard to explain.

*Kimberly Haufler
Chapel Hill, North Carolina*

IN MY CATHOLIC GIRLHOOD, SEX EDU- cation was short and to the point: no sex without a wedding ring. It could not be an engagement ring, either. Only a gold band on the fourth finger of the left hand would do.

I sat through many meals listening to my parents gossip, their remarks aimed

indirectly at my sister and me:

"Did you hear? That Jane girl down the street has to get married," my mother would say. "She's getting married in the rectory on Saturday morning. She'll never wear a white dress or walk down the aisle on her dad's arm. How could she do that to her family?"

My sister and I, thirteen and fourteen, would squirm in our chairs and feel ashamed of being female, while our three brothers shoveled spaghetti into their mouths and smirked.

"It'll never happen in this house, by God," my father would say, "or I'll make sure there's nothing left of them to get married!"

My sister and I would touch knees for support.

"God punishes those who break the rules," my mother would say quietly. "That's why he invented weddings: so people would not be disgraced by their behavior."

"The hell with God's punishment," my father would shout. "That's a slap on the

wrist compared to what I'll do!"

In unison, my sister and I would ask to be excused from the table. Our request was always denied.

Every time someone in our neighborhood got married, suspicious older women would count the months until the first child was born. A few of my high-school friends disappeared and resurfaced after several months, saying that they'd been out of town. By the time I turned sixteen I wanted only to graduate and move away from home. I vowed never to marry a Catholic. But I also vowed not to get pregnant before my wedding if my father was still alive.

Six years later I married a man with no religious beliefs. We had lived together for a year before deciding to tie the knot. I wore a white dress. I was not pregnant.

By then my parents had separated and lived in different states. My father wasn't interested in my wedding, or in me.

*Carole Urmey
Franklin, Tennessee*

READERS WRITE asks readers to address subjects on which they're the only authorities. Topics are intentionally broad in order to give room for expression. Writing style isn't as important as thoughtfulness and sincerity.

Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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Send your typed, double-spaced submissions to Readers Write, The Sun, 107 North Roberson Street, Chapel Hill, NC 27516. If you cannot type, please print clearly. We're sorry, but we can't respond to or return your work, so don't send your only copy unless you don't want it back. Because we must wait until the last minute to make our final selections, we are unable to answer questions regarding the status of submissions. If your work is going to appear, you'll hear from us prior to publication.

UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Small Victories	November 1	April 2005
On The Edge	December 1	May 2005
Possessions	January 1	June 2005
Saturday Night Games	February 1	July 2005
Games	March 1	August 2005
Taking A Stand	April 1	September 2005

ELIZABETH WAS A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD, pot-smoking hippie. I met her in Frank's Pool Hall the summer I was twenty. She was fleeing her aunt and uncle, psychotic alcoholics who would dress her like a five-year-old and set her hair in ringlets. She needed a place to stay.

No sooner had she moved in with me than my mother came to town and found us shackled up in my attic apartment, washing down speed with codeine cough syrup.

"Why, Tony," my mother declared, "I've never seen you so happy. Why don't you two get married?"

Before we could reply, she began calling around, trying to obtain a marriage license for an underage girl. Elizabeth and I just sat there, stoned.

My mother bribed a judge across the river to give us a license and found a clergyman who would marry us the next day. She asked Elizabeth what kind of wedding dress she wanted. Elizabeth shrugged and said dark green velvet. My mother went shopping and came back with a boxy chartreuse suit. Elizabeth tried it on. She looked like a hot-water heater.

I told my mother that I didn't think this wedding was such a good idea. For one thing, I was a homosexual.

"Tony, Tony," she said, "don't you know that all men think they're homosexuals just before they get married?"

I took another swig of Robitussin. Elizabeth sat in the corner, staring at the floor.

The next day the florist came with an armload of white tulips, and we left for the church. My mother rode in the back seat and complained that her heart was racing. The gang from the Seven Seas Bar, my neighborhood hangout, was waiting impatiently at the church doors; my mother must have invited them. The minister came, introduced himself, and began the ceremony. As he was reading a long passage from Kahlil Gibran, Elizabeth thrust the tulips into my hands and lit a cigarette. In no time at all, we were husband and wife.

The reception was at our apartment. Someone had draped toilet paper here and there in an effort to make the place look festive. There was no wine, no cake,

no hors d'oeuvres. Our friends from the bar left quickly, leaving us alone with my mother. Elizabeth and I were speechless, in awe of the monstrous thing we had just done. My mother showed no signs of leaving.

Elizabeth and I went into my bedroom and closed the door. She took off her day-glo suit and lay on the futon in her underwear. I stripped down to my shorts and lay down beside her. We drank more Robitussin. Eventually we heard my mother calling a cab and shutting the front door behind her. We held each other tight and cried ourselves to sleep.

Several days later an envelope arrived from my mother. It contained a newspaper clipping about our elaborate church wedding, the lavish reception at the Pontchartrain Hotel, and our plans for a Tuscan honeymoon in the spring.

Tony E.

Bay St. Louis, Mississippi

WHEN MY PARENTS WROTE TO TELL me that a childhood friend of mine was getting married, they sent a bus ticket along with the invitation. I was touched by their gesture, but I was decidedly not interested. I had dropped out of high school five years earlier and was now a full-blown drug addict. I hadn't seen my friend since we were ten. Although I had fond memories of her, I couldn't imagine facing her and answering chatty questions about the squalid life I had made for myself. When my boyfriend traded in the ticket for money to buy heroin, I didn't object.

Weeks later, I went to pick up my check at the unemployment office. It was a particularly dismal day, and I felt trembly and drippy and achy: the beginning of dope sickness. Worse than the symptoms was the certainty that I would spend the entire check on dope, and my next check wouldn't come for two weeks.

That morning, my boyfriend and I had brainstormed about things we could steal and sell to make money. When we failed to come up with any promising ideas, he had calmly suggested that maybe I could turn a few tricks, as a "time-efficient" way to get some cash. Although the idea made me wince, I felt too hopeless to be mad or offended. It wasn't as though I had

never considered it. I had already done just about everything else I had promised myself I would never do: what was so different about this?

Staring out the bus window on the way to the unemployment office, I caught a glimpse of a cat's bright eyes in the shadows under someone's front stoop. I thought about my friend, who would be married in eight days. I remembered how when she and I were kids, we used to stage weddings for the barn cats that were our not-quite-pets. We'd snatch two of them up and dress them in doll clothes, then walk the cat bride and groom down the aisle on their back paws until they inevitably escaped, sometimes giving us well-deserved scratches.

Her upcoming wedding suddenly seemed like an opportunity to escape from my self-inflicted misery.

I collected my check and met my dope dealer as planned, but before I could change my mind, I bought a one-way bus ticket home, departing the following evening, and hid it deep in the secret lining of my bag. Then I returned to my room and packed my scant belongings.

The next day, shortly after my boyfriend and I had our morning fix, a fellow addict appeared with a trunkful of stolen video cameras. We spent the better part of the day riding from pawnshop to pawnshop, telling sad stories and collecting handfuls of bills. When we tried to find a dealer, however, we couldn't reach anyone we knew, so we bought some dope from a guy in an alley. It turned out to be crap. Our addict friend promised us a sure score if we could wait a few hours.

I still can't believe how close I came to missing my bus so I could wait for that connection.

Gathering all the willpower I had, I announced I was going to buy cigarettes. I gave my boyfriend a longer-than-usual kiss goodbye, but he was sulking about the bad dope and didn't notice. I arrived at the Greyhound station with five minutes to spare.

One excruciating week later, I stood in a packed, steamy church wearing a borrowed silk dress. I barely recognized my friend and spent most of the reception hiding in the bathroom. But I never

shot dope again.

J.P.
University Park, Maryland

I WAS AN IMPRESSIONABLE YOUNG girl, fresh from boarding school, when I entered a monastery. This was in the 1950s, before Vatican II, and nuns were still considered “brides of Christ.” I looked forward to my investiture, six months away, at which I would wear the flowing white gown and gauzy veil of a bride.

Our monastery had two wedding gowns, which were let out or taken in to accommodate each “bride.” The novice mistress had me try on both gowns. One of them fit, albeit snugly. A week later, I donned the gown again, this time with the abbess and vicaress present. The gown was now too tight. Always a plump teenager, I had gained a few pounds on the monastic diet of pasta, potatoes, and bread.

“Too heavy for a young girl,” said the vicaress, whose own girth almost matched her height.

Her words burned in my ears. I’d thought I could stop worrying about my weight when I’d entered the monastery. After all, God didn’t care if I was stout or thin. But even here, it seemed, size mattered.

I’d been on a perpetual diet in high school. My mother used to say I could lose ten pounds — in each leg. I escaped the constant harping in boarding school, until a portly nun stopped me in the hallway to ask how I was enjoying my stay there.

“I love it, Mother,” I answered. “It feels like home.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she replied, her smiling face wreathed in chins. “And what are you doing besides enjoying school and getting fat?” Then she glided away, her black veil and habit billowing behind her like a pirate sail.

After the incident with the bridal gown, I thought, *I’ll show them all. I’ll get so thin they will beg me to eat.*

And so I cut my food consumption each day until I was eating practically nothing — a sliver of egg, a piece of lettuce. On the day of the investiture ceremony, the wedding gown zipped up with ease. I had not only become a bride of

Christ; I had become anorexic.

Beryl Singleton Bissell
Schroeder, Minnesota

I HAD BEEN DATING RON, A CHILD-hood friend, for several years. Marriage was an unspoken assumption between us. Meanwhile we were attending separate graduate schools more than a thousand miles apart.

I thought occasionally about where Ron and I would marry and what kind of wedding it would be. I even picked up an issue of *Mademoiselle* that featured “folkloric” wedding gowns, which were the height of fashion in 1971. The dress on the cover struck a deep, romantic chord in me: layered dotted swiss with puffy sleeves ending in long Victorian cuffs. I tucked the magazine away among my notes and occasionally pulled it out to dream of finding such a gown — though I couldn’t hope to buy one on my limited income.

That spring my housemate Catherine asked if I would like to spend the weekend in New York City, where she was going to visit her parents. Never having been to New York, I eagerly accepted. As I packed, I pulled the magazine from its hiding place and looked on the “where to find merchandise” page. The gown was listed under Lord & Taylor, New York City. Maybe I could just try it on.

Early Saturday morning, while Catherine was visiting with her mom and dad, I made my way to Lord & Taylor. I told the saleswoman that I had no money, but she happily filled the dressing room with all the wedding gowns from the magazine. She seemed to delight in my childish pleasure as I tried on gown after gown. I was saving the cover dress for last when the attendant burst into the dressing room and said: “You’re a perfect size 10.”

“Yes, I suppose I am,” I replied.

She tossed a wedding gown in my direction and told me a young woman and her mother were there to “see” gowns, but the model had not shown up. Would I do it?

I had little choice. She had already pulled the first gown over my head.

I spent an hour or more parading around in dresses while the young woman and her mother watched. Finally, the

two selected a dress, and I returned to the changing room to find the beautiful gown from the magazine cover. It was still my favorite, even after I’d tried on almost everything in the store.

The attendant walked in and saw the gown in my arms. “Take it,” she said.

“What?”

“Take it. We have no contract with you as a model, and I was wondering how to pay you. Take the dress.”

I returned home with my gown and called Ron that very evening. “Will you marry me?” I asked.

“Of course I will,” he said, laughing.

“No, you don’t understand,” I said. “I’m serious. I already have a wedding gown.”

More than thirty years later, we are still married.

Wanda Burch
Fultonville, New York

(end of excerpt)