

The Best Day of Someone Else's Life

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Extract

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PART ONE

My First, Her Third

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The first wedding I ever went to was my aunt's third, and it wouldn't be her last.

My Aunt Jackie was beautiful, and demanded attention like neon graffiti on a church. She gave me my first taste of schnapps, a delicious, minty syrup that I later learned was good when drunk sparingly and disastrous when guzzled. Most importantly, Jackie gave me my first taste of the BDOYL.

At age six I was too young to realize that Jackie's (third) wedding was the beginning of my indoctrination. That my participation in the wedding ritual was intended to sucker me down my own bridal path, ring on my finger as firmly as a bit between the teeth, to what the world would view as my greatest accomplishment: the Best Day Of Your Life. The BDOYL begs the question of why girls are so eager to get married if it's all downhill from there. After the vows, does life hold only lesser happinesses, the mildly unfulfilling expectation that today might be the *Second Best Day Of Your Life* – but only if it's really, really good? Like winning the lottery, having a baby, or bumping into the ninth-grade bully Susan Bland and seeing that she's gotten fat and has some sort of skin condition while you have your skinny pants on.

But, as my aunt was having one of the three greatest days of her life (thus far), my brainwashing commenced. I was oblivious, of course. I was never very bright that way. It was third grade before I figured out the bait-and-switch of

the New Lunch Box. Each August, I'd happily trail my mother to pick out a new My Little Pony or Strawberry Shortcake lunch box, eager to strut the new model at school. Dazzled by my shiny object, I'd be unwrapping my cream cheese and jelly sandwich on the first day before realizing I'd been duped into a classroom prison for the whole year. With my aunt's wedding, instead of a lunch box, I was given a basket of flower petals and, instead of school, I was sucked into an elaborate 'marry'-tale about the BDOYL.

My encoding would progress from merrily scattering rose petals to the doctrinal texts of *Cinderella*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, and *Sweet, Savage Love*. (What can I say? I was a precocious reader.) Then came the junior preparatory rituals. I staged weddings between Barbie and Ken, and between my Sea Wees mermaid dolls and my brother's G.I. Joes, blissfully ignoring the sticky I-live-on-land-you-live-underwater issue. No problemo. It's true love. I would later observe similar reality avoidance in many a determined bride, myopically focusing on her glorious BDOYL whilst railroading blindly past warning flares: Fiancé has never filed an income tax return, Fiancé spends more on cosmetics than you, or Fiancé drives an '82 El Camino and calls it a 'venerable classic.' Worry not. It's true love.

Eventually, the BDOYL story led to eleven trips down the aisle, nine one-wear-only dresses in colors to make the blind wince, five pairs of dyed-to-match shoes, thirteen Very Humiliating Moments, six seriously regretted hook-ups, one sprained ankle, four allergic reactions, seven stitches, multiple hangovers, and a total cost exceeding \$56,800. And that was just *other* people's weddings.

Not surprisingly, I developed a healthy skepticism about marriage. Which isn't fair, really, since I embrace Christmas wholeheartedly, turning a blind eye to the same corruptions there. But I did, so there you have it. They'd title *The Movie Starring Me*, *The Grinch Who Stole First Corinthians*. You may mist up at the first mention of, 'Love is patient, love is

kind . . .', but trust me, by the fifth time they trot out this warhorse of wedding readings, you'll be looking to bury your lavender satin pump in the minister's eye socket.

But not at the beginning. At age six, at my aunt's wedding, I presaged none of this. I was solely interested in being the center of attention and annoying my cousin.

I couldn't be Barbie. I knew that. But when I saw Jackie in her gown, I saw a version of princessness within my reach. You got the billowy, shiny white dress and the sparkly earrings and the delicate shiny shoes. An admitted sucker for shiny objects, I was enslaved. When it was my turn, I would glisten and smile and laugh charmingly at my own carefully selected audience, self-conscious of my lofty status and the attention pinned to me as I twirled gracefully on the arm of my prince, a crisply tuxedoed figure crowned with a blurry face befitting his lesser status in the affair. The marriage to follow had no traction with me, but the lure of the wedding itself was awesome.

I didn't remember much about Jackie's Husband Number One except that he looked like one of the bad guys in *Return from Witch Mountain* and swept me into a lap that smelled like garlic. Husband Number Two was pretty in the way of gleaming appliances or game show hosts. He called me 'Littlekin' and gave me smooth, round stones that he'd polished in a machine that made loud grinding noises. Jackie met him when she worked in her first husband's office. People didn't talk about it, so I knew something wasn't right. People didn't talk about *him* anymore because he was in jail.

Now Jackie was marrying Cub. I didn't know much about him either, except that Jackie was happy to be getting married and Cub was helping her. The whole time Jackie was dating Cub, the adults would ask, 'When are they getting married, when are they getting married?' Getting married was what everyone wanted, you knew that from the

way people talked, and that's why you had weddings, which were the best things ever.

Watching Jackie star in her big show, I was ready to be princess by proxy. My white-blond hair hung in curler-enforced ringlets that contrasted starkly with my stick-straight bangs and the occasional escapee curler-eluding strand. I wore a floor-length Holly Hobbie-style pinafore and clutched a basket of pink-and-yellow rose petals. My cousin Jared was seven, and wore one of those short pant suits that distort a little boy into a mini-man in a way that emphasizes his childishness. Plaid, of course, because it was the 1970s.

'You look like a girl,' Jared said scornfully. Boys are immune to wedding infection, not realizing that Something Important is happening. Jared was unhappy because he wanted to run around but had been threatened with a wallop if he didn't behave. Jackie would do it too, and we both knew it.

'I *am* a girl.' I stepped in front of him and smiled beatifically at an arriving guest. No hiding in mother's skirts for me. I relished the attention.

'Oh, aren't you sweet . . .' cooed a grey-haired matron in a puckery lavender suit. She patted my head. 'Now, what's your name?'

'I'm Kevin,' I said. 'I'm the flower girl.'

It's true. My name is Kevin. When my mother was pregnant, my parents were convinced they were having a boy. Apparently I was holding my fingers in *just* the right place during the sonogram. Thrilled, they picked the solidly Irish Kevin, after Saint Kevin of County Wicklow, near my father's ancestral home of Glendalough. Kevin nicely means beautiful, gentle, and lovable, not bad qualities for a kid. Also, legend has it that the good Saint Kevin lived to the ripe old age of 120 years, harnessing hopes of longevity for his similarly dubbed progeny. Most importantly, Kevin was the only name my parents could agree upon. Exhausted over the

insurmountable Connor versus Ethan hostilities, they clung to the Kevin détente like a life-raft. When I showed up, they were too surprised and worn-out to consider any alternatives. So, Kevin Adair Connelly it was. People mostly called me Vi, the best girlish derivative for Kevin, unless I was in trouble. Then my mother called me Kevin. Adair. Connelly. With menace in the pauses.

The woman in lavender looked confused. I smiled winningly.

‘Well, now. Isn’t that nice?’ She hesitated, decided against further comment and escaped into the church.

No one else came to pet me. Bored, I kicked Jared. He tried to retaliate but I was too quick and leapt away. He reached out in time to yank a handful of my non-natural curls and I began to cry, not because it hurt but because I wanted to get him in trouble. My mother rustled toward us in a long, stiff, flowered gown.

‘What’s going on, you two? Jared, I told you to behave.’

‘She kicked me,’ he whined.

‘I don’t care who did what. This is Jackie’s day, and I won’t have you ruin it for her. If you don’t behave, you’re both going back to the hotel to stay with the babysitter and the baby. Is that what you want?’ My mother was tall and willowy, and an expert at Looming.

Eyes on the floor, we shook our heads mutely. We did not want the shame of having to stay with the babysitter.

‘Behave.’ My mother liked that word. She rustled away. I stuck my tongue out at Jared. He scowled at me. My mother turned around and shot us a look. I beamed at her. She resumed her conversation.

‘You’re such a tattletale,’ Jared accused, conveniently forgetting that he had been the one to tattle.

I glared at him and huffed off, basket held high. In a room off a side hallway a gaggle of ladies were squawking around Jackie. They hovered like a gnat swarm, preening

her, vying to be singled out, and basking in the runoff from the Bride.

‘Do you have something blue, Jackie?’ Maria was Jackie’s friend with stern features. ‘You must have something blue or it’s bad luck.’

Jackie flipped up her gown to reveal a blue swatch pinned under her skirt.

‘Jackie, you need more blush . . . your cheeks are so pale. Here, let me.’ My Aunt Leigh attacked Jackie with a makeup brush.

‘Close your eyes,’ ordered Aunt Shannon, before dousing Jackie in a liberal application of Clairol Final Net, triggering a fit of coughing from Jackie and temporary dissipation of the gnats. The swarm quickly reconfigured.

‘Oh God! You’ve got a spot on your dress!’ One of her bridesmaids, Emily, dabbed at an invisible stain with a washcloth.

There are three types of women who flutter about the Bride. Type One tries to recapture her own moment in the sun. She takes wedding details personally. She cares what kinds of flowers are in the Bride’s bouquet. Type Two has never been married, and craves her own chance in the sun. Longing to be runner-up in the princess pageant, she cares about blocking and choreography. It matters where she stands in the altar lineup. Type Three wants to shine in her own way, with the Bride as a foil. Type Three will impress the world with her skill, as she efficiently bustles the Bride’s gown, or with her prescience, as she produces a safety pin and a Band-Aid from her purse and fashions a MacGyver-like repair to a torn train. She wants to be seen fluffing the Bride’s train at the altar. Occasionally an attendant genuinely wants the Bride to be happy, and is there solely to support her. This is rare. Most of us are seduced into craving a sliver of our own limelight.

I was all about limelight. Swatting through the gnat swarm, I planted myself in Jackie’s line of vision. Her

glance flicked in my direction, then away, stalling my mission.

'I need to stretch my legs,' she said. There was a soft but audible intake of air. Then the gnats jockeyed to offer best insider knowledge of the Wedding Ritual, ignoring the reality of Jackie's thorough personal experience.

'Someone might see you!' Emily's voice radiated horror.

'It's bad luck!' Aunt Shannon's tone raised Emily's a notch.

'No one can see the bride before the ceremony.' The purple feather on the hat of a woman named Melanie twitched with apprehension.

Jackie flapped an impatient hand. 'I'll be careful.' She wrestled herself upright in the confining gown, a swath of white satin beaded with tiny pearls rolling to the ground, shoulders and neck erect with stiff lace. 'I just need a minute. Alone. Please.'

Amidst disapproving clucking, the Bride took evasive action, leaving her ladies bereft. I hung around waiting to be noticed and petted but got bored because no one did. After a silence, Melanie pronounced Jackie the most beautiful bride, and said that she, Melanie, had insisted on the long veil. Immediately, the gnats all buzzed, highlighting their own contributions, heady again with the excitement. Limelightless, I wandered out.

I followed the sound of a door down the hall, where Jackie was entering another room. Inside, a man in a black suit with a flower on his lapel was reading a folded piece of paper. Jackie spotted him, smiled, and headed determinedly towards him.

'Nick,' she giggled, tilting her head. He looked up and smiled wolfishly. I pressed against the door.

'Jackie,' he leered. 'Don't you know it's bad luck to be seen before the wedding?' Palpable vibrations radiated from them. Was this something else that happened to brides? I didn't know who he was, but he wasn't Cub. His smirking at

Jackie reminded me of Bluto, the villain from Popeye. As an adult I'd describe that look as salacious. Of course, at six, I didn't know what 'salacious' meant. I did know what 'trouble' meant. My aunt was feeling feisty and I was looking at Trouble.

'As a matter of fact,' she flirted, 'I've done this once or twice before, so I can't say that *not* being seen causes *good* luck.' Jackie laughed. Bluto the Villain laughed too.

'Don't worry, babe. Third time's a charm. Cub's a lucky guy.'

'He's a good alternative to what I really want,' Jackie purred.

Bluto gleamed at her. 'And what would that be . . . ?'

She leaned in. 'That would be . . .' She drew out her pause '. . . a cigarette. And a shot,' she laughed. She was playing a funny game where she talked really quiet and stood close, like Telephone. She tickled him too.

Bluto laughed. 'The Dolphin Queen smokes? Well, blow me down.'

Jackie looked delighted with herself, another sign of Trouble. She batted her eyelashes. 'I don't know what you mean,' she pouted.

'Well,' drawled her willing victim, 'I may be just what you need.'

'Oh?' She raised her brows. 'How's that?'

Winking, Bluto produced a flat silver object from his pocket.

'You've got to be kidding!' Jackie pounced. 'My hero.' She opened the silver thing and knocked back a healthy gulp. She tilted her head and made a production of sighing as she swallowed. Then she looked at Bluto and licked her lips really, really slowly, like she had just eaten a cupcake with lots of icing.

Putting her palms against Bluto's chest, she leaned toward him. 'For that,' she breathed, 'you get a reward.'

'And what might that be?' He slid a hand over her bottom.

'Mmmm, I'm not sure. It should be something really good. Something *very* good . . . like that time at Jefferson Park.'

'Yes,' he said. 'That was a good time.' Bluto put his other hand on her waist and slid it up. Jackie drew in a quick breath.

'Or that time in Walter's backyard.' She leaned closer.

'That was a good one, too.' His hand slid higher.

'Or that time we parked at the end of the airport runway.' Jackie's face was barely an inch from his face.

'That was definitely a good time.' He growled, and covered her mouth with his. I gaped, witnessing my first passionate adult kiss.

My mother walked in.

'Oh Jesus,' she said. Jackie and Bluto jumped apart. Jackie recovered quickly.

'What?' She assumed an innocent look.

'For God's sake,' swore my mother.

'It's not like that,' Jackie chose indignant. 'I had a cigarette and Nick was checking my breath.'

'How dumb do you think I am?' My mother was now looming over Jackie. Bluto began backing away; the two women ignored him.

'Jackie, for Christ's sake! It's time for you to get *married*. To *Cub*?' My mother ranted, lasering a look at Bluto, who froze and looked sheepish. 'Remember *Cub*? Remember the *white dress*? Lots of *people*. A *priest*. Right here in this *house of God*. You are *getting married* in *five minutes*. If you don't *screw it up*!' You could hear audible italics.

Jackie looked petulant. 'Yes, I suppose. But—'

My saddle shoes slipped, and banged the door against the wall. All eyes jumped to me. 'Vi,' my mother started, 'where did you come from?'

I looked mutely at them. Jackie didn't meet my eyes. My

mother shifted quickly from Looming to view-blocking. Taking his chance, Bluto scuttled out the far door.

‘Have you been there long, scooter?’ My mother tried to sound as if it didn’t matter. I shook my head. ‘I expect you’ve come looking for this pretty princess.’ She nodded toward Jackie. I nodded back. ‘All right then. Best that we head to our places,’ she said breezily.

In a lower tone to Jackie, ‘We’ll finish *our* conversation later.’

Back in the dressing room, the gnat swarm engulfed the Bride again until a pert woman in a blue suit popped in and announced, ‘Five minutes.’

Next thing I knew, the lady in blue gave me a push and all the people were smiling at me. I walked slowly towards the front of the church. The lady in blue motioned frantically. I stopped, confused. She made a picking and throwing motion, and I remembered the rose petals. Nervous now, I grabbed a great gob of petals and threw it at the ground. People tittered. I started to relish the attention. I grabbed another handful of petals. At the front of the church I turned and faced a red carpet littered with clumps of rose petals at intervals, like piles of rabbit droppings, and Jared walking behind me with a satin pillow, looking scared and angry at the same time.

A few moments later, my mother and the other ladies walked unnaturally down the aisle like uncomfortable soldiers, elbows sticking out awkwardly, clutching their flowers and smiling too big. Then the music changed and everyone stood up. The door opened again, and Jackie came down the aisle in her big white dress. It sparkled when she walked. Everyone stared and smiled really hard. She walked slowly, smiling hard back. Limelight. I wanted to be Jackie so badly I could taste it. Just wait, I vowed. I would marry my dad or someone just like him. That would be me some day.

After the ceremony, the photographer grouped the family, long, bright dresses in front of tuxedos with ruffled shirts. We faced the camera and smiled as though our faces would break. Jackie bore the widest smile of all, bright lipstick gleaming. The photographer snapped picture after picture and captured the happy event for all eternity.

I would remember how different my aunt looked when she arrived at our house one night a year later with a puffy face and red eyes, before I was sent out so the adults could be alone. I went to my room and opened my Barbie coloring book to one of the best pictures, where Barbie, in a long sparkling gown, goes to the ball with Ken. Humming to myself, I picked a silver crayon and began to color, dreaming of heavy satin dresses and crowds of people smiling at me.