

## The Wedding Gift / Amy Sage Webb

*Wish in one hand, my mother used to say. Then spit in the other. See which one fills up faster.*

Standing beside her snapping beans to can, or setting the table for supper, I told her about things I had learned in school and things I thought I would like to be besides a farmer and a rancher. Forks on the left, spoons and knives on the right. Cloth napkin quartered into a triangle on each plate. I understood my place in my mother's house, but I had dreams, I told her. The world, I was learning, was large and complex.

I wanted to go to college. I thought I would be a writer, but it's just as well, all things considered. I married a woman who had gone to the local university to be a teacher. Linda. She is part of this story, but before her, what I did out of high school was go to work for Bristol Manufacturing. We made windshield scrapers out of plastic, and waited for layoffs during mild winters. This is Emporia, Kansas, the industrial Midwest, and as jobs go, Bristol was decent. Nothing came in alive and went out in packages. The job did not involve an odor. I worked there eight good years, and I've harbored no bad feelings about it.

What I do now is this. I am a caterer, event planner, and supplier of wedding and event accessories. Or, to put it more precisely, I own the Bow and Box on Commercial Street, across from the diner. I inherited the place from my mother's best friend, Mrs. Parsons, a large woman with a goiter and one cloudy eye. Throughout my life, Mrs. P. kept sweets wrapped in napkins in her pockets for me. She arrived in my mother's house smelling always of vanilla.

Mrs. Parsons is buried in Garnett next to Mr. Parsons, who died

in an accident some thirty-five years before her. My own mother spoke the final words at Mrs. P's grave site and tossed in the first handful of soil before turning away, dusting her hands on a handkerchief.

"Dirt," she said. "You spend your whole life cleaning it up. You die, and they throw it in your face."

My mother had been close to Mrs. Parsons, who spent every evening in my mother's kitchen for as long as I can remember. Each night I set an egg cup for Mrs. P. She arrived from her job fanning her thick throat and milky eye with both hands, making fatigued exclamations. Like my mother, she did not pray over the plates. She said, *Gracious! Do pass the potatoes!* Mrs. Parsons listened to my school reports on the space shuttle and the Colobus monkey, my dreams of becoming an astronaut or explorer.

Mrs. P. told me that life was what happened when you were making other plans.

At the funeral that day, I knew I should offer comfort, but Linda had just left me, and I could think of nothing to say. As if in response to my silence, my mother turned and pulled an envelope from her purse, and slapped it against my chest.

"Didn't have kids or kin of her own. She liked you. God knows why."

The sheet of paper told me two things in Mrs. Parsons' loopy script. The first sentence said, *Your father was somebody your mother met once.* The second said, *Get on with your life.*

Also in the envelope was the title to the Parsons catering business and the lease for the store front on Commercial Street.

Plenty of people still call us the old Parsons place, though we've overhauled and diversified considerably, and our services are much in demand. Such demand you might think would not extend all the way to my ex-wife and her plans to marry an ostrich-boot wearing real estate

agent from Kansas City, but you'd be wrong. Despite my line of work, I myself do not believe in weddings. I was married at the JOP in Hays, to Linda Lewis, light of my life. She did not take my name, but she did take my stereo four months later when she left for Denver with a guy named Tobey who is best known in these parts for his slapstick antics as the driver of the First Aid car in the demolition derby. The car is a souped-up station wagon with a coffin on the roof called "Hillbilly Ambulance."

When she served me papers six months after that, Linda was living in Boulder with a welder she called "Tice." Unlike Tobey, and, I could only assume, unlike me as well, Tice, she said, "really knew how to communicate." I met him only once, outside the same courthouse where Linda and I had been married. Before hugging me goodbye for what I assumed would be the last time, Linda stood on the running board of the man's Chevelle, pointed to his bicep resting on the window frame, and said, "This is Tice." He gunned his engine several ear-throttling blasts, she hugged me, and then they were gone, just two lines of burned rubber and a whirl of trash and dust funneling their wake. I did not expect her to enter my life again.

I should say right now, including and beyond everything that has happened, I loved Linda Lewis. From the first time I saw her, a sweet co-ed stumbling drunk down Mechanic Street with several of her girlfriends, singing, to the last time I saw her driving away in a \$40,000 Ford F-150, married to another man. After all my brooding years alone, she was a bright spot on the dark slope of my conscience. She was ease to Job. She was water after drought. Not that I ever said any of these things to Linda, not even close. But I thought them, and I think them still, how tricky the words are, a scarf that chokes your neck all night and then just smoke when you need them.

I grew up in north Lyon County on the Chase County line. My

mother's family farmstead, just me and her and Mrs. Parsons, who had moved into the Smithson family place due south of us. My mother, like me, was an only child. Like her parents, she had been born in the house, and she would die in it. I had no uncles, no aunts, no cousins. No sisters or brothers. No father. Only the promise from my mother that someday, when I was ready, I would know everything I needed to know about him.

Neighboring farmers and the fathers of my friends helped my mother with our land, plowing, pasturing cattle, mending fence. They tried to bring me up right. They taught me how to hold a rifle, how to spit a seed or a wad of phlegm so it would fly out away from an open truck window. They told me things like *Measure twice, cut once*, and *Don't fix it if it ain't broke*.

My mother met them all in the same way, on the back porch. She stood with her hands on her apron pockets, strings of gray hair blowy around her eyes, and waited until they removed their hats. She handed over checks or asked to see parts of the tractor that would need replacing. She ran her fingers along the threading of pipe and frayed wiring and said, always, "I'll get back with you." She never invited them into the kitchen.

She had been beautiful once—a round face and light hair piled on her head like a soufflé. Pictures in our attic proved this. I had laid these out in rows as a child, unwrapping the glass-fronted faces from layers of drapery in a cedar chest. In the jutting chins of great grandmothers and grandfathers, I looked for my own face. There were pictures of several babies, but each generation had succeeded in bringing forward teenage portraits of only one child.

I watched the men who farmed our land watch my mother coaxing a pullet from the scratch pen or hoeing up weeds. They said things like, *Never buy the cow if you can get the milk for free*, things I understood had to

do with me and the man whose face was not in any of the pictures in the attic.

It was when I met Linda that I saw for the first time the image of the man I might become. A man who would say and do the right thing. I had dated girls over the years, sure. A burger and some beers after work, the moment of standing between your car and hers, each of you with your keys in your hand, waiting for a sign. But nothing like this stupefied love-sickness had happened to me. I wanted to tell Linda herself, tell everyone that I was feeling things for what seemed like the first time.

I wanted to express myself to her, but she was an educated girl. Each time I tried to say, *I love you*, or *Will you marry me*, it came out mangled, twisted. I told her things like, *I wouldn't kick you out of bed*, or *There is always an extra slot in my toothbrush holder*.

In these moments, it seemed to me that I could actually see my words just hang there in the air between us.

*Useless*, the neighboring ranchers would have said, *as tits on a wart-hog*.

*Hopeless*, my mother would have said, *as a hat on a dog*.

How I asked Linda, finally, to marry me, was by not speaking at all. I put all of my savings, and they were considerable, living with my mother as I had all those years, into a single diamond solitaire. This I buried in a meatball at S'ghetti's. It's true that she was given the Heimlich maneuver by two of the kitchen help, and there was some cleaning to do of the ring, but in the end she said yes.

She stared up at me from the checkered booth and said, "Oh my god. You're the only guy who ever wanted to marry me so bad you nearly choked me to death."

It wasn't the language I'd hoped for, but it would do. We were married near her parents' place in Hays the next day. She and I and my

sound system lived in a trailer on some land of her uncle's for the next four months. I have not seen the ring or the stereo again. Linda herself, however, came into my life walking up the same stretch of Mechanic Street that I had watched her stumble down all those years before.

She had called me and asked me to meet her at the diner on Commercial, which is where I sat watching her approach. She was a little too tan, her jeans too tight. Her voice when she sat across from me in the booth a little too loud. She told me it was good to see me, and she told me how glad she was we had this chance to talk.

"I didn't want you to read about it in the *Gazette*," she said.

She told me she was living in Kansas City now. She'd met a guy at a Chiefs game. Her eyes glistened and winked as she described how they were both wearing ESU shirts, her alma mater. She told me she'd met fellow Hornets everywhere since leaving Emporia, but this time...

"Whoa, Nellie," she said. This time she was in love.

Linda's Hornet had majored in business. He sold real estate in Olathe. He was teaching her to golf.

I asked her the obvious question. "Why are you here?"

His family was from Redding, all ESU alums. Her family, none of whom I could remember going to school anywhere, were coming in from Hays. The plan was to have a country wedding just outside Emporia. In June.

She had not asked me anything since she sat down, so I told her what I thought she would want to know, which was that I was okay with that, and I wished her good luck. I told her I was still living out at mom's house. That I'd got Mrs. Parsons' shop, and it was doing very well.

"That's great," she said. "I'm really happy for you. And I want you to know that if there is ever"—here she paused... "*ever* anything we can do for you, if you ever wanted to leave this area, try real estate or whatever, Blake, I would for sure help you get started."

I felt something else entirely, but I told her that I felt the same way.

In fact, I said, I'd love to do something for her. And before I knew it, words just flew from my mouth. I told her to let me take care of the wedding cake and the reception.

"You're in KC," I said. "This way, you would not have to worry about a thing."

"Not a thing?" She twirled a lank of blonde hair around her finger and cocked her head to one side. "Are you serious?" I saw the same half-eager, half-mistrusting expression she had given me during the four months of our marriage just before she asked me if I wouldn't mind buying her something or loaning her my car. It occurred to me, stupidly, suddenly, that she must have had this in mind all along. Still, a thing promised is a thing promised. Of the two of us, I was the one who had kept his word.

"Not a thing," I told her. "I'm serious. Let me take care of it all." She told me how grateful she was, and what a great guy I was, but her final words before leaving the diner in a wake of perfume were a warning.

"Just, please"—she blinked her eyes twice. "please just..."

"What?"

"It's nothing."

"What?"

"This wedding is really important to us. It's not about you and me. I just don't want this cake thing to become an obstruction."

At this point she waved out the window, and as if he'd been sitting in it all along, a guy stepped down from huge glistening truck with a chrome cow catcher. I saw first a pair of ostrich boots and then the rest of him, all biceps and big thighs. I sat in the window of the diner, watching them climb into their pickup. Despite everything she had been and still was, all I saw was Linda, limbs and blonde walking away from me once again, the curves and clefts of her.

*Linda, you are the only one for me, I thought as I took two sugar pack-*

ets and banged them against my wrist.

*My happiness in this life is a bird, beating in the cage of your closed hands,* I thought as I tore the packets open and stirred them into the cold coffee.

*You are still connected to me,* I thought as I nodded imperceptibly, my head dipping the bill of my hat in acknowledgement of their truck as it pulled away.

I imagined them in the air-conditioned cab, the way Linda would be sitting in the center of the leather seats, her hand on his thigh, the way she would be saying right now, "He's so repressed he wouldn't know an emotion if it jumped out of that cake and bit him."

*Linda,* I thought. *What language is it that would tell you all of this? Why don't you see?*

I said nothing. I walked across the street to the shop and called my staff together. There are three of them, in addition to the day prep guys and the delivery and serving staff. Three who have been with me from the beginning.

Herb Sugarman has been here since the day after Mrs. Parsons' funeral, when he showed up wearing an orange hunting cap and holding a cross bow in one hand. When I'd told him about my idea for the Bow and Box, he'd been in mind of something else entirely. "This is the Parsons place," he said. "This is the job?"

I'd known Sugarman at Bristol. He mixed the chemicals and set the machines and the flow of plastic that would become windshield scrapers. Sugarman knew by the texture of a production run just exactly what it lacked. He could smell when a batch had too much color additive. He could taste whether coffee in the break room was sweetened with Aspartame or Nutra-Sweet.

Sugarman understands the architecture, the chemistry of catered food. People think it is Mrs. Parsons' recipes, but Herb Sugarman is my



secret weapon. You would not think this to see him. He is a big man, barrel-shaped. He wears Carhartt coveralls over his kitchen whites and rumbles southward each night in a rusted Dodge flat bed with a cracked windshield. Sugarman's wife was killed I don't know how many years ago on the Americus Road. A white cross at the ess-curve marks it still. Sugarman says he's never seen it, and won't drive the road. He claims his first wife was the last woman for him. Converged upon by well-meaning widows, he sold their house, took the insurance money moved out to Hartford in a trailer with no stove. "A woman won't move where she can't cook you something," he says.

The kid came from Bristol too, right after Sugarman. Pedro. I'd seen him around the factory. He worked in packing and shipping, the first group to get laid off in a warm winter. Pedro takes a lot of classes at the Vo-Tech. He's the one with all the ideas about business and distribution, and he's the only person in the shop who wears a tie.

Starting out, he cleaned the front of the shop and re-fitted gaskets in the kitchen. He answered right up when I asked him, *Pedro would you stop down to Muckenthaler's and get some steam trays? Or, Pedro would you mind checking the dates on the flour?*

You can imagine our feeling when Sugarman and I looked up from assembling a tray of petit fours one day to see the kid standing there with his hat in his hands, telling us he was sorry but we needed to know his name was Cory, and he needed to fill out some W-4's.

We had called him Pedro for years at Bristol. It had been embroidered on his uniforms.

"When did this start?" Sugarman asked.

"It's always been my name," the kid said. "People around here just take one look and it's Pedro or Paco or Carlos."

I told him he should have said something sooner, and he said jobs for Mexicans were hard enough to come by in a town like Emporia.

I told him it was going to be a challenge after all this time, but we'd

learn it.

Regina is Cory-Pedro's sister. She is the one who fills the front windows with bolts of voile, lacy garters, ribboned boxes spilling perfumed soaps and note cards. Regina is a coffee-skinned woman whose black hair hangs to her waist in waves. At the corner of one large brown eye, she has tattooed a single tear.

Regina sits on a lavender silk cushion by the cash register and nods at the customers. She knows how to talk to women about their weddings—why tiny packets of bird seed are ecologically better than throwing rice. What are reasonable expectations for an ice sculpture.

The tear, it took her a long time to tell us, commemorated her ex-boyfriend Rodney. Rodney had been killed when his car stalled on the railroad tracks in northern Arizona. He was coming back from a construction job in Surprise, she said. What got to Regina wasn't the accident. Rodney was a drunk, she said. It was the way the Phoenix police had broken the news to her by handing over a newspaper clipping from the regional roundup page—a photo of a mangled car under the single word headline, "Surprise." She claims not to have read a newspaper since.

They're good people, these three, and I depend on them to move us from concept to reality. They make the wishes of our customers come true, help them to express their desires in sugar and ribbon and an audio-and-lighting package of 32 karaoke devotional hymns.

After my meeting with Linda, I crossed the street and broke the news, my own wish. I had known it since Linda had said her last words to me about the cake, but I had not spoken it aloud, even to myself, until just then.

"We're doing a Princess of Wales," I told them.

Sugarman hooked his thumbs into his apron and frowned. Regina squinted as if against a shaft of sunlight, and Cory adjusted his tie.

We had discussed the cake plenty of times since *Bride Quarterly* had published it as their cover feature—the architecture involved, the layers of

ganache, the enrobing, crystallized violets, candy pearls. The sheer art of a thing done on such a scale.

You could have wiped Sugarman off the ceiling with a mop. "You're joking," he said. "For who?"

"My ex-wife," I said.

Cory told me that I was committing the financial quarter and more resources than we had, and I knew it.

"Surely a Duchess of York," he said. "Or even the Jackie Onassis II would be enough."

Sugarman agreed. "There's a time and place for that cake," he said.

I knew they were right, and yet somewhere between the window of the diner and the front door of the shop, I had decided that time was now.

Over the next few weeks, Sugarman worked from the *Bride Quarterly* drawings, projecting them full scale. He made models and tasted buttercreams. Regina and Cory did all the correspondence with Linda, the invitations, the color schemes, all of it. I brooded and dropped things and burned myself pulling miniature quiches from the steam-tray. It was a Saturday, morning prep, and I was staring at the schedule without seeing it: the Ladies' salad luncheon, salmon croquettes, the Episcopal assorted pastry tray and punch, weenie-wraps for the VFW and the Cattlemen's brisket barbecue. I stopped with a pair of tongs raised in my hand.

"I need a drink," I said. "On the clock."

We left the staff to finish a tray of petit fours and truffles, and headed straight for the smoke and paneling of the Town Royal and the underwater, mid-range frequency of several pitchers of beer drowned in a few choruses of bourbon.

It was getting to me and they knew it. I told Sugarman and Cory everything I hadn't told Linda. All the ways the bicep-bulging, money-golfing, Kansas City real-estate Hornet wasn't me. I got downright descriptive. Metaphorical. The story got away from me somewhere around dusk, and somebody, I think by the smells of the upholstery it was Cory,

drove me home. I spent the night on the bathroom floor.

My mother used to say, *a woman drinks to escape who she was, but a man drinks to become who he is.*

When I woke in the bruised, blue dawn I felt empty of everything. Anger, frustration, resolve.

They were waiting for me the next morning when I came in to prep the Rotary luncheon. My head felt like a sack of hammers, and I was in no mood for the box sitting on the salad bar with my name on it:

“Dear Mueller,” the card said. “We feel your pain.”

As Sugarman, Cory, Regina and the morning prep guys watched, I opened the oblong box hopefully, expecting supersize Excedrin and a bottle of tequila, a banana nut loaf, a Linda voodoo doll, anything but what I found nestled in the crepe paper, staring back at me with one eye. It was about ten inches long and thick as my wrist, a jaundiced Anglo color, with an on-switch and two speeds.

I looked from Sugarman to Cory, to the line of hair nets, and back again. “I don’t understand.”

“Take back the night!” Cory said, beginning to laugh.

Sugarman cleared his throat. “You went on so long about your ex-wife marrying an animate dildo... We thought it’d cheer you up.”

“Cheer me up? What the hell am I supposed to do with this?”

I picked up the box to toss the whole thing in the trash, but with the sudden motion a stabbing pain sliced through my head, and I dropped it, spilling the contents. Upon impact, the object suddenly switched on and began rototilling its way across the prep counter, sputtering and jiving until it ended, writhing, in the field green mix for the Ladies Auxiliary.

Cory responded quickly, picking it up with a pair of grill tongs and dropping it back into its cardboard coffin, where it sputtered under a fringe of frisee. As he did so, I noticed what I had not seen before, which was that they had named it and given it a slogan.

“Horny the Hornet,” the box read.

The line guys were beside themselves.

"You guys and your wishful thinking," Regina scowled.

Cory and Sugarman stood there grinning. "It was that or a handgun," Sugarman said. "We went the way of metaphor."

Just that quickly, the object insinuated itself into our lives.

The entire staff overcame their reluctance to handle it right away, and over the following weeks as we worked on the Princess of Wales, the thing took on a life of its own. Everyone wanted to set somebody else up to find it, and we found it embedded in sacks of flour, staring down from industrial-sized cans of shortening, wearing a cape of croissant and propped next to the coffee machine. Who knows how many batteries were used. The Hornet's fleshy, beckoning gesture undulated tirelessly from apron pockets and trays of bread crumbs for more than a week.

I had to admit that it wore me out. It was a Wednesday, ten days before the wedding and about four jobs coming up besides. I was sitting with Sugarman and Cory at the break table, waiting for the last batch of brioche to proof while a tray of raisin tartlets browned in the oven. The drawings for the Princess of Wales were spread before us, and the object lay weighting one corner. It was not long before we ceased staring at the semi-circles and dowels of the drawings and concentrated on the object, that series of contours we'd come to know too well.

"It does sort of beg the question of who is the model," Sugarman said.

"Whose skin is that color?" Cory asked.

"We're becoming obsessed," I told them. "The thing has got to go."

"That's not what women want," Sugarman said, gesturing toward the object with a piece of doughnut.

"What women want? I'll tell you what women want. Women want ostrich boots. Women want the Sha-La-La nine-hole golf course in Kansas City Missouri," I said.

"I hope you're right," Cory said, still staring at the object. "Golf I can learn."

I donned an oven mitt and picked it up. Its weird color and strange ridges and plastic veins still made me wince. "This has gone on long enough," I said. "We've got a tough week ahead, and this is not helping. You can do what you want with this thing, but I don't want to see it."

"What do you want me to do with it?" Sugarman asked.

I've had occasion to reflect upon what I said next, the choice of the words, the implications for what would happen later. What I remember having said, as I dropped the object in front of Sugarman, was this: *Put that in your cake and smoke it.*

And just that quickly, our mascot and the focus of so many adolescent jokes during those challenging days, disappeared. I knew by the tittering laughter that the object was still around, but true to their word, I didn't see it, and I didn't think about it. I didn't think about Linda or the wedding. I thought about the extraordinary cake we were making and about what Linda had said. *Don't let that cake become an obstruction.*

What did she know?

Under Sugarman's skillful hands and Regina's sensibilities, the Princess of Wales had come into being in our back room on a scale and grandeur that even *Bride Quarterly* could not have imagined. Four feet tall if it was an inch, festooned with floral accoutrements in Linda's signature purple and teal. Sugar-pearled and candy-jeweled from base to bride. I allowed myself to breathe the sweet vanilla breath of the cake, and I felt something at the base of my neck between the shoulders unbridle and loosen. These ribbons and roses might be my last words to Linda. They seemed final. Fully formed, elegant, and right.

The day of the wedding, it was still early morning when we arrived at the Saffordville United Methodist Church. We drove breathlessly past

fields hung in shrouds of mist. I remember the day now as clearly as if it were unfolding in front of me—bright, cloudless, perfect. Light breeze skirled the dandelions at the base of the steps as the event staff unloaded the cake from the truck. With each step I felt something in my chest pull tight as a stitch, the cake, moving like that, a frigate of flour and frosting.

Sugarman stood beside me, arms crossed over his chest. “Well you’ve done it now,” he said. “How’s it feel?”

I had spent so many hours during the last few days thinking about Linda’s response to the cake, the hours of labor and love that would be nothing but an obstruction to her life. I had not stopped to consider how I would feel when I finally saw it there, our hours of work under the open sky. I thought of Sugarman’s thick fingers pinching the marzipan curl of each rose. Cory-Pedro and I standing together under a sheath of spun sugar. All that work just for this. It was beautiful and horrible at once.

I took one deep breath. I was ready. “It’s a fine day for a wedding,” I said. “And wherever it is, I want you to put away that stupid object.” I turned to Sugarman. “I only want to see one finger pointing today.”

The look on his face told me what I had not thought to ask before. It was as we stood there waiting that I realized our mistake.

“You didn’t,” I pleaded.

“You told me to put it in the cake,” he said.

“I was being metaphorical,” I told him.

“So much for metaphor,” Cory-Pedro sighed.

We stared at the cake, making its way up the church steps in the muscular grasp of the prep guys.

“Do you know...” I started to ask, but of course we all knew immediately.

The top layer, Regina had taught us, was traditionally set aside and frozen for the bride and groom to keep until their first anniversary. Making its way up the church steps, supported by the network of dowels and

cardboard that formed the infrastructure of the Princess of Wales, underneath the yellow-haired bride and black-haired groom figurines, sat the twelve-inch round in question, festooned with marzipan roses, shaped sugar, and candied violets.

"Oh, no," I said to Sugarman.

"Oh, yes," he said to me.

Cory-Pedro said, "Oh, shit," and Regina said, "Serve from the bottom."

The next two hours were a blur of arrivals and seating, music and vows. I was so dreamily fixated on the cake and the implications of what it might contain that I failed to notice Linda entering the sanctuary under a veil the size of a bedsheet, later exiting on the bulging arm of her real-estate agent. Guests began to file into the reception area from the receiving line. Everyone in Linda's family pretended not to recognize me. Perhaps no one did. I stood with Sugarman and Cory near the cake, scooping balls of sherbet to drop into the punch. I was sweating profusely.

"I think the batteries are out. Nothing's going to happen," Sugarman said, but he was sweating too.

Linda looked at the cake once, for about a split second, as she and her new husband gripped the serving knife and beamed smiles into the camera. There was some flashing of lights, the usual smearing of cake on each other's faces, and they were off to the dance floor. I noticed that the groom, again, wore boots.

We served square upon square. We nodded through the appreciative oohs and aahs of friends and family requesting a rose or a piece of sugar sculpture. We worked our way through a stack of paper plates. On the dance floor we could hear the toasts, the chicken dance and the hokey pokey giving way to the throwing of the garter and the bouquet. Then, suddenly, Linda and her groom were gone under a shower of bird seed, strings of cans echoing their truck down the Kahola Lake Road. Guests continued to waltz. Older women fanned themselves with their hats, and



the younger women carried their shoes by the straps.

I realized that I felt nothing at all.

Next to me, Sugarman had set down his serving knife and was proceeding to wipe his hands on a towel. He nodded several times, lips clenched in a thin white line. I thought I saw tears in the corners of his eyes. It was the damned cake, I thought. Carved into shambles. All that effort, and for what? This is when I saw Regina take Sugarman's big hand in her small, manicured one, and lead him onto the dance floor for the last waltz.

I started to speak to Cory, but he shushed me and watched his sister and Sugarman begin very slowly to sway in a box-step. "Will you look at that?" He smiled. "Surprise, surprise," he said.

*If wishes were horses, my mother used to say, then beggars would rise.*

*"Not rise. It's ride," I told her once. "Beggars would ride"*

*"That makes no sense," she said. "Why would beggars want to ride?"*

I sat at her bedside during the last moments of her life, holding her hand as I'd never done since childhood, waiting for the last words. I must say that I expected information about my father, that in her final breaths she would reveal to me the mystery of who I was as a man, and why I had failed. Her breath, steady, eyes bright, she pulled me to her with a surprising strength and asked if I would do something for her.

I told her that I would.

*Dust*, she said, and died.

She died in the house where she'd been born, in the bed where she'd been conceived, her secrets borne back into herself. Is it any wonder, all my relics are circular? Afterward, lifting rose-patterned plates and Hummel statuettes and wiping shelves, I searched the house for clues. I found nothing until, opening the silver drawer, I found not silver but wishbones. The tiny, clean-picked bones of birds she must have eaten

over a period of years. Packaged in the sleeves for knives and serving spoons, only these brittle bones, these tiny stirrups, the unbroken wishes of my mother's life.

Linda's wedding ended something for me, but it was not the thing I planned. For years I had watched my own life play out behind me like so many ragged, frayed ends unraveling. I had waited for someone to tie a knot. Then two elderly ladies tottered past the remains of the Princess of Wales cake, holding each other by the arms.

The smaller woman wore a pink dress with white piping and carried a white patent leather purse. She stopped in front of Cory and asked after Mrs. Parsons. "The woman who used to cater your shop? She used to run a bake shop up in Melvern, you know. Before her troubles."

The other woman wore a mint-green pant-suit. She nodded in agreement. "Terrible business."

Cory smiled sympathetically and asked what we could do for them.

"You don't know the story, do you?" The smaller woman set her white purse on the cake table and cocked her head at Cory. "Poor Anna. I ran the cash register at the Duckwall's next door to her old shop. I was there the night she came into the bakery and found her husband after that girl."

The woman in green patted her friend on the arm. To Cory she said, "Parsons was a drinker. They were estranged. He used to break into her shop and steal the money out of the till."

"The girl wasn't more than sixteen," the small woman continued. "Not from around our way. Out of town. Emporia, maybe. No charges were ever pressed that I read of."

Conspiratorially, the woman in green whispered to Cory... "The rumor was always that she poisoned him, you know. Her husband. But that's a fib."

The woman in pink cut in again. "I was right next door. Shot him

is what she did, Mrs. Parsons. She shot Mr. Parsons dead on the spot. Must have been the last straw, him doing what he did to that girl what worked for her. My brother was deputy then. He's the one told her to keep a gun in case of break ins. She must not of handled it much. Recoil busted her eye up something awful."

The woman in green agreed that it had. "Ugly," she said. "Turned it white."

Neither of them knew what had become of the girl. The smaller woman said she thought the girl might have gone to live with the Amish in Yoder, the kind of people who would take someone in her condition. Poor girl. No people of her own. Pretty girl, they both agreed. Round face. Blonde. She might have made out all right. The woman in green said what did it matter. It was a bad business.

I watched the two ladies totter together down the steps of the church into the sunlight and thought of my mother and Mrs. Parsons. A bad business, I thought. A sad business. I remembered the way my mother had set out the egg cup for Mrs. Parsons each night. The way Mrs. Parsons' flashlight looked on spring nights swinging an arc of light through the fireflies as she traveled the path that led through a pasture between our house and hers. I remembered the milk-white of her eye, and the way it seemed to me that the light of her lantern was a thread stitching the field, or a hunter flushing birds from the brush. There was a curious, child's rhyme my mother used to say as the flash beam grew closer, *Annie Annie two by four, crashing through the kitchen door.*

At Mrs. Parsons' funeral my mother stood staring a long while at the raw new gash that would be Mrs. P's grave next to the slight declivity that was Mr. Parsons' thirty-five year-old one. The grave was weedy, a place I could tell no one placed flowers or wreaths of remembrance. And when she bent down over it, I thought my mother might brush away the milk thistle as one might brush a lock of hair from the face of a child. I

thought she might dust the scrim of dirt from Mr. Parsons' stone. But what she did, bending over the sunken grave like that, was spit. It rolled down the stone, leaving behind it a trail of red soil. And when my mother walked away from the cemetery she never looked back.

Winters can be long around here, and I've spent this one thinking about everything that has happened. It's spring now, and Sugarman has moved back into town, with Regina. Cory is thinking about moving to Dallas to work in hotel management. We'll miss him, but I know he's destined for bigger things.

I live in the same house as always. Alone now. I go to work and drive home. I listen to radio through the screen door on warm nights. I walk the pastures with my dogs. They're good girls. Sugarman brought them to me, squirming pups. "Two blue heelers," he said, "to heal your blues."

He's a good man, Sugarman. But I don't think, any more, that I'm blue. Thanks to Linda, thanks to all of them, really, I know what I'm looking for now. When I find her, I will bring her here, to walk these places with me. There is always another chance at love, and this time, I won't try to tell her how the curve of her cheek opens a hinge in my chest. I won't describe the way the big Bluestem shimmies the hedgerow, or the double helix of swallows forming and reforming over the pond. I will take one of her hands in one of mine and I will watch for the quick intake of breath, the moment of surprise that says, *Maybe this. Maybe you.* And when I kiss her in the last blue moment of twilight or the slanting evening haze of summer, or the slatey scrim of a coming storm, when I kiss her she will hear my answer—*Yes. Me,* and the weather will change.

I've not heard from Linda again, but I have my versions of her story. In one, following the June wedding she gains sixty pounds and is divorced by September. Another version involves an anniversary fight,

where she flings the still-frozen cake at her husband, kills him, and ends up in jail for the rest of her life, cell-mate to a woman named Martha. In the version I like best, Linda and her husband make it to the first anniversary and they find, when they cut the cake, the object we feared might be there. I can think of no better metaphor to tell her what I have learned to be true, which is that this life is nothing if not one strange and unexpected gift right after another.