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## Here Come the Brides

1972, Biloxi MS, St. Martin Elementary School. At recess I sit with Debby Wingo on the steps outside the third-grade building and watch Gena Nungesser skip rope. Debby hangs onto every word as I hold forth on Gena's foolishness. Gena has made no secret of her intention to marry Donny Osmond when she grows up. How is it, I ask Debby, that Gena believes Donny Osmond will marry her when he doesn't even know her? Besides, she's only eight, he's already well into his teens, he'll get married long before she's old enough, can't she see it's impossible?

I don't talk about my quandary, the impossibility I face. When I grow up, I want to marry Gena Nungesser. We've talked it over, she and I, and despite her desire for Donny, she's entertained the idea. When we play scenes from my favorite TV show *Get Smart!*, she always plays Agent 99 to my Agent 86. When we play with her baby doll, I've been cast as both the doctor who delivers it from beneath her shirt and the father who put it there. I love her, and until recently, I've made no secret of it.

"Girls can't love girls," my mother has proclaimed in response to my loving Gena. "Girls love boys." Everywhere I look, it appears she's right, but I know she's wrong. Much as I pray to be a boy, I remain a girl, a girl who loves another girl, the girl I want to marry. A quandary indeed.

I sit beside Debby and scoff at Gena's foolish marriage choice, but I don't admit the obvious, that Gena stands a far better chance of seeing her dream fulfilled than I do. Debby listens raptly as I admire Gena, sure-footed and graceful, in perfect step with the rhythm of the rope.



I learned young to impose my imagination on any limitation. Resourceful, I solved my dilemma by marrying Cher. Our life together went like this: Cher and I spent long summer days riding horses and singing duets from her *Greatest Hits* album. My feelings for Cher weren't like Gena's for Donny. I understood that I was pretending. I understood that I was really a girl and had to pretend not only to be a boy but to be a man. Our marriage, mine and Cher's, was at its height the summer of 1974. It lasted until Cher divorced Sonny Bono and quickly remarried Gregg Allman. I didn't want to be married to an infidel. I had to break it off.

Heterosexualizing my desire—quite an original imagination, mine.



Before I go further, I'd like to clarify a few points.

1. At present, there's no one I'd care to marry. My best friend Lisa and I have been told by a number of people that we act like "an old married couple." If that's the case, something's missing: the *I do*'s, the honeymoon.

2. I'm not the marrying type. That's what most of my lovers have told me. Most of my friends, too. But these days I have to wonder if I'd have been a different type had same-sex marriage been acceptable or even just legal while I was growing up.

3. A partial résumé of my sexual past might shed some light on how I really feel about marriage as an institution. Of the women I've had sex with, 46.15% of them were married to men at the time. Two were lesbians married to gay men for green card status. One of those was a bigamist. Of the remainder, all but one were separated from or divorcing their husbands. The one who still lived with her husband used to touch my face and cringe telling me she was happily married and didn't want to leave him. Most of the time, I didn't want her to leave him either. Ours was a torrid affair, full of exquisite melodrama at a time that kind of thing appealed to me.

To friends who disapproved, I would say, “I have as much respect for her marriage as she does.” That remains my position about any marriage.

4. I should acknowledge a heavily edited version of my own homophobia. For years after I exited the closet, I maintained that gay people shouldn’t get married. Marriage was just stupid. By the time I hit thirty, I used politically correct rhetoric to say the same thing: Marriage was a heterosexist institution; no gay couple worth their salt should want to stoop so low. (Not long ago, a friend weighed in, saying same-sex couples needed their own model because “the heterosexual model is flawed.” “Duh,” I replied and soon gave up arguing that it’s not about “models” but basic human rights.) For years I dreamed of the day two people of the same sex could hold hands in public without being met with frowns, insults, spit, or worse. Now I dream bigger. Don’t get me wrong. I’m not all happily-ever-after at the thought of legalized marriage for same-sex couples. People will cheat as much as they already do, they’ll argue about money and sex and housework, they’ll feel trapped in their relationships. But they might also get a nice tax break and be recognized as family members by hospital administrators. Wedding planners and divorce lawyers alike will have a much more lucrative business.



Early on, I inherited this map of my life to follow: Graduate from high school. Go to college. Get a bachelor’s degree and find a man to marry. Get a good job. Marry. Have children or, better yet, one child. (One is more affordable.) Accomplish all this by my mid-twenties. Afterward, look forward to weight gain, menopause, retirement, and grandchildren. As a child, I studied that map and studied it some more. Too much of the terrain looked alien and treacherous.



May 2005, Gulfport MS. I visit my parents in their new house. Late one afternoon my father and I go for a brisk walk. He points to one big house after another and tells stories about the people

who live there. He pays particular attention to the homes occupied by African-American or Vietnamese families. There aren't many, but he thinks I'll be impressed by the diversity. (I am. In their previous neighborhood, only one household wasn't white.)

With a block left to walk, Dad waves at a neighbor working in his yard and heads toward him. I tag along. After making introductions, Dad chats with the man about the heat, the humidity, the mosquitoes, the casinos—they make all manner of small talk. Then Dad turns to me, says I live in Albuquerque, says I teach creative writing at the university there. Says I'm 41 and still single, an independent woman, never married. Says, "She never found the right man."

I weigh my options. I've heard my parents introduce me this way many times, but none of them recently. I'm angered to the point of outing my father, exposing his lie. But no, I won't embarrass him. Besides, the poor man standing with us probably just wants to finish his yardwork; he probably doesn't want to talk about the weather any more than he wants to know I'm a spinster lesbian English teacher.

But the minute we're back inside the house, I let my father have it. "You don't have to tell people I'm gay," I say, "but don't you dare tell them I'm straight. Next time you do, I'll correct you on the spot."

My mother, startled to hear me talk to my father in such sharp tones, listens. It's a good thing. She needs to hear it more than he does.



"Never found the right man." I've found plenty of right men. The right woman, though, has eluded me thus far.



I've been proposed to by five men. The first proposal, the only romantic one, was made by Matt Wilkins, a blue-eyed blond whose dreamy good looks often made me wonder why he was dating

the likes of me. We stood facing each other, hipbones touching, in the back yard of a big abandoned house in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and Matt said, "Will you marry me?" I laughed and said no and kissed him. It was 1983, we had both just turned 19, I was a college sophomore majoring in psychology at USM, and he was a tenth-grade dropout managing a Pizza Hut and still living with his parents in Picayune. I was a virgin. He had a fuckbuddy named Barbara who gave me no cause for jealousy. He ran up his parents' phone bill to over \$300 the first month we dated. The conversations I remember most vividly entailed elaborate sexual fantasies. Matt liked to pretend he was a woman when he had sex. He liked to be on the bottom, legs spread, with Barbara or whomever above him with her legs together. He liked to come that way. I told him about Jason, my male alter ego. Matt thought he might like to have sex with a man someday. I thought I might like to have sex with a woman someday. The perfect match, that's what we were, but when he asked me to marry him, I said no.

The second proposal doesn't count. I was on the dance floor at the Showboat in Biloxi, Mississippi. I danced to solve the problem of my libido. I danced between Kellye Boler, the girl I wanted, and Douglas Joubert, the guy I wanted to be. I danced to songs like "Shock the Monkey," "Rock the Casbah," "Modern Love," "Come On, Eileen," and "Hungry Like the Wolf." When I danced, sweat flew off my fingertips and the ends of my hair. And one night a man, a drunken stranger, shimmied over and demanded, "Marry me!" I shook my head no and danced away.

The third time counted. Larry Wyett, 33 to my 20, framed his proposal as a way of getting me out from under my parents' control. Our babies, he said, he'd be the one to diaper our babies. I didn't want babies, I said; I didn't want to grow a baby in my body. I may have possessed all the infuriating weakness of an overprivileged Southern miss, but I knew better than to trade a prison for a dungeon. Ironically, my parents liked Larry. They liked his Mensa

membership, his Annapolis education and military background, his well-paying job, his charm. I liked that he could make science interesting. I liked that he was a great chess player, but not so great that I couldn't beat him sometimes. I especially liked his long, thoughtful letters. Once, saying goodnight after a date, he asked if I found anything sexy about him. I looked at his lank hair, his flaccid cheeks, his pudgy gut. "Your eyes," I lied. They were blue, long-lashed, mopey, and bulged a little. I touched Larry's penis once. It felt clammy and gave my palm a funky stink. I didn't look at it. I certainly didn't put it in my mouth like he wanted me to. Every time he proposed, I laughed him off, said I'd find a way to free myself from my parents' tyranny, thanks. Three years later when I told him I was in love with a woman, Larry stood leering down at me and said, "Men have beaten women for less."

The fourth time I was asked, at age 24, I said yes without hesitation. Khalid's visa was about to run out, and he didn't want to have to go back to Saudi Arabia. His boyfriend of several years, my good friend David, proposed to me on Khalid's behalf. I set right to work planning. I'd wear my dream wedding outfit: blue jeans and a white T-shirt. We'd elope. David could tell me everything I needed to know to get through the INS interviews. But Khalid ended up marrying Abby, my ex-girlfriend-turned-friend. She was buxom, not boyish like me, and wore dresses sometimes and used lipstick and put her hair up. That was one terrific wedding. The minister confided that it was refreshing to marry a couple who so obviously loved each other. David served as best man, Abby's girlfriend was maid of honor, and I photographed the blessed event: the cake, the champagne toast, the first dance. In one photo, David dumps one of many buckets of water over Khalid's car to wash off the shaving cream scrawl of *Just Married!* He and the groom were getting ready to drive home together. Late that night, we all went dancing: me, the bride and her girlfriend, the groom and his boyfriend, the man he would have married.

Abby and Khalid stayed married years longer than the INS required. David and Khalid's relationship lasted the better part of a decade. David's next boyfriend was an Austrian named Dirk. This time, the fifth and final time I was asked, I took the proposal much more seriously. I'd developed something of a political backbone. Bill Clinton was in office, had tried and failed to get the okay for gay people to serve openly in the military; the concession of "Don't ask, don't tell" was viewed as a victory by a lot of people who could talk freely about their sexual orientation. I often muttered, "You'd think they'd want us on the front lines, taking the bullets," but there weren't any front lines, there wasn't a war on. The AIDS pandemic had been allowed to spread unchecked. Friends of friends were dying, and then friends were dying. And yet again, David couldn't marry the man he loved, and Dirk couldn't continue to live and work legally in the United States without being married. So when David asked if I'd marry Dirk, I said yes and waited to hear more.



I have only vague recollections of two weddings I attended as a girl. Rich Richardson, an airman who worked with my mother at Keesler AFB, was tall and gangly with a thin mustache and a bobbing Adam's apple, but I had a crush on him because he talked to me as if I were older than ten. He and his bride chose "Color My World" for their first dance. I liked the simple piano melody; it sounded like something I could play. They're still married.

The other wedding took place in Houma, Louisiana, when I was about 13. The 19-year-old daughter of two of my parents' best friends married some guy. I don't recall the ceremony, but I do remember scoring a small but significant victory because I'd gotten to wear pants, nice black gabardines, and a dressy black t-shirt with cap sleeves and fancy neon-colored fish appliquéd on it. At the reception, there was a good live band, lots of people danced, and the drink flowed freely. Mom allowed me to have a piña colada, and I felt grown up and even consented to

dance with the bride's younger brother. The car the groom and bride drove off in was gaudily decorated, the bumper trailed by tin cans, the windows slathered with shaving cream. *Cherry-Poppin' Time*, the rear window announced, and my mother was embarrassed for the bride, ashamed for the parents. She had to explain to me what it meant. I thought it was funny, but my mother was sure the deed had already been done. The divorce came a few years later.



July 29, 1981. At a painfully early hour, well before daybreak, my mother and I drive to my grandparents' house, where my grandmother is waiting up for us. Today is the day Lady Diana Spencer will marry Prince Charles. The Royal Wedding, hours of it, is being televised live.

A sleepy seventeen-year-old, I lie on the sofa and try to stay awake as my mother and grandmother *ooh* and *ah* over Diana's dress and then criticize it. When the fairytale couple exchange their vows, I have a chuckle. Charles has too many names, and when Diana says, "I do take thee, Charles blah-blah blah-blah," she doesn't say them in the right order, or maybe she skips one. It's good for a laugh, but I also think it's a bad sign.



In October 1991, while still legally wed to Khalid, Abby married her girlfriend Susan on a Christmas tree farm named Nepenthe just outside Atlanta. To this day, Abby tells me how hurt she was that I didn't attend. It's true that I had other obligations that weekend—my parents were visiting. It's also true that I didn't want to attend. Abby liked to throw theme parties. I considered the wedding her biggest theme party of all. And anyway, how could I be convinced to take it seriously when the reverend presiding over the nuptials was named Carol Burnett?

Within a couple years, Abby was cheating on Susan with two other women, one of them me. The divorce amounted to Abby and Susan taking separate residences.



The first same-sex wedding I attended took place in Atlanta in 1996. I was the photographer. Before they married, I asked the brides why it was important to them to have a wedding when they felt every bit as dubious about same-sex marriage as I did. Diane said, “We’re hoping it will legitimize our relationship in our parents’ eyes. We want them to take our commitment seriously.”



One night in the early 1990s, my mother and I argued long-distance about the rainbow sticker on the bumper of my Civic. During a recent trip to San Francisco, she’d discovered what it meant. How could I “flaunt” something so disgusting? Why would I want to? She wanted me to remove it from my bumper before my next visit to Mississippi. I refused. She insisted. I told her I’d do it if she would take off her wedding ring next time I visited. She couldn’t believe what I’d said. “Marisa!” she said. “You should be ashamed.” I wasn’t ashamed. I told her that her wedding ring was a symbol of her heterosexuality, and I’d do away with my symbol only if she’d do away with hers. She hung up on me.



January 1998, Ocean Springs MS. I sit between my grandparents on their sofa and tell them about my recent trip west with David. I’ve brought photos, which my grandparents look at with more than a little interest. There’s one of David, tall and lanky and dark-haired, standing beside a yucca plant at Carlsbad Caverns. In another, he poses beside a particularly phallic stalagmite inside the Caverns. Still another shows him and some saguaro cacti in silhouette against a blazing sunset at Gate’s Pass outside Tucson. My grandmother inspects each photo with care, comments on how different the landscapes are from what she knows, and remarks how good-looking David is, how neat and clean. Five months earlier, while David and I were on the trip, she suffered what her doctor decided was a small stroke. It had exacerbated the paranoia and

confusion she was already prone to, but softened her tendency toward sudden rage. But for now, there's no sign of the stroke's effects. She's a little thinner, more sunken into herself, but fully engaged in the conversation.

So I tell my grandparents what a great traveling companion David was. I add how much I adore him. I tell them we've long called each other Husband and Wife. I tell them we talked about eloping in Las Vegas. "We wanted to prove that two gay people *can* legally marry each other," I say, including them in a longstanding joke among my friends.

At this, my grandmother blinks and frowns, trying to puzzle it all out. She knows I'm gay. Years have passed since she and the rest of the family last dreamed of my marriage. "You're getting married?" she asks, and I witness her inextricable slide into confusion.

Across from us, my mother helps to explain. She's uncharacteristically relaxed and seems happy despite the shift in topic. She clarifies as if speaking to a child: "No, Mama, they're gay. Even if they got married, they'd still be gay. They want to make a political statement."

Mother and I repeat these points, my grandfather joins the chorus but quickly fades out, and eventually my grandmother nods that she understands. Her empty eyes and crooked smile suggest otherwise. She has heard as much as her mind can contain, and now she's shutting down. We change the subject.

An hour or so later, I hug my grandmother goodbye for what will be the last time, and she claps her hands and says, "A wedding! There's going to be a wedding!"

As I recall it, nothing else I've done in my adult life has made her as happy. Not moving to Atlanta, not going back to school for the doctorate I'm close to finishing, no short story or poem I've written or published, not finally having a well-paying professional job at the Centers for Disease Control. I back out of my grandparents' crushed-shell driveway and wave to my grandmother. She is small, thin, huddled in her housecoat, her hands fluttering rapidly as they

clap. She has a faraway look in her eyes, a look at a happy, secure future, and four days later, at age 75, she dies of no one knows exactly what, believing that her only grandchild is soon to marry.



July 2004, a bed and breakfast somewhere off the Turquoise Trail, NM. I join my friend Angela at a wedding. A man she knows is marrying a woman she knows. The groom's sister, also a friend of Angela's, has said she'd like a "lesbian presence" at the wedding, to reduce her discomfort. That's why I'm invited.

I play my role well. Even before the nuptials, I take to a flirtatious brunette named Nicki Chizmadia. She stands close to me in her backless champagne-colored vintage dress, and her hand lights on my arm as we talk. The ceremony is beautiful; it takes place on a huge patio overlooking the Sandia Mountains. The groom's sister is the only bridesmaid wearing a pantsuit. Her longtime girlfriend watches from the crowd. Soon after the vows are exchanged, dinner is served; then the dancing begins. Nicki and I dance to nearly every song. Her back shines with sweat. I shed my blouse and strip to my sportsbra. We link hands and spin each other around. When our bodies crash together, we press and hold on tight. At night's end, Nicki scrawls her phone number for me. She kisses my mouth, pulls away, then kisses me again.

Later I learn that we are the talk of the wedding. Months pass, then years, and still we are the talk of the wedding. Lesbian presence accomplished.



September 2006, Albuquerque NM. I attend the wedding of two former students, a man and a woman. I've been grumbling since they announced their engagement, grumbling that I'm being called upon to support the Heterosexual Agenda. I'll have to get them a gift, of course, and raise

my glass in celebration. I could stay away, I know, but I truly care about one of them, and they didn't invite me to piss me off.

The wedding is an outdoor affair on a beautiful day. But I'm the only queer there, a fact I'm terrifically aware of. I go with Lisa. She's the only person of color there.

Sometime after groom and bride have been pronounced lawfully wedded, I admit to the new wife, "I feel so gay here." She doesn't give me time to explain that I feel like a political turncoat for attending a heterosexual wedding when the Bush Administration is pushing for a Constitutional amendment banning gay marriage altogether, as if it were ever really permitted. Actually, that's a mouthful I probably wouldn't have said. But I might add how the DJ's song selection has troubled my queer waters. Early in the day, he played "Love and Marriage"; according to the lyrics, they "go together like a horse and carriage," and "You can't have one without the other."

I say, "I feel so gay here," and the bride assures me, "Don't worry, Marisa. No one here will know unless you tell them."

As if I fear being yanked out of the closet I haven't more than ducked into in the past twenty years. As if.

Lisa, a witness to the exchange, tells me soon after that she felt like punching the bride.

The DJ puts on "White Wedding," the only decent song he has played all day. He doesn't play it all the way through. He changes it long before Billy Idol sings, "There's nothing fair in this world." He puts on "Yackety-Yack, Don't Talk Back," songs like that.

When the toasts begin, my bad mood deepens. The groom's brothers insult him—not with bad jokes and embarrassing revelations about his past, but rather with their drunken rambling, their lack of care in preparing anything resembling a congratulatory speech. The groom's father, on the other hand, has prepared something. He reads part of a poem by Langston

Hughes, and when he gets to lines I know by heart, I whisper along: “Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.” When I was 17, a woman I was in love with gave me a card that said that; that’s how I know the lines, and for a moment, I’m remembering what it’s like to be loved for all I am.

My reverie is short-lived, because beside me, Lisa is growling. How dare these white people who don’t even know the meaning or motivation of the poem appropriate it for this insipid purpose. She grumbles. She growls, “A dream deferred, a dream deferred.”

Maybe the poem’s about race, I think, about basic human rights denied people of color; but in addition to being black, Langston Hughes was also gay—he saw many dreams deferred. I’m seeing one now. Lisa and I leave without saying goodbye. We won’t be missed. It’s the bride and groom’s big day, after all, not Lisa’s and certainly not mine.

I vow to myself that this will be the last wedding I attend as long as marriage is legally defined as the union between a man and a woman.



The first time the possible legalization of gay marriage became a hot topic in the national news, I was shocked. George W. Bush was president, and huge numbers of people were speaking out in support of same-sex marriage. What accounted for the incongruity in timing? I soon figured it out: Starting a war at home would take the nation’s eyes off the war in Iraq. Mission accomplished.



My friends Betty and Rita, a couple, had lived together a half-dozen years when Betty wrote to New Mexico Congresswoman Heather Wilson in support of marriage between same-sex couples. In a letter dated April 30, 2004, and printed on Congressional letterhead, Wilson wrote back: “H.J. Res. 56, which would amend the Constitution, is intended to declare that marriage in the

United States will consist only of the union of a man and a woman.” To drive her position home, Congresswoman Wilson added, “I believe that marriage is the union of a man and a woman as husband and wife. I would prefer that this not be a constitutional issue, but since activist judges and local officials are seeking to redefine marriage, I would support an amendment that reflects my belief.” Until this point, there were no surprises in Heather Wilson’s reply, but then came this paragraph:

Over the last forty years we have seen the weakening of the family to the point of where a third of our children are born out of wedlock and by the time they start school, fully half of children are not living with both parents.

What this had to do with the Federal Marriage Amendment, she didn’t say; but in my mind, it was an indictment of marriage in general. Did she really mean, Why do you homosexuals want a piece of something that’s already falling apart? Not to worry, Wilson got back on topic:

“Elizabeth, we probably disagree on whether same-sex unions should be treated the same as marriages. I don’t believe they are or should be.”

Betty and Rita are now legally married, at least in the state of Massachusetts. They wed in late 2004, a few months prior to the birth of their baby girl. Rita is the biological mother. Despite the legality of their marriage, Betty had to adopt their child, had to get a lawyer and letters of reference attesting to her ability to be a good parent, had to come up with a couple thousand dollars to make sure she was legally recognized as her little girl’s mother. For their baby shower, they requested donations toward affording the adoption proceedings. “Our gay friends were the only ones who contributed,” Rita told me.

Betty and Rita next moved to Washington, D.C., where their marriage wasn’t recognized as such, and were told it would cost \$45 to apply for domestic partnership. Not to worry: They’re both still legally their daughter’s mothers.



Not long ago, Lisa told me that her friend Philip, a divorced man in his late forties, had filed for domestic partnership with his live-in lover of the past several years, a woman. I retorted, “What are they, gay?” Lisa replied, “He doesn’t want to get married again.” That’s the point: Domestic partnership is not the same as marriage. It’s not perceived the same. To toss us queers the crumb of domestic partnership or civil union as an alternative to marriage may give us a little taste of something, but it doesn’t much nourish us.



October 2006, Albuquerque NM. Upon reading *Heaven’s Coast*, a memoir by Mark Doty detailing his grief over his lover’s death from AIDS, an undergraduate in my creative nonfiction class asks me, “Why’d he have to keep writing about being gay? Why couldn’t he mention it once and move on?” I respond by explaining about marked and unmarked people. Those who fit dominant designations, I say, are always just plain “people,” absent adjectival identifiers. We never hear about the first white person to sit at the front of the bus, and gay actors are never quizzed about whether performing a straight love scene made them uncomfortable. My student doesn’t get it. He says, “Straight people aren’t always writing about what it’s like to be heterosexual.”

“Yes, they do,” I tell him. “They do it all the time. You just don’t notice because we live in a heteronormative world.” I refrain from pointing out that in almost every assignment for our class, he’s written about his fiancée, whom he refers to less often by name than by title. I’m not there to challenge the existence of privilege in his work; my job is to teach effective characterization, narrative structure, dramatic conflict. The essay he turns in later that month is about his asking his girlfriend to marry him and her saying yes. His fellow students are the first to ask, “Where’s the conflict?”

That same semester, I start taking offense at the word “homoerotic.” From here on, I will amputate the tag of *homo-*, as if certain behaviors enacted by same-sex partners don’t deserve the plainspoken designation of *erotic*. That, or I will start saying “heteroerotic” to indicate sexual practices and undertones involving opposite-sex partners.



Anyone who accuses gay people of having an agenda is only trying to protect the heterosexual agenda.

Anyone who thinks I’m writing about gay marriage is missing the point.



The lesbian who taught me the word *heteronormative* announced in February 2007 that she and her boyfriend would be getting married in March 2007. She told me she was having to rethink her identity, reconcile herself to being bisexual. I cared less about what label Sarah strapped on than I did about the apparent erosion of her political edginess. She was excited about the rings, her dress and shoes, the gift registry, the ceremony in Vegas. I could hardly listen, much less bring myself to ask how excited she was about the heteronormative legitimacy that came with her choice.

Heteronormative. Really? Isn’t the right word *normative*?

In response to our once-adamantly lesbian friend’s plans to marry a man, Lisa, my twice-divorced-from-men bisexual best friend, reassured me that she had “no plans to marry any time soon—within the next five years, say.” Hearing this, I thought, *Five years. Marriage between same-sex couples probably won’t be legalized by then.* But I would’ve wagered fortunes that it never once crossed Lisa’s mind that she might marry a woman. (Eventually I asked. Nope, never occurred to her.)

My mother, who had met Sarah several times, responded to the news first by affirming the bride-to-be's new sexual identity: "That means she's bisexual." Yes, just in time to marry a man, I thought, how convenient. My mother was happy for her. Sarah's family must have been thrilled, she said, and even if the marriage didn't last, at least Sarah could say, and I quote, "Been there, done that." My mother added that every lesbian should marry (a man) so that everyone would believe she was normal. "I'd be happy if you got married," my mother summed up. "That is, if I liked the guy."



Get this: My first lover, a woman, married my first male lover. Bully for them.



January 2001, New Orleans LA. It is late one winter weeknight, and my girlfriend and I walk holding hands in Jackson Square. I am in love, I am crazy in love, I am with the woman I love in the city I love best, and I want to throw myself to my knees and propose to her there, in the shadows of the streetlamps, with Saint Louis Cathedral towering before us and Andrew Jackson rearing up on his horse as we cross his path.

What stops me? There's recently been a man in the picture, Michelle's first, and the rift in her affections has not mended in a way I trust. That affair has lit her world with possibilities. She envisions marriage, children. She's dreams aloud of dancing with her father at her wedding. She's already picked the song.

Our relationship ends a few months later, and thus begins Michelle's revisionist history. She replaces a lifetime of lesbian identity with a feeble claim to bisexuality, but in the years ahead, she rarely if ever admits to her past romantic involvements with women. She erases me to my face. Last time I see her, in spring 2008, we go to dinner with Lisa. The evening progresses

happily enough. We all have crushes. Theirs are on men. Speaking of hers, Lisa muses, “I’ve never dated a Latino man.”

Michelle replies, “I’ve never dated anything but Latino men.”

I am vividly aware of my white female body and all its past uses with Michelle. Why, if we never dated, do I explicitly recall the sand-colored delta of her pubic hair and her nipples reddened like raspberries between my teeth as she gripped my hair and held my head where she wanted it? But sex isn’t dating, I know, and it’s not worth the effort to recount here the myriad ways we spent our time out of bed.



June 2006, New Braunfels TX. I visit my parents in their new home. All my life, they lived on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Then two months after Hurricane Katrina, they moved. The damage to their house was negligible, yet they couldn’t bear to stay because they were bored. Their house in Texas is basically a replica of the one they left in Mississippi: big, well-lighted, part of a new development, this one in a gated community situated on a golf course with the Guadalupe River just a short walk down the road.

We’ve been fighting for days about my latest tattoo, a big purple iris still healing on my left forearm. Several times daily, I’ve been called a “circus freak” and a “low-life” and the tattoo “an affliction.” I resent the onslaught, but with the tattoo there to serve as the bull’s-eye for my parents’ disapproval, I’ve been spared the usual insults about being gay.

Spared, that is, until Sunday morning, when my parents are getting ready for church. My mother has been pestering me to go with them since before I left Albuquerque, she’s worried about my relationship with Jesus—an oddly Protestant phrasing for a good Catholic like herself—but she has finally accepted that I don’t want to. Dad is somewhere, where is Dad?, but Mom

is ready, dressed as always in bright matching colors, her short thinning hair sprayed into place, makeup on, sweat dotting her upper lip. She sits across from me and sips her coffee as I sip mine.

She wants me to know she doesn't approve of my friends. She doesn't like Lisa, and I think the reason will be in keeping with the theme of the visit, because like me, Lisa has numerous tattoos. But no, my mother doesn't like Lisa because once when I interrupted something Lisa was saying, I caught myself and apologized. To my mother's thinking, that means Lisa has power over me. And she doesn't like Michelle, either. Michelle, my last girlfriend. This one startles me. "Because of the lesbianism," my mother explains. Because Michelle inspired lesbianism in me. Lesbian love, lesbian behavior, lesbian sex, lesbian heartbreak.

Mother starts talking about priests. She believes they're all homosexuals. Oh, she knows the difference between a homosexual and a pedophile, she says and keeps on talking while I wonder about her relationship with Jesus.

When the conversation turns, I interject a question that's been on my mind. A group of friends and I were recently talking about how we assumed our parents would respond if we got married or had a commitment ceremony. Mine, I said, would probably never condescend to come. Now I pose the question to my mother. "Would you attend?"

Her temper flares. Her face hardens, eyes narrow, lips purse, cheeks sag into a frown. "Oh, I'd better be invited. Don't you not invite us, Marisa. Don't you do that to us."

She hasn't heard me correctly, no surprise there. I say, "I'd invite you. I just didn't think you'd come."

"We'd come." Her face is still hard, her eyes two brown stones, her mouth a red wrinkle. "Of course we'd have to do something else with the money, our things. I won't have someone outside the family having our things."

I sip my coffee and mull over her words. Obviously, no ceremony would make her view my chosen one as part of the family. And my mother's insistence on attending the ceremony in order to give the pretense of a blessing would result in her disowning me. It wouldn't be the first time. And why is it my mother thinks I'm attracted to penniless types, women who don't have homes and cars and incomes and belongings of their own?

Whatever. The matter remains safely rhetorical. Same-sex marriage isn't legal, and even if it were, the closest thing I have to a life partner is my African gray parrot.



A man named Ira was the first person I knew who died of AIDS. He was survived by his boyfriend Bill. They were in their early thirties and had been together the better part of a decade. Ira didn't have a drawn-out illness—he died muscular and handsome—but he had time to write a will. Upon his death, his parents contested it. I remember Bill hunched over, face in hands, grieving Ira's death, grieving Ira's parents' pettiness. They had detailed what they wanted. They wanted everything. "They even want his undershirts," Bill said. What they really wanted was for Bill to have nothing left of Ira.



A man I knew had a longtime live-in girlfriend whose gay brother had died of AIDS. "I promised myself I wouldn't get married until gay people can marry," she told me once, and I thought *What a lovely woman, what a wonderful sentiment*. She and my friend separated a few years ago. He got engaged shortly thereafter and is now married. To a woman, need I add.



I've proposed only one time thus far, in 1989. It was late at night, and I sat slouched on the sofa while my lover slept with her head in my lap. I stroked the wild mass of her eternally tangled golden hair and asked softly, so as not to wake her, "Will you marry me?" Her lips parted. Her

eyes remained shut. She said, “Yes.” I asked again. “Will you marry me?” Again she said, “Yes.” Much later, when her eyes finally fluttered open, I asked once more. “Will you marry me?” She smiled and said, “We can’t.” Then as now, I knew it was only the stuff of dreams.



November 4, 2008. Barack Obama is elected the next president of the United States. Meanwhile in California, Proposition 8, a ballot initiative to ban marriage between same-sex couples, passes. Shall I harp on the irony?



*Prologue as Epilogue*

1969, Biloxi MS. I’m five. Shelley Collins, Mark Lacey, and I are in my grandparents’ front yard, getting ready to play scenes from our favorite TV show, *Here Come the Brides*. We are having the same argument we always have. Shelley wants to cast me as Jeremy, the romantic lead, played on the show by teen heartthrob Bobby Sherman. She begs me to play Jeremy, because she doesn’t want Mark to play him. At four, Mark still shits his pants: some Jeremy, some romantic lead. I am adamant, though: I want to play Jason. He represents everything I want to be: He’s strong and self-reliant, not prone to his brothers’ romantic foolishness, and he has the same name I’d have had if I’d been born a boy. In addition, I’m sporting the jacket for it, a rust-colored buckskin number that drips fringe from its sleeves and across its back. In the end I get my way. I get to be Jason, Mark is Jeremy, and Shelley plays the lead bride.

Before we’re too far into it, my mother comes into the yard and pulls me aside. Quietly she asks, “Can’t you be one of the brides?” She reminds me that I’m a girl and, as a girl, I should pretend to be one of the brides. She releases me back to the game of make-believe. I make my friends move away, far from the adults who sit visiting on the front porch. We move all the way across the yard, near the front fence and the cedar tree, and resume our play. I play Jason. I’m

wearing my buckskin jacket with all the fringe—improper attire for a bride—and I make a fabulous Jason.

“Can’t you be one of the brides?” my mother asked, meaning to insist, so very long ago.

I thought but did not say, “No.”

Forty years later, the answer is still no. I still can’t be one of the brides, and until I can, I refuse to play the game according to anyone else’s agenda.

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