

I'm (Not) Scared of Getting Married

First Day--November 1, 2006

My hands are sweaty, so I rub them on my jeans. Mike and I are at Applebee's, in a booth in the far corner by the restrooms. It's getting late, almost midnight, and the restaurant is as empty as I've ever seen it before. I have invited Mike to go shopping with me for my sister's birthday present, and since he is her brother-in-law I try to convince myself that the only reason I invited him is because he would be able to help me pick something out.

"Thanks for coming with me," I say. I know this whole appetizer and dessert thing has to wrap up soon, but there are things I need to say.

"Yeah, it was fun. I'm sure Lindsey will like what you got her."

"Me too." I don't know what to say next. I have to think of some way to navigate around the large elephant sitting between us. "So, maybe you can help with an issue I have." I brace myself. "You know I'm dating Matt. But I think I'm starting to like someone else."

Matt and I had been dating for almost two years, but we both started our freshman years at college two months before. Matt chose to go to the University of Michigan, and I decided to stay at home and attend Grand Valley. Ever since we made our decisions, things had been rocky. No matter how often we saw each other, the distance was hard to get over and late night phone calls hadn't been cutting it. And then Mike started hanging around. He was my brother-in-law's brother, and he started hanging out with my family. He would come up north to our trailer and he'd come by for family dinners on Sunday. We even went to the same church. Matt was starting a life somewhere else, and Mike was everywhere.

I knew something had to change when I started going to running groups that the church had every Monday night just so I could talk to Mike. I don't even like running. Now, it was time to tell the truth.

"Oh?" His eyes were focused directly on my face.

"Yeah, and I don't know what I should do because there's no reason to ruin a good relationship if the guy I like doesn't like me back." I feel like a twelve year-old.

Mike nods. "I don't see how anyone could not like you back."

My cheeks flush. I feel a strange desire to both vomit and laugh. The urge to vomit might have something to do with the near empty plate of nachos in front of me. "But then what do you suggest? I mean, should I tell the guy that I like him, or should I just break up with Matt?"

"You should tell the guy you like him. Definitely."

"But what if he doesn't end up liking me back? We're friends and I feel that if I told him I liked him and he didn't like me back then our friendship would be ruined. It could be really awkward."

"Like I said, I'm sure he likes you too. You should tell him," Mike says.

We sit in silence for a few minutes. I can almost feel the vomit creeping up my throat. There is no other time but this time, and yet I still can't manage to say the words. Thoughts are racing through my head. *He's too old for me. He's my sister's brother-in-law. How could this ever work? I'm only 19. How am I going to break-up with Matt? Do I want to go from one relationship to another? Am I cheating? Oh my gosh, I'm a cheater!*

"I think you should tell him soon." Mike says.

Fine. Just do it. Just say it. Come on, this isn't junior high. "I like you, Mike."

He smiles at me; the smile that I love most. The smile that always makes me feel like there is no one else in the room. The same smile that makes me feel jumpy and exposed, yet special and beautiful too. The smile that makes me fall for him without hesitation. That smile.

“I like you too.” Mike says.

I Read Instead—October 2009

I look at him and think, *If he mentions the beer that is brewing in his basement one more time, I might stab him in the eye with the nearest sharp object.* I glance around and realize that there is nothing sharp in the vicinity, so I instead I wait for him to stop talking about the amount of foam at the top of the carboy.

“When I checked this morning there was this much,” Mike says holding his thumb and index finger about a quarter inch apart, “but now there’s this much.” He moves his fingers another quarter inch apart.

“Mmhmm.” I’m holding a Nora Roberts book in my hand and keep glancing back at the pages. He has the uncanny ability to always start talking in the middle of when I’m reading. I usually try to finish it up before looking at him, but tonight he just won’t take no for an answer. Instead he starts going on about how his friend Charlie, the holiest of brew masters, called him and asked him how the beer was coming along.

“I told him I was worried that it wouldn’t ferment because I didn’t use the funnel, but he said that it should probably be fine,” Mike says. “I looked at this morning again and I see the bubbles coming up in the gauge, so I think it’s fine. Charlie said it just needs to keep getting faster, and when I went down again to check on it, it was bubbling every three seconds, instead of seven like this morning.”

“Oh, good,” I say and look back at my book. *I know this already. You told me this morning you were worried it wouldn’t ferment. I get it. Please stop talking about it, please.*

He knows I’m not listening anymore, so he says, “Sorry, you can keep reading now.”

He turns back to the TV and I turn back to my book. I remind myself that at the end of this chapter, I will stop so we can actually hang out and talk. But I think about how the only thing it seems like we have talked about for the past week and a half is the beer brewing extravaganza. So instead of stopping at chapter eleven, I press on through chapter twelve.

Sweet April 2009

It is the day before Easter and Mike’s family decided to get together because we all have other holiday arrangements for the next day. I am sitting at the table in the kitchen, while Mike plays with his nieces and nephews in the living room. His sisters-in-law, Bethany and Shara, were in the kitchen too, and so was my sister, Lindsey.

I was discussing Mike’s and my plans for the night, which included going to Bobarino’s, a Hawaiian themed restaurant in The Bob. “I just think it’s weird that he made reservations,” I say in hushed tones. “He never makes reservations. If we decide to go out to eat, we just go.”

Shara, Bethany, and Lindsey are all staring at me. Mike is out of earshot so I continue talking. “It’s weird, like he might propose, but I think it’s too early to get engaged. He’s always said he wants to have a yearlong engagement, and we’ll probably have the wedding next summer. I think July will be the month when he proposes. But, I still find it strange that he made reservations.”

“That is weird,” my sister says. “But it would be really exciting too.”

“Yeah, I just think it’s too soon. I don’t want to get my hopes up that it’s happening tonight.”

“I don’t think it’s too soon,” Bethany says.

Mike and I know we want to get married; we’ve known that almost the entire time we’ve been dating. When we met, I was nineteen and starting my first year of college. He was twenty-six and was willing to wait. It was never matter of if, but when. Three weeks into our relationship we said we loved each other, and now, two and half years later, things hadn’t changed. We still love each other, and we still know we will get married eventually.

“Well, we’ll figure out won’t we,” I say and smile.

Later that night, Mike and I are sitting at Bobarinos; I glance around and realize that there is only one other table filled with people; maybe The Bob is only busy after 5:30 in the evening.

We just finished eating our meals and I am sipping on some sweet wine, when Mike pulls out a piece of paper from his back pocket. I recognize that it is the deed to his house. The house had been a long time coming. Though he is twenty-nine, he hadn’t been able to afford living on his own because he dug himself into a hole with credit card debt when he was in college. When we started dating, he committed himself to paying off his credit card debt so that we could eventually buy a house. We always wanted a house together, and if it meant we had to wait to buy one until we were married then we would, but we didn’t have to. He got the deed shortly after he moved into his first house eight months ago and even though I wasn’t on the mortgage, Mike and I wanted to make sure that if something happened to him, I would get the house. Since we weren’t married, and I didn’t even technically live there, a deed was the answer. It is lying between the two of us and Mike begins patting down his body for a pen. Normally, I would have thought it was strange that Mike had brought the deed to dinner, but for some reason that I can’t

explain it didn't seem odd. I just thought he saw it lying around and shoved it in his pocket before we left. I look down at the page and I see that he has already signed his name to the paper, which means he is just waiting for me to sign mine.

"I just thought we should get this out of the way. It's been sitting on the fridge for a while and I think we should turn it into the city," he says.

"Right, that's a good idea." I glance at him before signing my name below his, and smile because I know that it's a big moment for us. It's our house now. I grip the pen and sign.

We finish dinner and pay the bill only a few minutes after we sign the deed, and walk out of The Bob not much after 6:30. It is cool April evening and the high temperature for the day is only 50°, but the sun is still shining and the days are getting long. Mike starts walking toward our car and I follow. I had decided that morning that I will let whatever happens, happen. I refuse to ask any questions about where we are going or what we are doing, because if I'm right I don't want to spoil anything with my questions.

"It's a little cold out. If we want to walk around, I should grab my jacket from the car," he says.

"Sure. Sounds good."

We walk to the parking lot where he grabs his brown blazer from the backseat. I bought it for him as a Christmas gift a couple years before because he always complained that he didn't have nice clothes to wear. Once he has it on, he immediately shifts from my left side to my right side. It is an abrupt movement that has me looking up at him confused, but he doesn't seem to notice. *The ring is in that pocket, I think. Stop thinking that. Maybe not.* I let him lead me to Calder Plaza, and begin paying more attention to my surroundings. The plaza is a large expanse of concrete surrounded by office buildings. In the center of the plaza is a large, red sculpture

created by Alexander Calder, but there are no benches or tables to be found. For the most part, it's just a wide open area where people can hang out; unless there is a festival or large event, it's often empty.

There are two people in front of us, a younger couple, and they keep looking around and back at us. We are the only two couples in the entire plaza and the fact that they keep glancing at us starts to make me nervous.

A few months ago my brother-in-law saw a couple get engaged in Chicago, and since he had a camera in his hand he took photos of the whole thing. He then told the couple he'd e-mail the pictures to them. I thought it was a pleasant surprise for the couple, and after he told me that story I desperately wanted my engagement caught on camera. Mike knew that I thought getting pictures of our engagement was a wonderful idea, and for a moment the thought pops into my head that the people in front of us are photographers. *They're here to take pictures of us. He's going to propose.* As soon as the thought enters my head I shove it back out again. April is not the month for engagements. I am expecting July, August maybe, but April is far too soon.

I keep thinking, *he's going to propose, I know it*, but I keep walking. Mike and I stay silent as we traverse the plaza to where a short, concrete barrier encloses a small area with grass. I sit down at first, but Mike quickly pulls me onto his lap. It's awkward that I am sitting on his lap when there is an entire wall for me to sit on, but I don't want to move in case this is the moment. His leg is bouncing underneath me, which is usually a sign of nervousness, and I can't help feeling anxious too.

"I'm glad we went to dinner tonight," Mike says.

"Yeah, it's a nice night."

“Did you have fun?” He looks at me. I smile and wrap my arms around his neck. His arms are around my waist.

“Of course.”

“So I gave you the deed at dinner, and I have something else to give you,” he says. He shifts out from underneath me and lets me situate myself on the wall.

As soon as his hand reaches into his blazer pocket I know. All I can think is, *this is it. It's happening right now.* He squats down instead of kneeling. I brace myself on the wall by placing my palms down on the cement. My fingers grip the wall, and I can feel the pebbles being imprinted on my hands. I'm not focusing on anything he's saying. I try to hear the words, but I'm just looking at the white box he has in his hands. I think about the ring, sitting in that box, and imagine what it looks like. *Is it square or round cut? Is it what I want, or did he pick something else? I said he could pick whatever he wanted because frankly he had to buy it. He has to see me wear for it the rest of my life, so it doesn't matter what it looks like. It's his gift to me. Oh jeez, pay attention.*

“I love you so much,” he says. “I want to spend my life with you, I always have.”

He pauses, and I know what's coming.

“Will you marry me?”

Oh yes, of course. Of course I'll marry you. The words don't come though, and I start to cry. I'm focusing on him sitting in front of me, and realize it's my turn.

“Yes,” I say. He stays in his squatted position, and I wrap my arms around his neck. I let go and look at the box that he's still holding. He opens it and I see the ring, glittering in the dying sun. It's perfect in every way; it's exactly what I want. I wouldn't have picked anything else.

I sit on the wall for a long time and he squats in front of me. Finally, we get up and I try to recall all the things he's just said to me. I try to quickly file them away so I can remember them later.

April actually is the month for engagements.

An Ex-Fiancé—November 2009

Mike has been engaged before. I imagine often how he asked the same question of someone and she said yes like I did. I imagine that they were really excited and told all their friends and family, much like we did. I imagine that they hugged and kissed after he proposed, and felt immense because they were going to spend the rest of their lives together. I imagine all these things, and so I ask Mike how it really was and ask him how this time is different. How am I different?

He begins by explaining that they changed during the time they were engaged, and that's why it ended. Change is such a vague word and I can't really understand how that can describe what happened. What changed? How did they come to the conclusion, or how did he come to the conclusion, that getting married was a bad idea?

Getting engaged is something I am entirely sure about, but how can I begin to be sure when Mike has proposed to someone else. The fact that he thought he could love someone else and think he wanted to marry her makes me think that he could change his mind with me too. I may change; in fact I know I will.

"How long did you date before you proposed?" I ask.

"I don't know, like two and half years," he says.

He says they dated for two and half years, and all of their friends were getting married and engaged. It was the next logical step and at the time and they really thought it was a good idea.

“Do you regret your decision of asking her to marry you?” I want to know.

“No, at the time it was the right thing to do. Now, I can obviously see it wasn’t.”

We have been together for three years, or about two and a half when he proposed. Even though we knew we wanted to get married, it was sort of coming to that point in our relationship where the next step had to be taken. It sounds a little too familiar.

“What did you have in common?” I ask.

“Ummm,” he pauses, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t remember what you had in common, what you were both interested in?”

“I guess we were both a part of campus ministries and we liked going to the beach, but that’s about it,” he says.

He tells me that they had nothing in common, or at least their only shared interests were that they liked the beach and were involved in campus ministries. I begin to think about what we have in common. We both really like kids and have some of the same ideas about life. He likes sports, and I don’t. I like reading, and he doesn’t. He’s a runner, and I don’t even like running shoes. We’re so different it seems like we can only end up in the same predicament.

“Why did you postpone the wedding?” I ask. I know a little about the sequence of events, but I want to know more.

“We were just different, we had changed. The pastor that was going to marry us said we should take some time off and think about whether we were really good for each other,” he says.

He says he postponed the wedding because their pre-marital counselor said they should. The wedding was a month away, but they did it anyway. Our wedding is in August and I'm terrified for the month of July. I'm terrified because by the time we get married, we'll be engaged for eighteen months and I will have graduated from college and will have undoubtedly changed, and we will continue to have little in common, except our ideas about life.

But isn't that the important stuff? The stuff that makes it work in the first place? We don't share the same interests, but while he's watching ESPN, I read my favorite book. I know that the only reason we weren't engaged a couple of years ago was because I was still in school and was only 20 years old. I know that since the day we started dating there's been no change so significant we couldn't work through it. I know at the three-week mark in our relationship we discussed how someday we'd get married. I know all these things, and even so, I feel a creeping doubt that he'll say the same things. In the end we'll change and maybe he won't want to stay.

"Do you ever regret your decision to break off the engagement?" I ask.

"Of course not. We weren't good for each other. We never would be," he says.

I worry that in the end, we'll change and maybe he won't want to stay, and he'll be able to walk away and not feel the slightest regret or guilt. The same way he felt free when he walked away from Marie six years ago. I wonder if this is really all that different; if I am really all that different. I hope so.

In the Car—October 2009

We're driving to our house in Wyoming. The house where we have two cats named Walter and Scarlet. The house I don't yet live in, but someday will.

“Do you ever think that things won’t work between us, like we might get divorced?” I ask.

“No, I don’t worry about that,” Mike says slowly.

“Well, I don’t think it’s going to happen or anything, but have you ever even thought out it?”

“No,” he says.

I think he can tell that I’m daunted by his answer. I don’t want him to have doubts about our coming marriage, but I want him to make me feel less crazy.

“I mean, I think we can make it. I know we can make it. We’ll make it.” He’s holding my hand and pulls it up so he can kiss the back of it.

Divorce Rates

The divorce rate in America is about 40%, but the divorce increases for each subsequent marriage.¹ Basically, if a marriage is going to work, the first one is the most likely to succeed.

Of women that get divorced, 36.6% are women who were married between the ages of 20 and 24.²

This age group has the highest percentage of reported divorces compared to any other age group.

However, of men that get divorced, only 11.6% are between the ages of 30 and 34.³ This age group has nearly the lowest percentage of reported divorces.

¹ Rate found at Divorcerate.org.

² Divorcerate.org

³ Divorcerate.org

In short, I have a much higher chance of getting a divorce because I'm getting married at the age of 22, than Mike does because he's getting married at the age of 30.

Christmas and Cats—December 2009

We're sitting Mike's living room, and our cats are peacefully curled up on our laps. We try to stay very still so they will stay there while we watch the rest of *Dan in Real Life*. Mike and I are sharing a blanket and we're sitting on one of our two very uncomfortable and beat up couches. I just keep looking forward to the day when we can go pick out new furniture that doesn't like it was found on some sidewalk.

I glance around the small living room and am so happy to be here at this moment. Our Christmas tree that we bought last year, after Christmas for half off, is lit up and has a mix-n-match collection of ornaments on its branches. Mike strung lights across the two curtain rods, so that multi-colored strands are dangling from both of the windows. The lamps are turned off so we can enjoy the ambience of the twinkling lights.

I like how I feel. Sometimes when I'm sitting in this house, our house, I feel like I belong. I know where all the silverware, plates, cups and cooking utensils are in the kitchen because I put them there. I chose how this house was organized. I know what's in the front closet, the bathroom closet, and closet in the office. Cleaning supplies are stored underneath the sink in the bathroom, and the Swiffer is in the office closet along with Mike's safe.

They're not big decisions to make, where the games go and where the Lysol should be placed, but I still got to make them because this is our house. No one told me where they wanted stuff, I just got to choose. All this space, and I get to choose where every little thing goes.

I feel immense as I'm sitting on the couch, stroking Walter's head and looking out the front window to the house across the street. In less than a year, I will spend every night in this house, relaxing with my husband. It seems scary sometimes, but right now it feels like the best thing in the world. I can imagine sitting here next Christmas, in the same way, with Mike as my husband. It's a small thing, a small desire, but a beautiful feeling.

Ten Years Forward—A Daymare

Mike will stand in front of me, one of his hands fiddling with the top button of his shirt. Button, unbutton, button, unbutton. I will know what he is going to say before he says it. He will have already told me the worst so there won't be anything else he can say that will make the wound bigger. He will leave, I will stay. He will rent an apartment, I will keep the house. He won't love me anymore; I will be left with no one.

"I was thinking maybe we should stop talking for a while. I think you're still too dependent on me." Mike will say frankly.

I won't even care to respond. I will be too deep in my own puddle of sadness to care what he has to say, or even what I have to say. "Ok."

"It's just that you call me all the time, and ask me to come over and fix things and I think it's confusing for JJ and Elliot. Every time I'm here they think I'm coming back for good."

"Ok."

"Janelle, do you understand what I'm saying?" he will ask.

"Yes."

“Can’t you say something more than just one word answers? Don’t you have anything to say to me?” He will stop fiddling with his button. I’ll feel sad that he stops the movement. It would be comforting to see him doing it, falling into old habits right in front of me.

“No.” I won’t move; I won’t breath. I’ll just wait.

He will shake his head and sigh. “I don’t know what to say. I mean, I’m hurting too.”

“I know.” I’ll know he is hurting. The fact is, we will have stopped loving each other a long time before then but didn’t wanted to admit it. He won’t like how I interrupted him, and I won’t like how the TV was always blaring. But those won’t be the things that ended it. Those will just be small, everyday, nuisances that we got used to over time. At least I thought so. What ends it will be us. Just us.

“I’m going.” He will head for the door and won’t look back.

I will remember our first date. I’ll remember the way he held our first child and how he looked at me with so much pride and love. I will remember all these wonderful things, and wonder how I ended up there.

I will see him pull out of the driveway, and I’ll tell through the glass that he is crying. I’ll wonder if he can see me doing the same thing.

The Guy I Know

When Mike gets home from work, or anywhere else, he’ll walk in the door and yell the cats’ names as loudly as he can. It usually comes out in a high pitched and squeaky voice that he thinks is hilarious.

Whenever we go to PetSmart to buy food for the cats, we take an immediate left upon entering the store. The cats that are waiting to be adopted are in kennels on the left hand side of

the aisle. We'll spend several minutes discussing how each cat would fit in with Walter and Scarlet, but then always leave because we know we can't get another cat. Already, there is enough cat hair in the house to drive me nuts.

He's much more willing to cook than I am, and so he makes dinner most of the time. It might only be grilled cheese sandwiches and clam chowder from a can, but I appreciate that he's willing to do it when I don't want to.

He plays soccer and runs. Even though he's almost thirty, he's played on a soccer league for as long as I can remember and is one of the better players on his team.

He is an uncle to five children, and it will be six soon. He is wonderful with kids and when we walk in his brother's house, three young children all shout, "Uncle Mike!" and run towards him. He then immediately starts making funny faces and throwing them up in the air while they squeal with laughter.

He is more comfortable holding a newborn baby than any person I know. Unlike normal people, he is completely confident in his ability to support their neck and keep them from crying.

He paid off \$10,000 in credit card debt in a matter of two years because he felt like it was something that would hold us back from doing all the things we wanted to do, like traveling and buying a house.

Whenever he cleans the house, which is about once a week while I'm at work, he'll show me all the things he did when I get home.

"See, I cleaned the bathroom and dusted."

"Good job," I always say.

Whenever I fight with my sisters, which is somewhat often, Mike always takes my side. Eventually he'll point out how I might be wrong, or at least that's it not a big deal, but at first he just lets me rant and then takes my side.

When we got to bed at night, he usually says he loves me. And then he rolls over and falls asleep within about five minutes while I'm left lying awake. But he always offers to try and stay up with me if I can't sleep. I always let him sleep.

Two Weeks Ago—November 2009

We're watching *The Office* on my laptop; a large, slow laptop. Even though we can access the show through the NBC website, there are still commercials that we can't fast forward through and whenever they come on, he turns down the volume, then turns it up, then mutes it, then turns it back up again. *Why does he keep hitting that? Is it really necessary? I would rather listen to the commercial than this awkward silence and button pushing noise.* This is not something I should be getting angry or even annoyed over. It's just a button, and he's just sort of hyperactive when it comes to watching commercials. He just can't stand it. *It's fine*, I tell myself, *he's not doing anything wrong. He's just pushing the button, that's all.* Click, click. I see the volume icon pop up on my screen and move from the right to the left.

Oh my gosh, how am I ever going to make it through an entire marriage when I can't even stand that he's pushing the volume button on my computer? How is this going to last when I can't get over the small stuff? People always say that you get used to the annoying habits they have. It's not so much that they go away but you just choose to ignore them or whatever. I'm not that person.

I stare at the screen and watch the muted commercial, telling myself it's not a big deal and that I just need to let it go. Finally, I can't take it anymore and I push his hand away from the button. He looks at me funny but I don't care because if he pushes that button one more time I might scream.

I Just Want a Marriage—October 2009

My friends, Tricia and Sierra, and me are in Traverse City for a weekend away. We picked up some drinks in town and are spending the rest of the night in the hotel room. It's the perfect time for girl talk and some much needed relaxation.

"I just can't believe both of my best friends are getting married," Sierra says between taking sips from her Mike's Hard Lemonade.

"I know. It's only seven months away," Tricia says. Her wedding is in May and she can't wait.

"It does seem crazy," I say.

"I'm just worried about the night of the wedding. I need to make sure I have extra condoms," Tricia says.

"Aren't you taking birth control?" I ask.

"Yeah, but it's not fool proof."

"I think it's fool proof, if it's used correctly. I've been on it for three years and have never had any issues," I say.

"It just makes me nervous though," Sierra says. "I always used extra protection too because I didn't want to get pregnant."

"Well I don't want to get pregnant either," I say.

“But what if you get pregnant before the wedding, would you change the date?” Sierra asks.

“No. The baby would come regardless, so it wouldn’t matter if I changed the date or not,” I say.

“You wouldn’t want to move it up so that you wouldn’t be super pregnant when you got married?” Tricia asks.

“I don’t care about what I look like. I mean, I care a little, but it’s my wedding. The only thing I care about is the marriage. I could have a wedding anywhere at any time and I wouldn’t care because in the end I would still be married, and that’s all I want. I just want to be with Mike.”

“I think I’d want to change the date,” Tricia says.

“Me too,” says Sierra.

“All I want is a marriage. I don’t care if I’m six months pregnant or not. Even if I am, that just means I’m going to have a baby, which would be terrifying, but exciting too. And on top of that, I’m not in it for the wedding, I’m in it because then I can spend the rest of my life with Mike. I want a marriage, not a wedding.”

All I want is a marriage.

The Only Dress—October 2009

I’m not nervous, or even particularly excited. I have a list of wedding dresses that I looked up online weeks ago, but even then I was sure that this would be a fruitless trip. There are going to be other stores and other appointments before I find the one.

When my sisters, my mom, and me walk into David's Bridal, however, I immediately feel overwhelmed and excited. There are dresses everywhere. It isn't my first time being in the store, but it is my first time being here and being the bride.

I hand the saleswoman my list of dresses, and she goes to get them. As I start to take off my clothes, and put on the corset/bustier thing that I am supposed to wear, something changes. I realize fully, for the first time in a while, that I am getting married. In nine months, I will be walking to Mike, wearing a gown, and saying "I do". He will know that he is the only man I want to spend my life with, and I will know that he only wants me forever. Our brothers, sisters, parents, nieces, and nephews will watch us, and his brother will marry us. His brother, Chris, will stand in front of us and join us in a way we never have before. I will move in to our house, and move out of my parents'. He will make dinner when we get home from work and we will clean the house and do laundry on Saturdays. He will wake up and feed the cats, and I will hop in the shower while he makes the coffee. We will go shopping for a new car together, rake the leaves together, clean the gutters, paint the house, and wax our cars together. We will share our lives entirely. We will be married. And with those thoughts in my head, I step into my first dress and my mom zips it up.

The first dress is a strapless gown with a sweetheart neckline. It has embroidery at the top, reminiscent of the 1920's, and the entire gown has a lace overlay. It sort of puckers in the front and is ivory instead of white, which makes it look like an antique. It isn't exactly what I want, but as I stand on the pedestal in front of the mirror, I think, *This isn't so bad*.

Then I put the veil on. It makes all the difference. I go from a girl in a dress to a woman wearing a gown. I am all bound up in tradition and lace, or at least I look like I am, and my heart starts to hammer against my ribs. I am a bride. Every time I'm in a wedding, there is always this

moment of wonder when the bride puts her dress on. Everyone knows at that moment that this will be the dress she will wear when her life changes, and when she will finally marry the man she loves. We will think about how beautiful she looks and get teary-eyed because this is her day and she is so happy. And finally, I can see myself in that moment, everyone looking at me in wonder, knowing I am so happy.

I stand there for a few minutes, knowing full well that this isn't *the* dress, but still, it is the first dress. There is silence from my sisters and my mom who are standing off to the side of the pedestal, and I know that they, for the first time too, realize I am actually getting married. My mom's eyes look wetter than normal and my sisters don't say anything; they just stare. I know my mom and sisters have sort of forgotten the wedding would be happening soon. It has always been something that would happen later, years from now. However, I am now standing before them in my first wedding dress, and they know things are different. They see that their youngest sister and daughter is getting married; is finally grown up.

After trying on 12 dresses, the second dress is the dress; my only dress. It is also reminiscent of the 1920's with cap sleeves and a sash that ties around my waist. It has a sweetheart neckline, lace overlay, and lace sleeves. The material is soft and pools at my feet. However, the back is the thing that seals the deal. It is a keyhole back so that the sleeves come over my shoulders and connect at the base of my neck, but my entire back is open, resembling a keyhole.

All I can picture when I put on that gown is Mike, looking at me and thinking I am his beautiful wife. There is no doubt in my mind that he will think this is the perfect dress for me, the one dress that exemplifies everything I have been looking for in a gown. Because this dress is different from any dress I've seen someone wear, I know he'll find me distinctive and unique.

He won't be able to see the dress on me and think that it looks like someone else's. No one else will wear this dress in quite the same way.

In my head, I can imagine him placing his hand on my back and leaning in for a kiss, or the one wedding photo where I will be facing away from the camera and he will be facing towards it, me leaning into his shoulder. There will be another picture, us holding hands, looking as if we're just passing each other on the street with Mike facing the camera and me staring up at him. I can see a photo where we stand next to each other with our three oldest nieces and nephews standing in front of us, and the other four younger ones held in our arms; me holding two and him holding the other two. I can picture my hair being swept back in some low bun, with tendrils of hair falling down my neck, and maybe a white rose or peony stuck in the side. I can imagine me in that dress, getting married. It's the only dress I can see it so clearly.

Forgiveness from Last Night—November 2009

For the past three years, Mike has fallen asleep next to me. At approximately two o'clock in the morning, every night for the past three years, he gets up and goes to his own home, where he then goes back to bed. Even though my parents don't care one way or the other if he spends the night, he's always felt awkward about getting up each morning and possibly seeing my mom before he leaves.

Since Mike works a regular eight to five job, and I usually have a crazy school schedule, this has always worked out well. We still spend every night together, but at some point he goes home so he can get ready in the morning, and I stay at my house so I can do the same. It seems insane, and some days I think that it won't go on for much longer because it's exhausting for

him, but we've already done it for three years and so I can't see it ending now when we only have nine more months of this schedule left.

However, those few hours that we spend together before we fall asleep are the moments when our real relationship comes through. When the TV is on, or our families are around, or even when I have to finish writing a paper for class, we sit silently and wait for those few moments when we can finally talk. We're patient with each other. Things that can't be said out in the living room, in front of friends, or during Law and Order can be said when we're lying next to each other in the dark.

Even before we climb into bed, we usually argue over who's going to turn off the light. Whoever gets into bed first doesn't have to, which is usually me, but he always tries to coax me out of bed so I'll do it. It hardly ever works.

"I think I hear your mom calling. You should go see what she wants," he says as he stands by the light switch in his boxers.

"No, I don't hear anything. She'll come to my room if she really needs anything," I say from under the covers.

"But what if it's important."

"I doubt it is."

"Are you sure you brushed your teeth?" he asks.

"Yes, you were there," I say.

"Fine. Are you ready for sleep then?" he asks.

"Yes." Then he turns off the light and climbs into bed next to me.

Tonight is no different. We spend several minutes determining that I am already in bed so he should turn off the light. Then, when he finally crawls in, he snuggles up close and throws

his leg over mine and puts his hand up my shirt and covers my breast with his palm. We lay in the dark for a few minutes without talking. Even when there is something weighing heavy on our minds it can take several minutes of silence for us to feel comfortable enough to say something.

I can hear him next to me, opening his mouth and then closing it again. It's a habit he has, and usually it means that he wants to say something but he doesn't necessarily know how. I wait for him to find the words. When he's doing this, occasionally I'll ask what he wants to say, but this time I just let him figure it out. We've had a rough weekend; a weekend filled with a lot of emotions. We've fought, we've been annoyed, we've been happy, we've been frustrated, and we've especially been stressed.

Since it's my last year of college, and I have more work than ever before, I've been more stressed than I can ever remember. He doesn't always understand how I can get so worked up about homework, and not getting stuff done because he didn't go to a standard four-year college, and so I get frustrated and have a hard time talking to him. He gets angry with me because I won't talk, and he avoids me by staying in the office. We've spent all weekend dealing with these moments, and we're both exhausted.

Finally he speaks up. "I'm sorry I haven't been very patient. I'll try to be more patient."

"Where did that come from?" I say it nicely, knowing that apologies are never easy and only in this dark room at this moment can he freely say what he wants to.

"I've just been thinking about it."

"Well, I just need a little more patience right now, with school and stuff."

"I know," he says.

That's the end of the conversation. I don't bring up that I am annoyed by how he is getting annoyed with me so easily lately. I don't tell him, in words, how stressed I am with school and graduation coming up, and our wedding approaching soon after that. I don't need to tell him any of those things, because he knows them anyway. In this space he can finally bring it up and acknowledge it.

In this space, we are able to say whatever needs to be said and there is no judgment.

"It's ok," I say and close my eyes.