



The Wedding Gown

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Robin Fisher stands stiff as meringue at the top of a marble staircase, clutching her father's arm, awaiting her cue. She sweats. Moisture trickles down the jeweled bodice of her raw silk, off-the-shoulder, hand-beaded gown featured on page fifty-six of the February 2005 issue of "Modern Bride." Perspiration pools in the cups of her push-up bra. Her feet ache, pinched by the pointy toes of her Manolo Blahnik satin stilettos. Any minute now she'll hear the familiar strains of "Here Comes the Bride" and float down the steps like Cinderella on her way to meet Prince Charming; in this case, David Stuart Rabinowitz, Attorney-at-Law. Robin prays she won't trip on the cathedral train trailing behind her like a fallen parachute or catch the Chantilly lace of her billowing hem on one of her perilous heels.

"How you doing, Honey?" Jack Fisher says. He squeezes his daughter's hand.

"Fine," Robin squeaks. She clutches her white rose bouquet close to her trembling lips; the sweet scent makes her sick to her stomach. She is pale as a Kabuki dancer, despite the raspberry frappe lipstick, misty mauve blush, and three colors of eye shadow applied two hours earlier by a makeup artist from Bellissima Salon known only as "V."

"You look radiant." Elaine Fisher says. She flutters around Robin like a hummingbird, adjusting her veil and fluffing the gown's train, then takes her place next to her daughter as is the custom in Jewish weddings.

The train is not the best idea, Robin knows. Overkill for an afternoon garden affair. But the train, she believes, makes a statement. The train is serious. The train is epic. The train signals longevity. The train makes it clear to all four hundred ruffled and tuxedoed guests, whose posteriors are poised on damask-draped seats and will soon be plopped next to round tables topped with white lace cloths and white lilies and white lit

candles, that her marriage is meant to be.

After reading twelve magazines, after checking six web sites, after attending three bridal shows, after shopping at eight stores, after trying on sixty-one dresses, Robin finally reached a decision.

“Mom, this is the one.” She twirled in front of the dressing room mirror as if she were a prima ballerina. “I feel like a real bride.”

“You look gorgeous,” Elaine said. “Like a princess.”

Robin checked the gown’s price tag. “Oh my God!”

Elaine lifted her reading glasses to her nose and peered at the numbers. “Ten thousand dollars. Well, you’re worth it, Honey.”

“What will Daddy say?” A squirt of acid dripped down Robin’s esophagus.

“He’ll come around. After all, you’re our only daughter.”

“I know, but. . .”

“Your wedding is once in a lifetime.” Elaine spoke to Robin’s reflection. “It’s *your* moment. I compromised on my gown and to this day it upsets me when I look at my pictures.”

Robin ordered the dress then chewed two Pepcid tablets. She was committed. No returns.

The rabbi, a distant cousin of the groom, takes his place under the *chupah* as a string quartet strikes up The Brandenburg Concerto No. 2. On the patio, the wedding planner gives last minute notes to the caterer.

Robin checks the position of her tiara, a complex weave of seed pearls and silk flowers, intertwined with her cascading auburn curls. She wears something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue, even though she’s not superstitious. Elaine insisted. The “blue” is a topaz heart sparkling in the second hole of her left ear, a gift from Michelle, her matron of honor. No doubt, Michelle’s toast at the reception will be sentimental and teary and gushy. Michelle will take credit for the marriage because her husband Josh introduced Robin to David, one of his AEPi fraternity brothers from UCLA. Yes, Robin owes it all to Michelle.

When the two best friends shopped for bridesmaid dresses, rifling through rack after rack after rack, Robin broached the subject of her wedding jitters.

“I think my parents love David more than I do,” she said.

“You’re probably right.” Michelle studied a champagne chiffon gown. “I’ve seen the way your mom looks at him. Not very motherly.”

Robin snickered. “David’s the dream son-in-law. Respectful, thoughtful, attentive.” She pointed to a coral slip dress. “This is cute.”

“Definitely not my style.”

Robin shrugged. “David and my Dad go on and on about torts and contracts and ex parte and pro se and all that boring stuff.”

“It’s nice they have so much in common.”

“I guess.” Robin skimmed through a cluster of flowered frocks. “David and I never fight. We barely argue. Is that weird?”

“It means you’re compatible.” Michelle held up a strapless scarlet gown slit to the hip and posed as if she were a tango dancer. “This is hot.”

Robin glanced over her shoulder. “Too hot. The attention is supposed to be on me.”

“Right.” Michelle returned the dress to its spot.

Robin caressed the fabric of a key lime Alfred Angelo cocktail dress. “Y’know, sometimes I wish David and I *would* fight.”

“Why?” Michelle eyed her friend with suspicion.

“So we could have makeup sex.”

Michelle giggled like a tickled toddler. “Makeup sex is the best.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Robin said. “Let’s get some lunch.”

Flashbulbs pop like fireworks as the groomsmen stride down the staircase, heralding David’s entrance. There are eight: Robin’s brother Matt, Josh, five assorted friends and cousins, plus David’s brother Jonathan, the best man. Next, Grandma Sophie hobbles down the aisle, escorted by Carl Fisher, Robin’s favorite uncle.

“Doesn’t Grandma look beautiful?” Elaine says. She pulls a handkerchief from the sleeve of her dress and dabs at her eyes. It seems to Robin that her mother has been

crying with happiness for weeks. Robin hasn't cried at all.

At the engagement party at The Fishers' house, Grandma Sophie grabbed Robin's arm with her arthritic fingers.

"David is such a handsome boy," the tiny woman said. "Such a *mensch*."

Robin noticed a balding spot on top of Sophie's head. "I'm glad you like him, Grandma."

"Such *naches*. Thank God you're getting married while I'm still alive. I was beginning to wonder."

Robin clenched her teeth, a habit she'd developed since saying "yes" to David; the stress of planning a wedding, she assumed. David had proposed at sunset on the beach in Santa Barbara and placed a blinding, round, two-carat diamond solitaire on Robin's finger. She would have preferred something less flashy—smaller with baguettes—but all her friends oohed and aahed and wowed when they saw it. At thirty-six, with a steady design job and growing 401K, Robin was ready—anxious really—to get married. And as her mother never hesitated to remind her, "Sweetie, you won't have the bloom of youth forever." She and David had dated for a year and then she'd moved into his condo. Marriage was the next logical step. What was the point of staying together if they didn't envision a future, didn't plan to pass on their genes? Robin's biological clock was tick, tick, ticking. She longed for motherhood and feared she might become a science project like her forty-two-year-old sister-in-law Rachel, who was injected by Matt with fertility drugs after he practiced on an orange. No, she would not waste time in a dead-end relationship. David couldn't wait to be a father. David would be a wonderful father.

"Robin, listen to this." Uncle Carl pulled her aside. He was a bear of a man, six feet tall with an impressive paunch. "I had a little talk with David. I told him you were a gem, an absolute gem, and he'd better treat you right, or else." Carl grinned beneath his grey moustache. "And you know what David said? He said he'd cherish you. Cherish. Such a word. Poetry. What do you think of that?"

Robin felt her stomach churn. Time to swallow another Pepcid. "That's so sweet," she said.

Later in the evening, David handed Robin a glass of champagne and guided her to

the dessert table. He clinked a spoon against his glass and the guests quieted.

“Robin and I would like to thank the Fishers for an amazing party,” David said. “We’re deeply touched. It’s been an amazing evening.” He smiled at Jack and Elaine, his cosmetically-whitened teeth gleaming. “It’s an honor to be part of such an amazing family.”

Robin stared at her fiancé as if she were a neutral observer and assessed him: short, curly black hair, no sign of recession; dark brown eyes; distinguished nose; strong, masculine jaw. Yes, he was handsome—in a bland sort of way.

“I’ll save most of my sentiments for the wedding,” David continued. “But I do want to say I can’t wait until Robin and I start married life together. He wrapped his arm around Robin like a sheltering angel. She’s my dream girl, my soul mate, my one true love. She’s amazing.”

Robin froze like an ice sculpture. Amazing, amazing, amazing echoed in her head. David looked at her expectantly. “I’ll drink to that,” she said finally and chugged her champagne.

The procession continues, a parade of pretty women in pastel sheaths—puffs of lavender, mauve, mint green, and apricot. Robin’s intended effect was an impressionist painting—Monet’s garden at Giverny—but now the attendants remind her of Easter basket leftovers. What was she thinking? Michelle blows her a kiss and glides down the steps. The ring bearer, David’s nephew, and the flower girl, Robin’s niece (Rachel finally conceived), meander down the aisle, little Hailey wide-eyed, dropping rose petals. Robin feels dizzy and her body lists to the left.

“You okay, Honey?” Jack asks.

Robin opens her mouth but her words are stuck in her windpipe

A half hour ago, dressed, painted and prepped, her picture already taken with Elaine, the two of them gazing into a mirror, mother touching daughter’s veil, duplicating the pose Elaine and Grandma Sophie had assumed thirty-seven years before, Robin sat on a cherry chaise lounge with Michelle in the bride’s quarters. Waiting.

“I’m so happy for you,” Michelle said. She hugged Robin, careful not to smear

her make-up. Robin shuddered and clung to Michelle, crumpling her gown between them.

“You’re shaking, Robbie!”

“I’m . . . so . . . scared.”

“That’s normal. I was scared when I married Josh.”

“Tell me I’m not making a mistake.” Robin grabbed Michelle by the shoulders.

“Of course you’re not. David adores you.”

“I know. It’s just that he’s so damn. . .predictable.”

“Sweetie, when you know someone really well, you start to finish each other’s sentences. That’s how married couples are.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Tell me.” Michelle rested her hand on Robin’s arm.

“Remember Miles?”

“Oh yeah. The weird tattoo guy.”

“Tattoo *artist*. And he’s not weird. Just unconventional.” Robin stared out the window at a perfect cumulus cloud. “Sometimes I wonder, *what if?*”

Michelle scrunched her nose. “He’s not exactly marriage material.”

“Maybe not, but Miles was exciting. He kept me on edge. In a good way.”

“He’s a bad boy. And you’re a good girl.”

“Not that good.”

“I can just picture him talking shop with your father.”

Robin ran her polished fingernail along the arm of the chaise marking a line in the velvet.

“We talked about art for hours—Miro, Morandi, Modigliani. We laughed at the same, stupid jokes. One night we ate at a snooty restaurant and pretended we were Russian diplomats, complete with fake accents.”

“That’s hardly enough for a lasting relationship.”

Robin pouted. “David hates modern art.”

Michelle hugged her. “Who cares? So does Josh. You’re picking at any old thing now. Looking for flaws.”

Robin blew out a long breath of air. “You’re right. I’m just cranky. I didn’t get

enough sleep last night.”

The wedding planner knocked on the door and poked her head in. “It’s time,” she sang.

David, arm-in-arm with his parents, descends the stairs in his Armani tux. His eyes glisten and he smiles, so genuine, so joyful. He’s a dreamboat, Robin thinks. Someone else’s dreamboat.

“Daddy. . . .”

“Yes, Honey.”

“Daddy. . . .”

Elaine juts in front of them and straightens her husband’s bow tie for the third time.

“Sweetheart, you’re driving me crazy,” Jack says.

“Sorry. Nervous energy.” She kisses his cheek then rubs off the lipstick mark.

“I’m just so excited.”

Jack takes her hands in his.

“Daddy. . . .” Robin says. Jack does not hear her. He and Elaine are lost in a private moment.

The first four chords of “Here Comes the Bride” ring out, beckoning, triumphant.

“This is it!” Jack says. He lets go of his wife’s hands and kisses Robin on the forehead. “My precious daughter. We couldn’t be happier.” His eyes, green like Robin’s, fill with tears. “We already love David like a son.”

For a moment Robin stands still as a mannequin. Then she lifts her head, stares straight into the photographer’s camera, and forms her lips into an imitation of a smile.

“Let’s go,” she says, her voice quivering. She wills her body forward. She inhales deeply to keep from gagging. *Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. Step. Breathe. StePAHHHHHHHHHHH.*

Robin’s right stiletto heel pierces the lace at the edge of her gown. She hears a faint rip and she teeters and trips and tumbles and tumbles and tumbles down the stairs, a cloud of white, the cathedral train wrapping around her like a cocoon. In unison, the guests rise to their feet. The bridesmaids strike poses of horror, hands over their mouths

or clasped to their bosoms. Robin flops and lands at the bottom of the staircase. She moans, the sound muffled beneath layers of veil. She moans again.

One shapely bridal leg lays exposed, revealing a pink, lace garter and a scraped knee. Below it, Robin's ankle bends at a peculiar, painful angle. Several steps above, a satin shoe rests like Cinderella's slipper abandoned at the ball. Guests' voices rise in a growing din as they share their disbelief. Defrosting from their shock, the bridesmaids cluster, wondering what to do. Jack and Elaine dash down the stairs. David rushes to Robin's side.

"Robin, my God, are you okay?" His voice is anguished and worry lines are creased between his brows. He crouches next to Robin and envelopes her. "My sweet Baby."

"My ankle." Robin whimpers.

"Is there a doctor in the house?" Jack shouts, his last word a hoarse cry.

What an absurd question, Robin thinks. There are probably twenty.

Her cousin Kenny, the orthopedist, pushes through the crowd and kneels at her side.

"Robbie, I'm going to examine your leg." He presses the limb working from the top down: femur, patella, tibia. "Does this hurt?" Robin shakes her head. "Does this?" He prods her ankle gently.

Robin yelps.

"Your ankle is broken, Robbie. I don't think anything else is. We'd better get you to a hospital."

"But what about the wedding?" Elaine says. Her eyes bulge.

Dr. Kenny looks at her as if she's insane. "Robin will probably need surgery, Aunt Elaine. She needs to go to Valley General now."

A relative from the groom's side joins them. "There's an ambulance on the way!"

Robin moans again. She stares at a run trickling down her hose in a jagged stripe.

"Someone get some ice," Kenny says. "You're going to be okay, Robbie." He pats her arm. "Just fine."

Robin snuffles and nods. Her ankle throbs.

"Thanks God," David says. He brushes a string of seed pearls from Robin's eyes

and kisses her cheeks, nose, chin, his lips lingering.

Tension fades from Robin's face and color seeps back in. She closes her eyes and focuses on the pulsating pain. A reprieve.

No one sees her raspberry lips curl in a smile.