

THE RUNNING OF THE BRIDES

walked through the glass doors of Filene's Basement and into a Hobbesian state of nature. The steel garment racks were empty, many knocked over, and giant piles of wedding gowns dotted the room like bonfires. Women in colorful party hats ran in every direction like plunderers bearing white-hot loot. Hair-raising shrieks and whistles punctuated the roaring din.

The annual one-day sale known as "The Running of the Brides," a tradition since 1947, was taking place on the third floor of a building overlooking Union Square. Wedding dresses that normally sold for thousands of dollars on Fifth Avenue could be had for "as low as \$249." Other brides-to-be, along with their mothers, sisters, cousins, and girlfriends, had stood in line on the sidewalk of 14th Street since four o'clock in the morning, shivering in their winter coats and bunny ears, clutching blowout horns and pom-poms and paper cups of coffee. After watching last year's YouTube video of the store doors opening and two thousand women stampeding for the racks of white dresses, I thought it would be safer to show up a few hours into the sale.

"What do you think you're doing?" I felt a hard tap on my shoulder.

I looked up from the massive heap of white taffeta, silk, and lace I was sifting through.

"These are my dresses!" said a woman, glaring at me through leopard-print glasses. Her pale, wobbly breasts brimmed out of a satin bodice.

Unable to see how all these dresses could be hers—the pile could have filled a third of a subway car—I shook my head and returned to my rummaging.

"Hey! Didn't you hear her? These are her dresses!"

Now on either side of the bride stood henchwomen in glittery pink tiaras and pink T-shirts that read "Amanda's Team."

Amanda said, "Get out of here! Go find your own dresses!"

I dropped the velvet gown in my hands and walked away, muttering, "What the hell?"

But now I saw that all the piles of white dresses were well guarded. Atop one giant hoard sat a tawny, slump-shouldered woman, an exhausted guardian elf in her pointy, yellow party hat and candy-striped socks. In order not to dirty the dresses, she had removed her boots, and they sat next to the white pile like a relic from a saner world. In front of another mound of dresses stood two sandy-haired women in green T-shirts, one declaring "Mother of the Bride," the other "Aunt of the Bride." When the two women spotted the younger, blonder, thinner version of themselves inching toward them in tiny, jerky steps, because the dress under consideration was binding nearly all the way down to the ankles, the mother's hand flew up to her heart and she gasped, "Oh God, you are so beautiful!"

I approached a saleswoman who was standing with one arm draped across an empty clothing rack, giving off the air of a prison gang leader surveying the exercise yard, and asked how I was supposed to try on any dresses. The saleswoman looked down at the loafered foot she had propped on the rack's lower bar and inhaled the sweet power of information.

"Should've got here earlier," she said. "Racks were empty thirty seconds after we opened the doors."

After more prodding, the saleswoman explained that you needed a dress to get a dress. If you found a dress you liked in another woman's pile, you had to have a dress to swap for it. The bigger your stockpile, the better your chances of having a dress the other woman would want. This was prison-esque, I thought. I was in a closed-barter market, and I didn't have any cocaine-laced postage stamps. Or even a cigarette.

"Good luck," the saleslady taunted.

Leaning on a pillar, I watched the other brides and their posses in matching T-shirts and sparkly head boppers ransacking each other's piles, fighting over mermaid dresses, shouting through cupped hands, and hurrying back with new gowns to try on. There were no private changing rooms, so women were getting in and out of gowns in full view; it was an unabashed fiesta of shapewear and stretch marks and dimpled skin that rarely saw the sun. Brides elbowed their ways in front of shared mirrors while their mothers zipped them up. Once the dresses

were properly zipped, snapped, and laced up, the mothers stood staring at their daughters' reflections as intently as if they were staring at their own. Suddenly I was taken aback by my own image. In the background of a mirror, between a bride and her mother, lurked a skinny woman in a brown parka with a thick, black, disheveled bun and prying green eyes.

I hadn't done this in a while: watch grown mothers and daughters shop. After my mother died on the eve of my sweet sixteen, I took it up like a spectator sport. For years, whenever I spotted a mother and daughter out on the town, I would watch them with both blinding envy and the astute detachment of an anthropologist. In my mid-twenties, while getting my MFA in creative writing, I worked as a sales associate at Bloomingdale's, and five days a week I helped mothers and daughters visiting from all over the world, as well as wealthy duos from the Upper East

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Side, find the perfect cashmere sweater or sequined cocktail dress. Oftentimes I would linger near the dressing rooms to eavesdrop on the women throwing compliments at each other or, conversely, the most incisive barbs—

some girls could be so nasty, some mothers so hypercritical. I avoided the dressing rooms when a mother and daughter were sharing one stall because the difference between serving these women and being that daughter felt too vast. And now here I was in perhaps the biggest mother-daughter dressing room in the world.

The Indiana Jones theme song went off in my parka. I answered the phone with a groan.

"I guess you haven't found a dress yet," said Yoav, my husband to be.

"How am I supposed to buy a dress? I don't wear dresses. And you don't understand what is going on here. It's like *war of all against all*."

"You know, you don't have to wear a dress. You can wear whatever you want. Do you want me to come down there? I can grade these labs tomorrow."

“No, no.”

“Maybe you should wait to go with your sister?”

“When? She lives on the other side of the country. Forget it. I don’t need anyone to make a hoopla. I’m fine.”

As I returned the phone to my pocket, hurrahs erupted to my right. A redheaded, freckly bride with a pronounced lazy eye stood in her chosen dress, grinning at her cohorts, who were shaking neon plastic rattles. Every time a bride chose a dress, the cheering would begin with her entourage and spread until the whole floor was applauding. While the triumphant bride lifted her red hair so one of her helpers could unbutton her back, other women descended on the pile of gowns she was leaving behind like a swarm of rats I once saw on the subway tracks tearing apart a dead white pigeon.

I took a deep breath. I unzipped my parka. I laid the coat on the floor alongside the wall and pushed up my sweatshirt sleeves. Of course, I could have fled Filene’s—I could have hurried back to our homey apartment in Queens and worked on my novel while Yoav read ninth graders’ reports on the physics of light—but if I left empty-handed, I would have to go shopping for a dress again. No, this was it, I told myself, marching toward a willowy brunette in a silk sheath. I wasn’t going to leave without a wedding gown. So what if I didn’t have a Team Jessamyn? If I was alone? Without a mother? I was used to fending for myself.

Except now there was Yoav, I realized as I was passing a table of frilly white garters. I was getting married, and what was marriage if not the end of fending for oneself, of being alone? At least until death did us part. Was that kind of love possible? Was any other love as dependable as a mother’s?

The last time I was in a dressing room with my mother was a year before her third and final bout with cancer. It was a cubbyhole in a strip mall on the suburban edge of Montreal, and I was thirteen and unaware that she had ever had cancer. My parents hadn’t told my younger sister and me because five years earlier, the year Mom was diagnosed, so was her thirty-year-old brother Tony—handsome Uncle Tony, who would turn up the radio and do the robot for me and Ashley, mouthing, *Domo arigato, Mr. Roboto*—and he moved into our blue guest room to die. I knew my mom went to the “Royal Vic” on Tuesdays and Fridays and would hole up in her bedroom afterward be-

cause she was nauseated from the treatments, but it had been like that on and off for as long as I could remember, so it didn't seem strange. It never occurred to me that not all moms went for "treatments." I also knew she'd had a lump removed from her breast, but I didn't think much about that either, since she never mentioned it, aside from this one time in the dressing room.

"Do my breasts look the same size?" she asked, turning from the mirror to face me. She was trying on a tight T-shirt with pink and white horizontal stripes. "Or does the one that had the lump removed look smaller?"

"They look the same," I lied.

She turned back to the mirror and took in her reflection with her dark brown eyes, which were rimmed as always in thick black liner à la Sophia Loren. From the neck up she was the mom I knew and loved—olive skin, hair dyed a modish red, gold teardrop earrings. From the neck down, she was a total embarrassment; in addition to the tight striped T-shirt, she was trying on a denim miniskirt. Over the last few months Mom had gone from shopping for classy silk blouses and wool dresses at Holt Renfrew to scouring the chintziest stores for short skirts and spandex shirts.

"I'm afraid your dad isn't attracted to me anymore," she said, looking at me in the mirror.

It was the first time my mom had spoken to me like a fellow adult, as well as the last. Before she said another word, I knew this had to do with Brenda, my dad's secretary, who was blonde and blue-eyed and ten years younger than my mom. The day Dad hired Brenda, a year or so earlier, he came home and said his new secretary had a "lovely smile." My mom had been at the stove, monitoring a sputtering pot of french fries. At the time, I couldn't explain why those simple words froze the kitchen, why it felt like the world ground to a halt and then proceeded on an entirely different course. But I understood it a bit better that afternoon in the dressing room, now that I had experienced more of my own crushes and could see how little Dad was doing to hide his. Every Wednesday that summer Brenda and her fair-haired sister had joined my dad on the sailboat he inherited from Uncle Tony. After the weekly sailboat race, the team would go for drinks, where my mom would join them in one of her desperate outfits.

Mom lowered her eyelids and stared vacantly at the image of her feet balanced on tall cork-wedged sandals. "I had a dream last night," she said. "I was in the foyer—nobody else was home—and I noticed I had no reflection in the mirror on the coat closet. It was frightening. I was looking in the mirror and nothing was there. I opened the closet and there were all these high-heeled shoes, but they weren't mine. I realized I was dead and they were Brenda's high heels."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh my God, Mom. Aren't you being kind of dramatic?"

Brenda and my dad got married a year and a half after my mom's funeral. I don't remember what Brenda's wedding dress looked like. I think it was a mauve skirt-suit. My sister claims it was champagne.

"I don't have a dress," I said to the lissome brunette in the silk sheath. She was pinching up the silvery straps to see if that improved the fall of the dress. "Can you give me just one of yours? You can give me one you don't like. I don't care. I just need it to start trading."

The woman gave a cursory shake of her head without taking her eyes off the mirror.

The next woman, who had a thick metal hoop through her nasal septum, said sure and gave me a size 18 ball gown with a full skirt packed with crinoline. It was as heavy as an armful of books. Okay, fine, I thought, looking around the room. Now all I had to do was find a woman who was a size 18 who liked this dress and had a size 4 in her pile that I liked. I blew through my lips. Not only did that sound like a grueling mission, but it also dawned on me that I had no idea what kind of dress I would like. All I knew was that I didn't want to feel like a frilly fraud. The dress had to be fundamentally me, but what was that? Was I a form-follows-function purist? Or an irrepressible original who loved quirky details? Was I classy, punky, romantic, traditional, or cutting edge? Was I ironic, like so many in my generation, or earnest? Was I an uncompromising bold white or a nuanced ivory?

The bride who started the white-wedding-dress tradition was Queen Victoria. She had some white lace she wanted to wear at her wedding, so she had a white gown made; and thanks to the recent invention of photography, an image of her and Prince

Albert was seen far and wide. After that, brides in the western world wore white dresses. Over time we came to believe the color symbolized virginity, preventing many second-time brides from daring to wear white, but for the first half of the twentieth century, the color was meant to show decadence and festive abandon, white clothes being the definition of impractical. Since World War II, the increasing commercialization of weddings—along with every other aspect of our lives—has raised the white dress to a near mythic purchase. Today the average bride in the United States spends over \$1,500 on her wedding dress. Were we—the writers and bartenders and law students in greasy ponytails and blue jeans, here in Filene's Basement on a Saturday morning looking for the perfect, big white Victorian dress—morons? Pawns of commercialism? Followers of rote tradition? Or were we doing something meaningful today?

“Would you like to trade for this dress?” I asked a very heavy woman who was rooting through her stockpile.

She scanned the dress with her limpid blue eyes and reached for the tag. She said, “Oh, I don't know if I could fit into an eighteen. It's really pretty, though.”

Her mother, watching her daughter looking wistfully at the Cinderella-style ball gown, said, “Go on, Casey. Take it. If it almost fits, we can add panels on the sides.”

Casey took the dress and gave me the go-ahead to sift through her cache.

My whole childhood, a mint-green dress hung in my mother's closet, gathering dust and mystique. All the clothes around it changed—the brown corduroys and orange polyester button-downs of the seventies gave way to the jean shirts with metal studs and neon-splashed T-shirts of the eighties—but that strange 1960s shift dress remained. Years after my mom and the dress were gone, I found some photos of my mother as a plump-faced seventeen-year-old wearing her dramatic eyeliner and the mint-green dress. They were taken at her engagement party to Gio, a young man from her Italian neighborhood, the man my mother broke it off with three years later to marry my dad, an outsider, a Jew with thick black glasses and a thick South African accent.

When my mom was fourteen, she dropped out of school to help support the family, because Granddad was too busy drink-

ing homemade wine in the basement. I'm not sure how long she had been working as a bookkeeper at Richelieu Electrical Parts when her boss asked my dad, who had immigrated to Canada a year earlier, to drive her home in the evenings because she didn't have a car and it was an even colder winter than usual. At first, my parents drove through the dark, snowy city in my dad's blue junker saying little to one another—my mom thought he was a conceited misanthrope, and he thought she was a loudmouthed attention hog. But according to my nana, a seamstress who spoke no English and who believed that placing half a boiled egg on one's forehead could cure a cold, by the time my mom arrived at the door one spring evening with a glint in her eyes and a co-worker who needed a shirt cuff mended, it was obvious. Nana said when my mom stepped to the side to reveal my dad, she knew at once that her daughter was going to marry this man.

I have two pictures of my mother in two different wedding dresses: a short, stylish, lacy number for the Jewish wedding and a long, plainer gown with a flowing train and veil for the Catholic one. The day before the church wedding, my mom and nana had their hair done at the beauty salon, so my mom spent her last night under

her parents' roof sleeping next to her mother; they dozed in side-by-side chairs, trying their best not to ruin their curls. In both wedding pictures, my mom and dad look young—at least ten

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years younger than I was that day in Filene's Basement—and happy. They have dimples and wide, toothy smiles. Their eyes are luminous. They have the faces they have when I think back to the first years of my life, before Uncle Tony died, before Mom found a lump in her armpit, before Dad's new secretary, when the fledgling trees surrounding our new tract house were supported by beanpoles and on Saturday mornings Dad used to play "Red River Valley" on the guitar, his stockinged foot propped on the coffee table, while Mom used to belt along, out

of tune, holding me and my baby sister by the hands as we danced around the family room. Beyond the patio doors, the world was blanketed in immaculate, blinding white Canadian snow.

There's my dress! I gasped. It passed by, folded over the arm of a short, curvy Hispanic girl. All I could see was the gauzy ruching, but it looked like the kind of ruching a flapper would wear to her wedding—or Cyndi Lauper—feminine without being too precious. The dress looked like it was made from the mosquito net I would bring on long, solitary backpacking trips, taping it to the ceilings of grimy hostels in Kenya and India. At night the net would catch the moonlight and I would awake in a pale, glowing cocoon.

I grabbed a dress from the pile I had been digging through without success and ran after the girl.

“Hey,” I said, “do you want to trade?”

The girl—she looked no older than twenty—had a round, lineless face and long, shiny, straight black hair. Knitting her eyebrows, she pulled back her head as if I were holding up the entrails of a freshly killed animal. She said, “Um, no.”

I glanced at my offering and saw that I had grabbed a monstrosity. No one was going to trade for this gown with the high collar covered in golden burs. The dress was made for walking down the runway, not the aisle.

I chucked the useless dress and shadowed the girl as she searched for a worthy trade. I didn't stalk her like a private detective, who keeps an unobtrusive distance, but like the creepy guy at the bar who never gets too close but always lurks close enough so that the girl can't forget about him.

A lot of women showed interest in the dress, which I got to see in its full glory when the girl held it up for them. It had a simple V-necked bodice crisscrossed by the silky gauze, so that the torso was bandaged tight past the hips, whereupon the soft tulle cascaded in vertical waves toward the floor. Streamlined, but with a touch of chaos, the dress was more perfect than I had imagined. It was that rare piece of clothing that both Yoav—a man who set off every morning to a New York public high school in a bow tie and tweed jacket—and I—a woman who felt ill-at-ease in anything but jeans and old-school sneakers—could like.

The girl would consider the dresses the other women held up as possible trades, but she always ended up shaking her head.

Nothing seemed good enough. Indeed every woman who wanted the dress seemed to raise the girl's standard for trading it. She took less and less time considering the gowns offered her. Soon she was barely glancing at them before peering about the room for something still better. I even started to feel sorry for her, despite the black looks she kept shooting back at me.

At last, she stomped over, extended the dress with a straight arm, and said in a tone that suggested that I should be more careful about what I wish for, "Fine. Here you go!"

I hurriedly pulled my sweatshirt off, adding my dingy bra and unshaven pits to the bodily chaos. I slipped my hands through the gown's stiff armholes and reached under the ruffles to push down my jeans. I arched my back to pull up the zipper and edged my way in front of a mirror.

The dress was a couple of sizes too big, but even when I clutched it in the back, I looked like the broom in *Fantasia* after it comes to life, sprouts arms, and starts terrorizing Mickey.

"You won't look so shapeless if you get it taken in," said an elderly woman, tottering toward me. She had a gaunt, wrinkled face and a chic white bob. I didn't see who she was with, and she wasn't a saleslady. No nametag was pinned to her emerald green sweater set. She had come out of nowhere.

She reached into her purse, which was filled with giant blue clothespins, and pulled one out. She said, "I could pin it, if you like. So you can see."

I closed my eyes as she pinned the dress down my back. I inhaled her perfume, a musky, dark chocolaty smell. It felt so good to have this woman tightening the bind around my chest and waist. I didn't want her shaky hands to leave me. Reddish dots whirled inside my eyelids while I imagined that my mother had come to me in the guise of this elegant, waspish old woman. After all, as difficult as it was to imagine, my mom would have been in her mid-sixties now. I had watched my dad's face fall and his thick black hair grow thin and gray, but I couldn't picture Mom old. Would she have continued to outline her eyes so dramatically, drawing wings over the wrinkles?

I don't like to think about the last time I saw Mom doing her eyes. She had only one eyelash, but she kept wiping the mascara wand over it again and again. I leaned in the bathroom doorway and asked why she was getting dressed up. She told me it was none of my business and brought her face and the mascara

wand closer to the mirror. Her head was too shrunken now for the bouffant wig, which no longer looked even half-believable, the thick red hair appearing as if it were to blame for her collapsing neck and shoulders.

I didn't ask again where she was going, but she turned as if I had and, glaring at me with a big black clump dangling from her right eyelid, said, "I don't want you to come with me. I hate you. Do you understand me? I HATE you."

It was supposed to be me, the teenager, shouting that at her, which I had a few months earlier. I don't remember why. I only remember the sight of her standing stricken in the foyer and the sick feeling that came from telling your dying mother that you hated her.

Mom went back to brushing mascara on the sole lash while I remained in the doorway. Dad said the cancer was touching the nerves in her brain—that was why she asked us to turn off the VCR when we were in the car, why she defecated on my bed—but I couldn't help wondering if in this state of derangement she was revealing what she truly felt about me.

Over the years I have tried to dispel that notion, telling myself that of course my mom didn't hate me, that she was just angry and with good reason. I picture her in the green bathroom with

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the mascara wand and imagine that in her confusion, she was acting like a jealous girlfriend, dumping me before I could trot off into the future without her. If she didn't love me, why did she leave all those notes around

the house explaining how to use the sewing machine; or warning me and my sister that we shouldn't throw away this beaded purse, because we might not like it now, but our tastes were going to change; or imploring us to "choose our mates well"? For years, Ashley and I would find these notes, like the Post-its a departing employee with unfinished projects might stick around their cubicle. "Please don't leave Nana alone on her birthday."

"There," said the old lady.

I opened my eyes.

I said, "I'm going to take it."

A tall, pretty woman with strikingly black skin turned from the mirror we were sharing and asked, "Did you just say you're going to take it?"

I nodded.

She called out, her red earrings shaking as she pointed at me, "Hey, girls, she said yes to the dress!"

Everyone around me clapped and whooped, and the applause spread through the room. I looked through the mirror at all the women cheering for me.

The black woman leaned over and asked, "Can I have your other dresses?"

"I don't have any," I said. "This is the only one I tried on."

The woman's eyebrows went up in disbelief. She turned back to the room and cried, "And it's the only dress she tried on!"

I received still louder cheers.

I paid six hundred dollars for the gown, which had a suggested retail price of three thousand. The store threw in a white T-shirt that looked like it was for breast cancer awareness; on the front it said in pink, "I survived," and on the back, "The Running of the Brides."

As I was heading for the door, a PR woman wearing thick pancake makeup and a fuchsia pantsuit ran up to me with a microphone. She asked for a few words about my experience today, and suddenly I was staring into a bright light and the lens of a video camera balanced on a man's shoulder. I knew they wanted a giddy sound bite, but I said, voice cracking, that my mom had died when I was a kid and I really missed her today looking for a wedding dress.

When the little interview was over, the PR woman approached me with her index fingers under her eyes to keep them from welling over and ruining her face. She said, "You are so brave."

Brave? I wasn't sure I deserved such a compliment. I laughed, a little embarrassed, and said, "It's not like I just got back from Iraq."

I pushed through the glass doors with my unwieldy plastic bag and found the city bustling in a pale wintry light. Leafless branches and brown buildings reached toward a pallid sky. It felt like the same diffused, indifferent light that was caught in

the diaphanous white bedroom curtains the day Mom died. I wondered if that was in my head—that grief affected the light—or if it was true; it had been this time of day and only two weeks earlier in the year. For days, Mom had been lying in the four-poster bed like a baby: diapered, gurgling, her skull covered in fuzz, her big black, makeup-free eyes looking around the world as if she were seeing it for the first time instead of the last. Ashley had been pouring a can of Campbell's chicken broth into her mouth when the soup started spilling down the sides of her face like an overflowing bath.

“Dad!” Ashley screamed.

I remember being there when it happened—it's one of the clearest memories I have, my chubby tween sister with the can of soup—but my sister and my diary say I wasn't. According to my diary, I heard Ashley and came running up the red-carpeted stairs, yelling, “Dad! Dad! Dad!”

Dad bounded into the bedroom, where my sister and I stood on either side of Mom's bed. His face was bloodless. Years of waiting for test results and coaxing Mom to take her pills and apologizing for Brenda and going to the office after sleeping all night in a bedside chair at the hospital had given him a pale, swollen look, as if he were underwater. He wore contact lenses now, not glasses like in the wedding picture, but his hair was still thick and black as he rolled Mom over to spill out the soup and proceeded to give her mouth-to-mouth with cross-eyed determination. I watched, half believing Dad would save her. Dad was a fixer, his fingernails always packed with grease from tinkering in the garage. I had seen him fix old motorcycles, lawn mowers, radios, and watches. I didn't see the absurdity of him desperately giving artificial respiration to a woman who had been dying for seven years.

I wasn't ready to get on the subway, so I carried my momentous purchase across the street and sat on the steps of Union Square. It was an unseasonably warm afternoon and most people looked happy, as people tend to on a Saturday, buying candy-roasted nuts, strutting to the beat in their earphones, laughing with friends as they waited for the traffic light to turn green. More young brides-to-be paraded into Filene's Basement with their entourages in party hats and fluorescent wigs. Not everyone looked happy, though. The park benches were lined

with lonely men and women. A hollow-cheeked amputee in a wheelchair held a cardboard sign: “Need \$\$\$ for Alcohol.”

I raised my head to the enormous fifteen-digit clock that spanned the glassy building that used to house the Virgin record store. How dystopian was that row of giant orange numbers overlooking the city: the hour digit deceptively still; the minute digit changing with a disquieting jolt; the digit counting the seconds marching at a steady staccato; the digit counting the tenth of a second flowing ceaselessly—123456789012; the digit counting a hundredth of a second a perpetual blur.

The clock still seemed new to me, but I realized it had to be at least ten years old now because it was up there on 9/11. And 9/11 was ten years after Mom died. Mom had been dead twenty years. Could it really have been that long since I last saw her?

I took a deep breath, stood up, and gathered the Filene’s Basement bag.

Twenty years down. All of time left to go.