

# Happily Ever After

Fiction – Unpublished

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Before the matrimonial spotlight worked its way to Samantha, she had often thought of it as such a silly concept, that a woman's life would somehow center around one day, as if every day before was uphill and every day after was down. Why must it be the greatest day of a woman's life, the singular source of validation? Why must all women be either a bride, or waiting to be one? These were only shallow fleeting thoughts however. She chalked them up to marital marketing and immersed herself in the details, just like many of her friends had and many more would. Even if this was not the pinnacle, there was no way she would be cheated, not in front of her friends. It was her turn and she was not going to miss out.

Sam had handled the duty for Jenny and now she would return the favor. That was the unwritten agreement ever since they were freshmen in college. Jenny was in charge of the logistics for the bachelorette party, guiding the driver and his long white limo to the modest split level house where Samantha had spent her idyllic childhood.

The vehicle cautiously pulled into the driveway, which was barely large enough to accommodate its stretch. In the back seats, giddiness reigned; the driver relenting to Sam's friends, letting them reach over to commandeer the horn. Theirs was a deafening signal to the guest of honor that this was a night to let go of all inhibitions.

Jenny was a little quieter than the rest. She knew this had to be a good night for Sam and the pressure was on. It was one of the best nights of her life when Sam orchestrated the evening last year.

Just inside the entrance of her parent's house, Samantha took one last look in the mirror, her beautiful dark brown, perfectly cut hair just skimming her bare tanned shoulders. Her appearance was a frequent concern, always leading her to wonder where she measured on the cruel meter of physical attraction. Tonight, as she finally stepped out the door, she was as confident as her fragile ego would let her be. At least she was the undisputed woman of the evening.

She wasn't wearing red for any other reason than that it was her favorite color, she told herself. And this, she was certain, was the perfect time to try out this silk blouse, cool and soft against her body, and these heels. It was a warm May evening, and there was just a bit more freedom in the air as summer approached. So, with her blouse cut a little lower, and with heels a little higher,

Sam strode down the walkway toward the limo to the hoots of her friends and the applause of the horn.

There were eight women in the limo, but tonight they were girls, willing and determined to be girls. For the four who were married, being a girl was a long lost desire, making the shots of sambuca a bit sweeter this evening. For Sam, the shot was her initial obligation.

"And now, the first of many", said Donna as she pushed the shot glass toward Sam.

"Where are we going?" Sam knew there was no answer to this question. She was simply establishing innocence.

"Shut up and drink!"

The conversation turned to sex, as if by accident. Jenny felt the need to issue a disclaimer to the limo driver, but he'd heard it all before, and in fact he had seen it all too. During the animated discussion, Samantha maintained her demure facade, patronizingly above the earthiness of her entourage, even as she fantasized, wondering how she compared when it came to sexual experience. The conversation served to trigger a recurring thought. Was everyone more advanced than her? Was it preference or lack of imagination that kept her sex life so one dimensional? Jenny had remained her only reference. They had shared so many dark room conversations through college. Often till dawn, they would relive every quirk and behavior of their boyfriends from the early encounters of their respective relationships during their freshman year, to the routinized preparation for the outside world with their inevitable spouse.

Sam always felt secure in the knowledge that whatever happened was meant to happen. David, her fiancé, was locked on her from the start, - in fact, even before the start - when they were paired up, seemingly by the hands of fate, at freshmen orientation. The exercise called for sitting cross legged on the floor, face to face, and answering three questions: What is important to you? Who do you look up to? Where do you want to be in ten years? She had only touched on her hometown boyfriend, feeling that anything more would have been rude.

College was all so threatening, with so many unknowns. She had never been one of those people who was thrilled by the unknown. It was hard enough to say good-bye to her boyfriend when she left for college. But like so many, it was only weeks before the relationship was completely dissolved and she was able to land in David's arms without hardly breaking stride. First came the "I think we should see other people" phone call to her "hometown", followed by the exchange of overly analytical letters. Then the obligatory "how are you" call became more painful than helpful as he faded away, on the losing end of the end. At first she was a willing counselor to his pain, acting from a position of strength as David ("David was so thoughtful, so understanding, so mature") waited outside the dorm room, ready to purge her guilt when she finally hung up. In truth, he was equally

concerned about protecting his share of Sam's attentions, whether he was conscious of it or not. After all, it had only been two weeks since their first kiss, one late Friday night in the backyard of a fraternity house, free from the smoke and noise of a party, in the darkness of a chilly September night, the cups of beer strengthening the chill, weakening the resistance. The warmth of his arms carried over to the whole semester. She knew immediately that he would be good to her. A day or two later she had unconsciously rephrased her thoughts: He would be good for her.

All through college, Jenny and Sam were "peas in a pod", sharing their own special inventory of inside jokes, triggering exclusive fits of laughter that no one could join. They would always be best friends, even if they competed with each other. The fact that Jenny secured a boyfriend soon after Sam did wonders for their friendship that first year. The pressure was off, the table complete. They would be a foursome forever.

Although both girls were attractive, by any physical standard Sam was slightly more. She sensed this, and it gave her the strength to fully appreciate the friendship. While there were times Sam envied Jenny's spontaneity, and even became jealous at the unique rapport she occasionally displayed with her boyfriend and other members of the opposite sex, at no time did Jenny ever represent a threat when it came to the brutal arena of physical attractiveness. For Jenny, this was never an issue anyway, being supremely confident in her abilities and buttressed by a relatively healthy, if sometimes consuming relationship.

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"You've got to try it. It's unbelievable!" cackled one of the girls in the back of the limo following a graphic description of an unorthodox sexual variant. Sam maintained her stiff smile while she discreetly caught her best friend's eye, looking for confirmation. Jenny expected the look from Sam as she bent her head for a clear line of sight around the bottles and through the arms of the cluttered vehicle. She smiled and gave a barely perceptible nod.

Deep in Sam's stomach, a question began to gnaw. What had she missed out on? What else would she miss? It had been a long time since she and Jenny had pulled an all-nighter. It was always the all-nighters that served to confirm that they were on parallel paths, and that anything they hadn't both discovered was obviously not worth discovering. Of course, it was always Jenny who had the higher tolerance for unknowns. She was the experimenter who reported back to Sam, paving the way for her to catch up. Now, with the passage of time, Sam had no sense of where she was. Hadn't they done everything worthwhile in college? If

Jenny hadn't tried it, then it couldn't have merited an attempt. But now suddenly it did? This was unfair. She would have to talk to Jenny alone, soon.

The limo pulled up to a stoplight alongside another car. A reasonably attractive casually dressed man sensed the commotion out of the corner of his eye.

"Hey, ya hunk!" Oh, that was a new one, he thought.

"Yeah you! You, guess what?! She's getting married. Can you believe it?!" What was he supposed to believe? So what. He tried to ignore her.

"But she wants you. Yeah, she does"

"Donna!" said Sam. She was truly embarrassed, more for him than herself. He looked over, gave an obliging smile, and tore away at the light.

"Jerk" said a drunken Donna. The laughter drowned out Sam's smiling protests

"I can't believe you!" as if Sam really couldn't.

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College was surely the best time of their lives, knowing for sure that your days were pretty well mapped out and there would always be a boyfriend there for you. Sam and David had their little tiffs, but they always ended happily, giving those years as much of a roller coaster ride as Sam could tolerate. There was never really any question about the direction of their relationship. In the meantime, she enriched herself with "the liberal arts" and he buried himself in the ordered calling of accounting. It was all so beautifully clear, so much more than most people could expect. She pitied her adventurous college friends, constantly searching, always lost.

When the spring of her senior year finally arrived, the tension of finals took a distant back seat to "the question". When would they hear "the question". Who would hear it first? And as an afterthought, why did this have to matter so much?

Jenny led the way, as she always had. When Sam found out about the proposal - and of course she was the first to know - she couldn't help feeling a pang of envy. She was very happy, but she would be far happier when she "caught up".

While it was obvious that it was just a matter of time, those days were agony for Sam. Jenny, being so consumed by the excitement of her attainment, was not in a position to counsel her best friend. Sam would not have expected it anyway. Nevertheless, there were many times when Sam came very close to telling her friend to just shut up. She held this in, fully aware that she would be a similar case to be reckoned with when she finally heard "the question". And then, whenever *then* was, it would be her turn to pour out her exhilaration without restraint.

A few weeks passed before David sensed the involuntary testiness that had possessed his girlfriend. He was far from ready to present her with the customary

material symbol of his commitment, but this was only a financial rather than an emotional obstacle. Unfortunately, Sam's staunch position was always that you could not have one commitment without the other, as David soon discovered through the coy conversations of their mating dance. And thus, it was like "a message from God" when the representative from a large jewelry broker arrived on campus that spring, colorful glossy brochures in hand, to present the details of the "College Engagement Financial Program" to prospective customers at the established fraternities. The splendid sound of "no payments till next April" fell on many a virgin collegiate ear, unsuspecting of the meaning or weight of terms like compounded interest. David, by virtue of his major, knew otherwise, but based on his thorough calculations, the benefits of a purchase far outweighed any costs, financial or otherwise, that he would eventually have to bear.

And so, after a lovely dinner at their college town's most elegant restaurant, Samantha feigned sheer surprise as David presented her with the diamond ring. Because the restaurant employees had become accustomed to this routine every year, the champagne arrived moments later at their select table, which had been especially reserved for moments like these.

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The limo slid right up to the door of their favorite hometown club. This was the bar they always came home to during breaks in their college year. This was the bar where they ran into ex-boyfriends, overweight homecoming queens and the already divorced classmate as he drank himself into the past. Returning here was either tragedy or triumph, and there was always some ambivalence. Sam had been here only twice since she graduated last year, once running into her high school boyfriend. He was very happy to see her, and obviously happy with the direction of his life. In fact, as Sam remembered, he was too happy. She didn't share this with Jenny, but instead, simply told her that the whole scene had become tiresome and she would not return. Tonight, however, she had no choice and in this case it didn't really matter, for tonight she was triumphant.

The girls made their way to a bar table. Jenny took a detour, leaning over the bar to dictate her special requests as the eight got settled and surveyed the surroundings in silence. This was almost an instinctual behavior, leaving the first minute or so completely devoid of conversation. They couldn't help it. It was one of those things; a review of the territory that ensured the survival of the species.

Jenny slid in next to Sam and gave a shrill "hee hee hee!" to her best friend. This was an inside joke. They had done this to each other after they each became engaged. In fact the actual term was "hea hea hea", pronounced the same way.

"Hea" was an acronym for "happily ever after". It was half mocking, half celebratory, but it always drew a mutual laugh, primarily because both agreed it was so stupid. How drunk were they when their minds first came upon this inanity?

She hee heed back. So, like wild hyenas of the Serengeti, Jenny and Sam had their own primitive greeting, their awareness of its silliness being their only saving grace.

The shots arrived. Sam gave the bride's "I'm too old for this" look to her friends more as a means of sustaining her innocence than as a rejection of the offer. But as the kamikaze plunged down her throat, she suddenly became keenly aware of how futile such protests would be. It was at this moment that Sam decided to jump down from her pedestal and break free of her petty inhibitions. She knew Jenny had hoped for nothing less.

Jenny's hopes, however, were not entirely motivated by her bond of identification with Sam. In truth, Sam would never suspect the motives Jenny had in mind, for it was Jenny, a year into marriage at this point, who knew just how difficult it could sometimes be, and for once it was her hope that Sam would not "catch up" in the area of marital discord. As much as Jenny wanted to confide in her best friend - her friend who had always been close behind on the parallel tracks - she loved Sam enough to share her mistakes purely for Sam's benefit. But now was not the time, not that Jenny knew if there ever would be a time. It had been too long since their last all-nighter, and she knew as well as anyone that the steamrolling momentum of impending marriage is enough to crush any constructive criticism that one might ponder sharing. She knew she could not do anything to deprive Sam of her day, even if the marriage was a mistake. All she could do was go with the flow, and make sure Sam had one of the best nights of her life.

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When graduation day arrived, the families of both David and Samantha seemed to meld into one. Everyone "got on so well", it was if they were already related. The fathers planned a fishing trip, the mothers exchanged recipes and brothers and sisters scurried off together. The bonds were forged.

Through all of the celebration, there was a barely perceptible edge to Sam's smile that only David was well aware of. No wedding date had been set - a source of strain on the relationship since the engagement. Not that Sam wasn't happy. It was just that, Jenny had a date set. Jenny had a clear path to the alter. When Sam decided to press the issue just days before graduation, David did not bother to

conceal his irritation. What more did she want from him? Didn't she trust him? Did the \$10,000 diamond ring mean anything to her? He omitted the price in his testimony, but it remained in the forefront of his thoughts. Thank god he hadn't made any payments yet.

Sam backed away, slipping quickly into tears over the reaction she had caused and the fear of upsetting her cherished future. It was only a moment before David turned consoling and they were in each other's forgiving arms. Still, Sam wanted a firm date, and an undercurrent of tension would remain until this was "cleared up".

In fact, David knew this would be a problem even before he presented Sam with the ring. He knew he was going to marry Sam, he just didn't know when. There were far too many uncertainties to work out, the main one being his career. As an honors student, David had the luxury of entertaining many offers, and he was determined to make the right choice. He also had planned on going to Europe for the better part of the summer following his graduation, and Sam was not a part of this adventure.

On the surface, Sam understood all of this. It was only logical that someone like David would want to - as she put it - "get it out of his system" before he settled down. She knew she should be happy about this, but she wasn't. She had only Jenny to compare herself too, and Jenny was *already* planning her wedding. As much as she wanted to resist it, she continued to be miffed by the simple fact that David had an agenda, and she was excluded from some of it.

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Jenny and Sam sat side by side at the bar table, oblivious to the other girls chatter as they scoped the premises for familiar faces.

"I can't believe she's still hanging out here. God she looks like shit!"

"Wasn't she engaged?" asked Sam

"Yeah, in fact I thought she got married."

"Who's the guy?"

Jenny squinted as she tried to put the face with the past.

"That's Jimmy McClaren! I can't believe it. Jimmy McClaren and Stephanie."

"But didn't Jimmy end up getting married to Sophie. They had a kid didn't they?"

"Two of em, must be toddlers by now."

More shots arrived. Jenny toasted.

"To Jimmy and Stephanie." Sam gave a skeptical smile that turned sincere after the shot went down.

"Didn't you used to like him?"

"Yeah, I still like him, actually." On the surface, this confession was no more alarming or harmful than so many they had shared in the past. But there was something in the tone and manner of Jenny's statement that raised a flag for Sam. A shred of regret seemed to float on to the table between them, so subtle was this message from Jenny to Sam, so unexpected in this time of least regret, that it became obvious in the brief silence that followed, during which it grew into an issue.

"What do you mean you still like him?"

"I think he's pretty cute. In fact . . ."

"Who wants another shot" yelled Donna from across the table. Jenny didn't finish her sentence. Instead she responded for all to Donna's interruption.

"Bring em' on!!"

Jenny was struggling. This was no time to bring up her own problems, but at the same time there was never anything she hadn't shared with her best friend. Still, how could she even consider burdening her with such a downer on a night like this.

Sam sat quietly for a moment, wondering if she could let it die.

The shot arrived. Another toast to "Living fucking happily ever after", which they revised to "Living - happily fucking - ever after".

Sam slammed the glass down on the table, turned toward Jenny, brushed her hair back from her slightly impaired eyes, and confronted her friend.

"Jenny, what do you mean . . ."

"Samantha!" Jenny was not going to let it go any further.

"Lets just have a good time, okay?"

"Jenny?!"

"Sam, you don't want to talk about this now, believe me! Belieeeeve me."

"Jenny, you're my best friend. You've got to talk to me"

"I will Sam. I definitely will. But you don't really want to get into it now do you?"

It was clear to Sam that whatever to problem was, it was sure to be another all nighter, and as concerned as she was about Jenny, she sincerely wanted to have a good time. Maybe if they *did* have a good time, this would pass, she told herself.

"Jenny, you know I love you"

Jenny, who had been staring into her empty shot glass at that moment, looked Sam in the eye as tears welled up.

"Yeah Sam, I know it. I know it"

They fell together in an embrace, like best friends do - their tears flowing on each other's shoulders.

"I love you too." Jenny cried.



The others caught them out of the corner of their eyes, trying not to be intrusive, knowing that this was a bond that did not include them.

From somewhere in the bar, the shrill sound of a patron's voice cut through the air. It was the sound of high pitched laughter, of a "hee hee hee". Jenny and Sam suddenly couldn't help laughing themselves as the sound reached their ears. They pulled apart with a tearful laugh which grew when they "hee hee" to each other.

"Hey, where's the next shot" yelled Jenny as she wiped the tears away. Sam did the same.

"We're gonna have a good time, right Jen?"

"Dammit we are Sam!"

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David went to Europe. He sent postcards that grew briefer every week. It didn't matter to Sam; she didn't really want to hear about how enjoyable it was anyway. Anything that important that did not involve her was competition as far as she was concerned. But she missed him.

They would be reunited a few weeks before Jenny's wedding in late September. As the maid of honor, Sam had the unique opportunity to do something that Jenny had never done before. She meticulously planned every aspect of the bachelorette party and shower. She spent time in the library perusing the etiquette manuals; and she carried out each and every one of her responsibilities with the highest standards of class. Jenny's wedding would also be one of the most important days of her life, because, like she had so often in the past, Jenny was paving the way. Sam knew that if all went well, she could expect the same standard when her turn came.

Jenny's wedding also provided a certain level of distraction for Sam, one that she could use to her advantage when David returned. She knew that David was expecting her to bombard him with the "wedding date" question. Instead, she plunged into her preparations, to the point that it was necessary for her to postpone an evening with him soon after his return. This served two purposes. First, it was important to Sam that David be aware of the amount of preparation that is involved in putting together a wedding attended by 200 people. The more time they would have, the easier it would be, and she knew this would best be accomplished by having a wedding date set. More important however, was the fact that Sam's apparent lack of concern over their wedding date served to plant a tiny seed of uneasiness in David's mind. Now that he was back from Europe, had accepted a job offer from a highly ranked accounting firm, and was set on where he was going to live, the distant possibility

that his eventual marital status could be even slightly uncertain was enough for him to pull out the calendar. He knew that it would be at least eight months before the firm would give him a vacation, so he settled on a weekend in early June.

The mind does strange things when time and space intrude on a couple, and the few extra, and somewhat unexpected days that Samantha and David were apart were enough to make his seed of uneasiness grow into a threatening tumor of doubt. A part of him knew he was being silly, but he would still feel much better when the date was agreed upon.

The night before Jenny's wedding, Sam told David that she would not be available. There were many final arrangements to confirm and then a late evening drink with her best friend. Nevertheless, David showed up on her doorstep that night, unexpected, and for the first time in his memory, unwelcome.

When Sam opened the door, he didn't waste time.

"David! I told you . . ."

"June 6th.

"What?"

"June 6th. "

Sam knew what he meant, but she was not going to let on.

"David, why are you here, and what is June 6th?"

He was actually nervous, and she could see it. She was enjoying this. It was revenge for all the anxiety he had caused her.

"June 6th, Sam, is the day I would like to marry you." Sam broke into a broad smile. She tried to follow through on her planned response but could only wrap her arms around him in pure bliss.

"Well, I'll have to check my schedule, but I guess, I can . . ."

And that was finally that.

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The girls piled back into the limo and headed uptown to the disco that used to never let them in. Here were fresh memories of rare adolescent evenings when, dressed and made up to the hilt, they would slip in unchallenged at the age of sixteen.

Tonight, however, the night was theirs and Jenny had made arrangements ahead of time to ensure that all would go smoothly. They slid into a darkened booth, deafened by the disco. Moments later, what appeared to be an officer of the law confronted the group. It looked like a raid.

"We have reason to believe that some of you are underage." Jenny protested vehemently.

"I'm sorry girls, we need to see each of your identifications please."

They each dug into their purses and held open their wallets. Sam knew what was up. This was her idea a year ago. When the officer got to Sam's ID, he asked her to "please step out from the booth." He appeared dead serious.

"Please turn around Miss." She tried to conceal the smirk on her face as she turned and lifted her hands in innocence, her bracelets dangling.

"It is 'Miss', isn't it?"

"Yes, officer" she said with mock shyness, her eyes sarcastically subservient.

"It's still 'Miss'. You're not going to handcuff me, are you?"

Jenny lost all composure, laughing hysterically as she ducked her head under the table in a feeble effort to maintain the fraud. As the officer looked Sam up and down he slowly began to swivel his hips to the music. When she turned back around, he was already unbuttoning his uniform and thrusting furiously. From out of nowhere, a chair was slid behind Sam and the girls motioned her to sit down.

The officer's hat was pulled down, barely revealing his eyes. He drove his abdomen closer to her. She smiled in embarrassment, as she was supposed to. On the dance floor, others turned to watch the show. Sam was fairly intoxicated by now. As she watched with interest, she couldn't help wondering, as they all were, "what if?" After awhile, she exhausted her inventory of embarrassed expressions and looked over at Jenny with a "how could you do this" smile, as if this was so difficult. Such looks were more habit than anything else.

She soon became aware of her habitual facade, and while the "officer" shook his bare ass only inches away, Sam caught Jenny's eye and let her tongue slide slowly and seductively across her lips, as if at any moment she would grab the goods and make her fantasy a reality. This brought an outright scream of pleasure from Jenny. She had never thought her friend capable of such uninhibited behavior.

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When Jenny returned from her honeymoon, she and Sam spent many a Sunday brunch going over what had happened for Jenny and what would for Sam. Marriage changed Jenny literally overnight. There was at first, an air of being settled that Sam picked up, as Jenny pulled out her credit card and offered to "get this one". For the next several months, they would be in different worlds, and this became more and more clear as the fall turned to winter. The conversation would sway from the topics surrounding Jenny's marriage to those involving Sam's wedding. At first the transitions were graceful and comfortable. Later in the year, however, it became more and more obvious that their parallel paths had

momentarily diverged. Jenny would talk about her husband's job, his quirky habits around the house, the type of barbecue grill they should consider buying. Sam talked about the wedding gown, the type of music, the catering. They would each indulge the other as long as they could stand it. The holidays provided a perfect excuse to pass on brunch this week, "and probably next" as Jenny took on the agonizing task of shopping for her in-laws and decorating the house. Sam, who would live with her parents until her wedding day, gradually shifted much of her pre-wedding preparations to her mother, who was more than happy to become the primary sounding board as the day drew closer.

After the new year, Sam and her mother slowly moved into high gear. As David put together the final arrangements for a mortgage on a modest suburban house just a few miles away, Sam stocked up on Bride magazines and other oversize periodicals along similar lines. She assembled a detailed ledger listing price comparisons, budget limitations (constantly adjusted upward), color schemes, invitation options and every other piece of information she could gather. Although Jenny was much less involved than was once anticipated, she and Sam managed to maintain relatively close contact, over the phone. They were conscious, at this point, of their different worlds, but regarded it as pleasingly temporary. It would not affect their joyous anticipation of Sam's wedding date. Nevertheless, they drifted from each other, each of their meetings beginning and ending with a reminder to get together more often.

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The stripper finished his act with a longer than usual kiss for Sam, who unexpectedly let her hands drape over the man's shoulders. She wasn't entirely sure why she did this, but there was no apparent guilt.

Several thoughts ran through her mind. This was her night, she was slightly drunk, Jenny seemed to enjoy her display of freedom, and David was boring. As she went through this short list of reasons not to feel guilty, it was the last one that struck her. It was as if it came into her head involuntarily. "David was boring". What did it do with it? Why would she think this? While she maintained her vague smile for her friends as she returned to the chumminess of the booth, her mind took upon the task of evaluating what had been a surprisingly natural thought. This had to be rationalized. Of course David was boring, that's just the way he is, and I love him for it, she thought.

This would most certainly require more thought and another drink - the girls ordered her a "sex on the beach". After a long swallow, she privately returned to the issue, contemplating whether she should share her concerns with Jenny. How could she love David for being boring. The alcohol took effect, twisting her

thoughts into a mangled set of vows. "For better or for worse, through sickness and boredom, no matter how boring, till death ends our boredom"

"Jenny, is David boring?"

"I don't know, I never slept with him"

"Jenny!"

She was laughing. Sam was not. She changed gears.

"Sam, now is not the time to think of David."

"Why not?"

The other girls were tuned into this particular conversation. They responded with a scolding laugh, almost in unison:

"Because it's boring!!"

Sam knew when to let this go. She was outnumbered, and obviously exempt from any guilt on this evening, her proverbial last night of freedom.

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The spring of her marriage had finally arrived and preparations for the wedding accelerated to a frenzied level. With just a few weeks, Sam actually wondered if she would be able to find an evening for the long awaited bachelorette party that Jenny had thrown her attentions into. David and Sam spent less time together, both well aware that they would soon be together all the time. While he did assist with some of the organization, Sam had full veto power over David and she did not hesitate to exercise it. It was clearly her day and she would see that it went like clockwork.

For David, he was mindful that he could not have done better or been more appreciated for remaining in his secondary role. As part of this, he immersed himself in the financial planning of their future. This was always David's strong suit anyway. His passion, for lack of a better word, was always the rational and methodical manipulation and analysis of numbers. They were so pure, so predictable. David often considered the possibility that, like computer functions, all behaviors as well as everything in the ambiguous world in which he lived, could and would eventually be reduced to numbers. It was the beauty of the byte, reducible, objective, manageable.

Months prior to the wedding, David made himself a copy of the invitation list, calculated a "no-show" factor, and created a formula that would reconcile the gifts on the register, factor in a probability of duplicate gifts, and provide a figure that gave an anticipated cash windfall that they could expect from their wedding. He then prioritized a list of additional material possessions that were not included on the register, and set about creating a purchasing schedule that would reach into

the two years following his "merger". He was so proud of his creation that he excitedly presented it to his fiancée' with a complete summary.

Sam didn't really know what to make of this. She was both excited - which she showed - and overwhelmed - which she didn't. She loved to go shopping, but would David's schedule of purchases permit her to do so? In the end, the presentation served to loosen Sam's purse strings a bit more (which really didn't need further loosening), allowing her to indulge her own materialistic tendencies based on the fear that there would be few such sprees in her future.

The day before Jenny's limo arrived, Sam spent the afternoon on herself - the tanning booth, a facial, a massage, her hair, and finally her nails. While she had always been aware of a certain constant state of physical attractiveness in her appearance, a significant by-product of the complete makeover is the boost in self-esteem that comes simply from the process of being fawned over for hours. Of all the adjustments and improvements, nothing did more for Sam than the spectacular outcome of her manicure. Her nails could be looked at without a mirror, the glistening, perfect shine, the sharply defined cuticle, the sound of them when they lightly tapped on the table, the sheer power of them. She loved her nails to the point where she could not resist inspecting them every few minutes. They were materialism personified, giving her the same pleasure that so many men feel over the newly polished hood of a corvette. And like narcissus himself, it was so hard to turn away from them. She was ready to be a bride.

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It was back in the fall of their freshman year that the DJ's selection first made its permanent home in the hearts of the girls. Everyone seems to have a song - this one was theirs. And with it came the flood of memories; memories of pure comfort in where they were and where they were going; of the excitement and the newness, and the bond that was forged so strongly among Sam and her best friends. In the early days of college, before the paths of their respective relationships became unalterable, there were brief moments of intense freedom, and this was the music that had become their anthem. They spilled out of the booth and on to the dance floor. In a raucous circle they danced and sang the words that had lay dormant in their minds for years. It is odd how people can turn their back on the past as if it never happened, until it returns and taps them on the shoulder as the friend they meant to call. For the few minutes that they danced, Sam and Jenny forgot what had brought them there, and when the song ended, they were momentarily overcome by a deep sadness. Sam saw herself in Jenny's face. There was no need to explain.

The DJ deftly mixed the tune into another song. While the others continued to dance, Jenny put her arm on Sam's shoulder and led her to a separate booth. There was still nothing that could be said with the noise and the darkness around them. Only glistening tears and melancholy smiles filled the void.

The two men had been out many times before, and it was always the same old crap. But one never knew, so they convinced themselves once again that they had nothing to lose and casually sidled up to Sam and Jenny's booth.

"Can we join you"

"Well, we were kind of having a conversation"

"Oh, I'm sorry" said one of the men to Jenny. "We didn't really notice you Talking." Jenny was on the edge of irritation.

"Sometimes you don't need to be talking to be conversing"

"I know what you mean. I just thought we might be able to contribute to the conversation. I'm sorry."

"Sit down", said Sam as Jenny tried to conceal her surprise. Sam responded to her friend's look of intense curiosity with a barely perceptible shrug.

"Paul, and this is my friend Brian"

"Jenny, and this is Samantha. And that there. That is Samantha's ring"

"Nice to meet you ring" said Brian. "I'd like you to meet my wristwatch" The quip never had a chance. A waitress arrived just in time.

"Can we buy a drink for the bride and - her maid of honor?"

Paul looked at Jenny as she nodded to confirm her title and desire for a drink. A nod followed from Sam and the conversation slowly began to edge forward. Brian, while obviously the shyer of the two when it came to introductions, was more candid in the one on one conversation that began to form between himself and the beautiful bride to be that was seated next to him. He had been divorced for exactly one year - this being the admittedly pitiful way that he and his good friend elected to mark the occasion. In a few months he would be 30, "with all the wisdom that it entails", he said sarcastically.

While it was clear that Brian had no difficulty in talking about his failed relationship, he was conscious of Sam's impending union and made a point of saying that he did not want to "bring her down" on a night that was intended to be a celebration for her and her friends; but Sam urged him to continue. She was fascinated by his sensitivity and candor - something she could honestly say she hadn't experienced in her limited contact with other men. She propped her head on her hand, her elbow on the table and listened intently to the trials of a relationship gone awry. There were compatibility problems that struck a chord and brought a smile to her face, until she was reminded of the consequences for Brian's marriage. There were way's that Brian described things, perspectives and thoughts, conclusions about the world that resonated so deeply in Sam that she barely moved

when Jenny's foot nudged her in the calf. It wasn't that Jenny had any problem with the intensity of their conversation; she had been having a pleasant, if less intimate, discussion with Paul. It was just that she thought it wise for Sam to maintain some degree of distance. At least that's what she told herself. After a momentary smiling acknowledgment of her friend and a sip of her drink, Sam dove back in, but not before she took silent note of the warm intensity of Brian's eyes.

Even in the depths of their discussion, there were moments when Sam's thoughts wandered off the path of Brian's tale, when she tried to imagine what kind of marriage she wanted. She had always known what kind of wedding she wanted, but what then?

Her parents had succeeded, and so had many of her friends. She never considered asking them about the specifics behind their success, probably because she never imagined the chance of being unsuccessful, but at least there were examples of happiness for her to shoot for, where husband and wife took on the world together, joined by more than a ceremony - bound on an almost extrasensory level by an unspoken congruence of thoughts, convictions, and most importantly, commitment. Her thoughts wound back on to the path of the story, sweeping her easily back into the depth of his feelings.

"And that's basically what happened. I hope you don't take this too much to heart"

"Oh, me , no . . .no not me".

"He's a lucky guy"

"Who is?"

"Your fiancé. What's his name by the way?"

After saying and thinking, living and breathing, writing and hoping his name for so long, after being able to say his name as quickly as she could say her own, there was, for the very first time, the slightest most minuscule beat that occurred before the name of her future husband finally escaped from her lips.

"David . . .is his name"

"What's he like?"

"David? He's great. He's a really *really* nice guy. He's just . . ."

For some reason the right words weren't coming to mind.

". . . just, he's just really really nice!" She seemed so chipper that she had to laugh at herself.

"Well, that's really really nice" he said, half mockingly. She caught on and the laughter went up a notch.

"But you're really really nice too" she said with a smile

"Really Really?"

"Yeah"

"Does that mean David and I are tied in 'reallys'?"

"I guess it does, whatever that means."



There was silence as the smile left Sam's face and he held her gaze. It was clear to both that something was happening between them - not yet threatening, just nice.

Brian was tempted to share the brutal reality of his past to try to pry her away, but he knew the momentum of impending marriage was among the hardest to overcome and he sincerely cared enough about her - even at this early stage - to spare her the turmoil. Besides, he had no intention of ruining what had evolved into a wonderfully platonic connection between two people.

"Nother drink", he said, more to break the tension than anything else. She was grateful.

"Sure". The smile returned. She tipped her ice filled glass into her mouth, and the result was a minor avalanche that only Brian saw, the ice running down between her breasts and into her blouse. Her mouth full of ice, she laughed when she caught his eye, the sole witness to her clumsiness. She looked down and reached for the already saturated cocktail napkin to dry the water from below her neck.

"I'd help you out with that, if I could, but you understand."

She laughed again as Jenny looked over.

"What the hell is going on here?! Is it time for the wet T-shirt contest?" shouted Jenny.

Sam laughed even more. They were all laughing now.

"Hope the wedding gown is made out of Gortex," said Paul.

"What will David think?" asked Brian. And this time, with no pause at all, Sam responded, her eyes locked on Brian's.

"Who?"

And with the shock of the one word question, all the girls could really do was laugh some more, cackling until their stomachs hurt. Just as they would catch their breath, Jenny or Sam would start it up again with the question.

"Who?"

Jenny couldn't resist. With a shakily stern visage she intoned,

"Do you, Samantha, take David . . ."

"WHO!!?"

They were out of control, the laughter causing aches in their sides. Paul and Brian, while joining in on the periphery, shared an occasional glance of fascination over the hysteria. What did this mean?

When the drinks came and they finally settled down, the intensity between Brian and Sam resurfaced. Sam's mind was racing. She hadn't had anything to compare this to. There was no Jenny to lead the way, there was no context. She couldn't say she loved this man - that would just be impossible - wouldn't it? What word would describe her feelings? Her head turned, almost snapped, back to his waiting eyes, as if looking for the answer to the question in her mind. He shook his

head with a bittersweet smile. He knew the question, but he didn't know the answer either, and there was no need to say anything.

Paul asked Jenny for a dance, leaving Sam and Brian alone. The others were out of sight. She looked to Brian for help - help with the weight that she was suddenly feeling and the pain in her heart. The tears welled up and she gave a self-conscious laugh.

"I, I'm sorry. I don't know what's the matter with me"

"It's all right. We don't even have to talk about it. I hope I didn't ruin your night."

"No no, you didn't. I'm so glad I met you."

"Yeah, you look real happy." Another tearful laugh.

"I'm sorry. I just, really . . . like you."

"Really really?"

She laughed, and smiled and he wiped her tears gently and they gave each other a best friends hug because it was the best they could get away with. When she slowly pulled away and looked up at him, she wanted him to kiss her so badly, but he knew there was no turning back for her and he knew that he *was* making it worse, no matter what she said. There was no where to go. There was no escape.

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"I do" she said, and a few minutes later the couple plunged into the bright June sunshine in their black and their white, surrounded by families, and families of families, and into the limo, and to the park for pictures, and to the reception and the introductions and the cake, and the dance with dad, and off they went. It was the perfect wedding. And they would live their lives as happily as they could. As happily as they could possibly know how.

They would live, "happily ever after".