

Sketch

Volume 47, Number 2

1982

Article 3

The Wedding Dress

Sandra Reid*

*Iowa State University

Copyright ©1982 by the authors. *Sketch* is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress).
<http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch>

The Wedding Dress

Sandra Reid

Abstract

I'm getting married in three months. I have the ring on my finger, the dress in my closet, my bridesmaids chosen and their dresses picked out. My father has had his tux fitted, but my mother hasn't picked out her dress yet and I keep telling her, we really should go and find you a dress...

The Wedding Dress

by Sandra Reid, English Senior

I'm getting married in three months. I have the ring on my finger, the dress in my closet, my bridesmaids chosen and their dresses picked out. My father has had his tux fitted, but my mother hasn't picked out her dress yet and I keep telling her, we really should go and find you a dress.

She smiles and says, yes, we'll go. But we don't go. She has so much to do, she tells me. She'll buy a dress next week, she promises. And then she changes the subject. She always changes the subject.

She asks me, did you see that article in the paper about how women feel about abortion? That's something I didn't even consider when I had all of you, and I certainly wouldn't want to go back and do it any differently. I wouldn't give any of you up.

None of us, none of her five. I remember that she had to get married, being pregnant with me. That's what they did in those days. Then I realize what she is trying to say. I could tell her she has nothing to worry about, I'm on the pill, but I don't. Mom, I say instead, I believe that every woman has the right to choose.

You do?

Yes, I do.

Every woman, in every situation?

Yes.

Oh. She nods and again the subject is changed. I assume that my comment has satisfied her curiosity, allayed her fears, but I am never certain. She goes on to talk about this fellow at work. This fellow looks at her as if she had no clothes on. Don't tell your father, she says, he'll

want me to quit work. She doesn't want to quit her job, so she tells me all of these sort of things, he won't listen. If he does, she hears once more Why work at all then?

But this fellow, the next time he comes into her office, the next time, well, she's going to do something about it. I'd tell him he was a bastard, I say, and then I'd get fired.

Mom chuckles. She doesn't laugh, not anymore. She stifles it inside. But she used to laugh, I mean really laugh. It's all so strained inside now. I wonder why she doesn't tell me what she's thinking. I wonder if she tells anyone what she's really thinking.

I look at her and I see that I have that smile, that chin. I have what used to be her laugh. But I don't have her eyes. I don't have those lines, that expression, the feeling. There's something behind those eyes, if I could only look inside, deep inside, I wonder what I'd see. But they avoid me.

There's an uncomfortable feeling, she squirms in her chair like a child who's been caught snooping in her mother's dresser drawers everytime I ask her about my wedding. I want to know, I'm her first child, her first daughter, what does she think of all this?

All I care about is that you are happy, she says.

Happy? How can I be sure? I want to say Tell me what you mean. Are you happy? I'm not sure what it means to be happy. Should I be so filled with happiness that people will look at me and say Ah! She's in love! that's what you'd think, reading all those bride's magazines or listening to people say How wonderful, you're getting married! But I wonder (is that all right, I mean to wonder?) if this is forever and always, shouldn't one wonder about it before one actually does it?

Mom, how is it supposed to be? I don't ask, but I want an answer from her. How am I supposed to feel? How do I know it's this man, this time, this life, for me? Mom, talk to me. She's always told me how it was before. When I was a child she always knew when I was lying. She always knew how I felt, she understood. But now, she is silent.

There is a phone call. Mom answers. Phone, Marcie, she says.

I get up and take the phone from my mother who does not look me in the eye nor smile at me nor does she tell me who it is. Then, of course, I know.

Hello. Yes, I knew it was. What? Not again! But I thought we were going to the play?

Mom is in the kitchen. She's been listening. Yes she has, I can tell. The way she sits there, nonchalantly filing her nails. The nails that are beautifully manicured and have been ever since she started working and a cleaning lady comes to the house twice a week.

Randall is telling me something about these clients he has to entertain tonight with his father. Of course I am expected to be there, even though we spent thirty dollars to see *The Fantasticks*. I am tempted to tell him I'm going to the play anyway.

Yes, all right. I'll be ready. I hang up. Mom gets up and starts a tea kettle full of water on the stove. She pretends to be completely absorbed in getting that pot of tea brewed, but I know better. Oh do I know better.

I go back to the kitchen table. She doesn't look at me, but she knows I am angry. I'll have to go the play another time, I tell her. She turns to me curiously and says, Oh? Yes. Randall and his father have to take some clients out tonight because they're leaving town tomorrow.

That's too bad, she says, but that happens sometimes. You'll have to get used to it with Randall and his father owning their own business.

I say nothing, but I want to scream. I don't want to get used to it. Why should I have to? They're not my clients. I look at my mother and remember how she was when my father's clients or his boss came to town. A new dress, a day with the hairdresser and perfect make-up and late nights. Why should I? Mom, why does it have to be that way? What if I said no, what if I did go to the play?

Mom pours herself some tea. Would I like a cup?

When I come home that night, it is late. Almost two o'clock in the morning. I think that I could have been in hours earlier and much happier about it. They weren't my clients. I didn't care. Stuffy men, with boring talk,

wandering eyes and drunk—all of them. Then there was me, all dressed up like a doll in a big picture window. This is the woman who will be my wife. Get a good look now, see what a looker she is? What an asset she'd be to the family. To the company.

I'm not going again, I'm not. Next time, I will go to the play. Alone.

I walk into the bathroom to brush my teeth, to brush away the sourness of the evening, the wine, the staleness of their cigarette smoke. I can smell it on my clothes and in my hair. It makes me sick.

I take off the greasy make-up which lies in creases across my face, in the corners of my mouth, shiny on my forehead and nose and that's when I see. My mother's eyes. And I stare, in disbelief. When did I get those lines? That expression, that tired, anxious, suspicious expression. Where did it come from?

I don't want to look anymore. I finish washing my face in the dark, and when I am through, I shut the door firmly behind me.

I must have made too much noise when I came in. I didn't realize I had been so noisy, but my mother is coming down the stairs. I can hear the soft step on the carpeting and then there she is. Wrapped in a warm, thick, plaid robe with furry slippers on her feet she asks, Did you have a good time?

And suddenly my anger swells, it churns, pushing from my guts to my heart until I feel as if my head will explode and all my questions, all my confusion, all my fears will come gushing out at her, demanding an answer. I drop my face into my hands. I don't want her to see me cry.

Tell me Mom, if this is the way it's supposed to be, that I can say no. I don't want it. Where does it say I have to do all this? What if I said no to him—what if I did? Where does it say that it's not all right? Why can't I say no!

I look up and my mother is watching me, waiting. And our eyes meet.

Mom, I say, I can't do this, I just can't.

And she says to me, firmly and softly, Then don't.

But there's my dress and the bridesmaids' dresses and

the orders for the flowers, the invitations—

—you can sell your dress, or save it. You can cancel orders.

Cancel. Cancel the dresses, the flowers, the church, the band, the dinner, the tuxes. . . the wedding. I can cross it out, throw it out, mark it with a big black 'X', mark it off—a mistake.

All I want is for you to be happy, my mother has said. I look at my mother, who never bought a dress. And I reach for her and we stand there silently, clinging to each other. I don't want her to say anything, nothing, not a word. My mother has said enough already.