

The Wedding Dress

by

Tara Waters Lumpkin

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The face in the mirror stared back at her. It was a very pretty face, but she wasn't convinced that it was her own. It looked too grown-up.

Ellen wore an ivory-colored wedding dress once bought at a prestigious department store in Manhattan. It had long sleeves and a tight bodice which pushed her breasts upward. Her red-gold hair fell over twenty-five of the fifty tiny silk buttons which closed the dress in back. She held a heavy wrought-silver mirror out in front of her. Her back was reflected in a full-length looking glass stuck on her mother's closet door. Below the line of dainty buttons the dress gathered into a bustle, and folds of rich silk fell to the floor. The skirt was supported by an old-fashioned hoop slip. Long sleeves buttoned tight at her wrists. There was lace on the cuffs and on the off-the-shoulder neckline. It was a beautiful dress.

The woman in the dress looked back at Ellen from the mirror. No, it certainly was not herself. The real Ellen was the woman in bare feet dressed up in someone else's wedding dress. The reflection trapped in the mirror was an imposter.

She took the dress off, carefully folded it, and put it back in the box. Sunlight streamed through the picture-glass window to the bed where the box lay. Chissy-boom slept curled up on a pillow. She made sure to shut the box tightly, so he couldn't sleep on the dress; after all, it wasn't hers.

Outside it was hot. Noon. She was hungry. In the garden she picked tomatoes and lettuce. Grasshoppers leapt on and off her brown legs and arms. Sticky heat. It was best to sit on the porch for a while, eat a salad and drink cold Heineken. Nothing to hurry about.

Chissy-boom came onto the porch and jumped into a swinging chair. Now that he was old he didn't like being left alone. Ellen went to the kitchen and poured him a saucer of milk. He got it in his whiskers and on the porch floor as he drank. "You old black cat," she said, stroking him. The afternoon was still. Fish rippled the pond down in the field. The dogs were asleep under the coolest bushes. She listened to the stream water running through the cow pasture. The beer made her dizzy. She was lethargic. Hard to think. Daddy would be coming home tonight.

The front screen door slammed. Ellen heard her mother and sister carrying packages. They rustled. Lily bumped into something and said, "Oh shit!"

"Ellen, you here? Where are you?" her mother called out through the old house.

"On the porch, Mum."

Chissy-boom jumped off the porch swing.

Jesus Christ, it's hot out today," said her mother, sitting down with an iced tea. There was a sprig of mint in the glass. "The air-conditioner in the Volvo's broken. I'm drenched," she went on.

Lily came out and sat down. "What have you been doing all day?" she asked.

She was tall, much taller than Ellen, and very thin. She ate pistachio ice cream from a carton, dripping green globs on the floor.

"Haven't been up to much," Ellen told her. "Tried on the wedding dress."

"How'd it look?"

"Alright. Sort of funny."

Her mother nodded her head and placed her glass on the table. She shook water droplets from her fingers. Although she had said that she was hot, she looked cool and calm.

"You two do the horses tonight, please. I've got to get ready for cocktails at the club." Her mother stopped before she reached the porch door. "Ellen, if you see your father when we come in tonight, you might tell him that the dress fits." Then she was gone.

"Come on, let's go do it now," Lily said. "I'll go run change."

"Meet you up there."

"O.K."

Bull frogs were croaking; their voices drifted up from the pond. Ellen leaned against the metal gate and looked for the horses. "W-o-o-hoo," she called. They started up the hill towards her, stopping every few yards to graze. They weren't in any hurry for dinner. The barn smelled of sweat-lathered tack. Lily came up and placed a flake of hay in each of the four stalls. "Nice to have only four to do. That's one good thing, for sure, about summer," Lily said.

Ellen was worrying about something, probably the dress. She didn't usually talk when she was worrying. She just came to the point, if that, and walked away from it all, like that time she had found out about one of Daddy's girlfriends.

"Might be best if you just refuse to wear the dress," suggested Lily.

"It's not like it's just any old dress. It's Dad's old girlfriend's dress, her old white wedding dress."

Their parents came home that night while Ellen and Lily were watching an old movie rerun of "King Kong." Holding their breath, they hoped their parents would go straight to bed. It was likely that they would be angry at one another.

Dad was the worst, because he would come in and make you feel guilty, as if you'd let him down, and then he'd say: I support you in whatever you decide to do.

"I hear Dad coming down the hall."

Lily was right. Floor boards were creaking. Old Chissy-boom jumped out of Ellen's lap and hid in the corner. Dad didn't like cats. He turned the corner and came into the den. His face was red. He was getting fatter and looked unhealthy.

"I hear the dress fits, sport," he said to Ellen and smiled.

He was trying to be cheerful and sensible. She didn't want to talk to him. She knew that pretty soon he'd say that he just-wanted-them-to-be-a-family-was-that-too-much-to-ask? But she and Lily didn't believe it. They'd heard that one for years. Being "just a family" meant being played off in parental warfare.

"Yeah, Dad, looks fine. It'll do," Ellen said, keeping her eyes glued to the television.

"Sport, Ellen, look at me."

Ellen looked at him, feeling a big knot in her stomach. I'll die of an ulcer at twenty-two, she thought.

"Yeah, Dad?"

"I don't think you should wear that wedding dress. O.K.? Buy a new one. You know how much of a busybody that woman is. It's not right. Wear her dress and, next thing you know, she'll be organizing your entire wedding. She'll be over here every day driving us all mad. Right?"

"But Daddy, a new wedding dress will be expensive. They cost a thousand dollars at least now for something nice." Her voice choked. She hated him for doing this to her. Why did he say such stupid things? It made him look like a fool.

"I feel very strongly about this," he continued.

"Oh, Dad, come on. Can't we talk about this another time?" she begged him.

He was quiet for a few moments.

"You know my reasons," he said softly.

He creaked back down the hallway.

Lily looked up from "King Kong" and said, "Some mess."

Ellen nodded her head in agreement.

A week passed. It was hotter now than ever. North Carolina weather gets so hot that people barely bother to breathe. Lily had gone up north to Nantucket with her beau. Ellen spent the morning on the lawn tractor. She wished she was anywhere but here, even though the cut grass smelled nice. At noon she went in the house to make lunch and take a cold shower. While rinsing off her plate, she heard a car pull in. It was Mrs. Harper, whistling under her breath in that obnoxious way she had, knocking on the door.

"Ellen, dear, I hear the dress isn't suitable."

That didn't seem to bother Mrs. Harper. What an act, Ellen thought, falling into step with her light banter.

"No, it's a little too big," she explained.

"Must have been. I told your mother and your father--they both called separately, you see--that you could have it taken in. They both said that you'd decided you wanted a different dress, a new one."

"Well, I sort of..."

"Yes, your father, he called first, told me that you wanted a new dress, and he felt bound to provide it. 'After all, you only get married once,' he said."

Ellen wished Mrs. Harper would drop dead right there on the doorstep. But it was funny, if you looked at it that way: Mrs. Harper standing there putting all this effort into this silly game they all played. He had a new girlfriend. They all knew that. And she was much younger than Mrs. Harper.

"And your mother called--why it couldn't have been more than half an hour after I talked to him (she said him with great emphasis) and said the dress didn't fit and would probably be too hot for an August wedding. I told her, 'Get it altered,' but she said you insisted you weren't wearing it. So since I was out this way, I thought I'd pick it up."

She's never going to shut up, Ellen thought.

"I'll go get the dress," Ellen said to her very politely.

She walked down the hall into her parent's bedroom. The shades were drawn. It was stifling hot. The box lay on the bed. Someone had taken the top off it. Chissy-boom was asleep on the dress. She moved him to a pillow and put the top back on. Then Ellen gave Mrs. Harper the box and walked her to her car.

"Actually, I just thought the dress was ugly. That's why I didn't want to wear it," Ellen explained.

"Oh, you are too funny," exclaimed Mrs. Harper as she got into her expensive car and drove away.

—The End—