

I Do

ERIN SOROS

I COULD START ON THE DAY, NOT LONG AGO, when I arrived with my suitcase and found the short-term rental apartment serviceable, but blank, furnished like a doctor's waiting room, with the requisite leftover magazine tucked in the coffee table. The location was ideal—close to the conference I was there to attend—but since the apartment lacked a TV and I couldn't get the Wi-Fi to work, I found myself flipping through that sole magazine, a bridal series, white women in white gowns, its wedding theme like a wink. One article told the story of a woman whose boyfriend threw her a surprise wedding. They were married the weekend he proposed. He'd arranged the venue, and her girlfriends had picked an assortment of wedding dresses, every detail planned in advance, the food, the flowers, the guests. Three people had been left from his list, and when she accepted his proposal, the two of them were able to contact these friends, who immediately shifted their schedules: a tailspin of coordination, and then everyone the bride and groom loved had gathered together in one room.

Over the weekend, I flipped back to the pages that described this surprise wedding as if I were checking to see if the article still existed. Beside the text, there was an image of that white woman in a white dress, surrounded by friends who knew about her wedding before she did. This smiling woman seemed like some kind of evidence. I found the article and corresponding photo simultaneously comforting and threatening, the way something can become when it too precisely mirrors one's own desires.

I have never been married, but I have a story to tell about my weddings, six of them to be exact, each one a surprise, organized by my beloved and my family members and friends that he secretly contacted. On the big day, all I had to do was find the location—following clues in the newspapers, the billboards, the sides of buses, the numbers on the roofs of cabs. Ordinary signage seemed to register with glistening significance. The fact that these weddings never did take place does not mean they have not structured my life, disrupted it as surely as an actual wedding might have done.

A friend once asked me what a hallucination feels like, how I know the difference between what I am hallucinating and what is the reality all around me. I've

said it feels like a dream—it has that quality, a shimmering and vibrant uncertainty. It also can feel like holding a magazine, the way you can stare at the image and know it has a reality, but that this reality is different from the chair bracing your body.

The first time I hallucinated about a wedding, my parents were able to get me to the hospital by letting me think the guests would be there. I don't think they lied to me. They just did not correct what I said. I was visiting them in the summer, having flown to Vancouver from upstate New York, and though it was in the middle of a heatwave I was wearing a winter coat I found in the basement and a pair of old jogging pants with a hole in them. I decided I needed to shower and change for my wedding, this strange wedding that would take place at a hospital.

I slipped into a turquoise dress and clipped on turquoise earrings, vintage, small glass turtles that would go whizzing across the slick hospital floor when the staff tackled me and tied me to a bed. Delicacy and brutality met, and my mother ran to find the earrings, holding in her palm these small translucent parts. I thought my friends were in the room. I thought the voice of the nurse, one kind nurse who tried to calm me, was the voice of my friend Sarah. When a male nurse laughed—I was flamboyantly insulting my beloved—I thought he was my friend Mark relishing my wit. I thought my beloved was sitting in the corner, where he belonged, mute and small and powerless now that the wedding with all its secret clues seemed to have led me to this humiliating capture.

I could tell you about the second episode, the third, the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, each with its distinguishing features, each with its identical fantasy: the wedding is somewhere in the city, and everyone I love is waiting. It is always a surprise. My beloved always knows me well enough, somehow, to have contacted all those I love. I say 'somehow' because my beloved and I have never been romantically involved. He knows me, or did know me, years ago, the year I first escaped into hallucination. But he never knew me well enough to surmise whom to contact in order to plan such an event. So while I am searching for my wedding, I am searching as well for the logic of how he could have pulled off this surprise. Did he coordinate efforts with my closest friends? How did he know their numbers? How did he know their names?

Do you see that there was some grasping for sense here, for the order that ordinary life brings, even as I clung to mad hope?

A unifying element of the second, third, fourth, fifth, and sixth episodes is that these all invoke my experience of the first one, as if I am trying to work out its possibilities, prove that what I believed to be real might indeed have been the case. He *was* trying to find me on that day long ago when my parents took me to the hospital. He *had* been searching—he had even written an article in the newspaper about me, with some cryptic code professing his love. I delight in how this knowledge will shock all those who had doubted me the first time, who had thought I was mad. Now those same people will be waiting at the wedding, ready to witness the ceremony and to apologize for their lack of faith. All the subsequent episodes return me to the first elated moment of error, as if to prove it right, as if this first lapse had a purity that the other episodes lack, that initial innocent and yet rapturous occasion when I crossed into a liminal realm.

Weddings are plot points. In romantic comedies from Shakespeare to *Bridget Jones*, they are the event to which the plot leads. But what happens when the wedding does not take place—when it is instead imagined, and when this non-event happens six times? How to represent such absence and repetition? How to tell the story then?

I could tell you the details, the radio I insisted on bringing with my parents as we drove to the hospital because the broadcast was providing me with clues about my beloved. I remember the documentary on North Korea and Russia, the recognizable comfort of the CBC host's voice, how somehow the experts' dialogue about these countries became a secret code for love. I could tell you about standing in a public bathroom and watching how the tap water responded to the heat of my hands, as if by magic, and that this response seemed a sign. I could tell you that the way I organized books on the floor represented a map of my psyche that I believed could be read by my beloved. I could tell you that when my friend tried to help me by bringing dinner, I stared at the packaging, pointing at the words and laughing, sure that he too could read what future these labels foretold. I could tell you how I invited a stranger into my apartment because I thought he knew where the wedding would take place. I called my mom long-distance and passed the phone to this stranger, and he tried to explain to her what was happening to me.

What was happening to me? I have used the word *hallucination*, although strictly what I am describing is a fixed delusion. In my state of mind, I had come to believe something that was not so. Yet the distorted belief had visual and auditory

elements—the world appeared on occasion as if through water, words thickened, images fluctuating. Sound increased. The dialogue of passersby not only seemed significant—it seemed to be aired through a speaker. Someone had turned up the volume on the world.

While these details are vivid, their order is not. I cannot explain the repeat episodes in a coherent narrative because the circumstances collect in my mind like detritus lining the bottom of a large dark pocket.

At the core of these experiences, and this core has a piercing and painful clarity, is the longing, not just for my beloved to be waiting for me—not just to be loved, to be found—but also for everyone I love to be in the same room. The first time I woke from madness—and that is what recovery feels like, an awakening, a groggy and disorienting shift from sleep—I found my primal fantasy shameful: to have wanted so much, to have felt so lonely that I hoped not just for romantic love but for the plenitude of everyone's presence—a presence that extended both to the living and the dead. Everyone would be united. No one lost.

As a girl, I was not one to pine for anything like this ritual. I do not recall ever playing at being a bride. As an adult, I assumed I didn't want to be one. Not for me, those wedding magazines and a maid of honour and a bridal shower, bows and ribbons on my head. If I wanted loyalty, I had no need for collective ceremony, no need for a lover to sign a legal vow. But perhaps we are enticed by the potential relationality we deny. The wedding returned in fantasy precisely because it had been foreclosed in my reality. I would not consciously entertain its lure. And if there is a plot to my story, it includes this key element: I was romantically rejected by the very person whom I call here my beloved, and this rejection occurred just months before I would enter the first of these repeated waking dreams. The delusionary state functions as my psyche's way to refuse the reality of this rejection, to find some falsehood in this man's truth. I remember the pain that summer when I attended two weddings of my close friends, a pain complex and confusing. In one of these ceremonies, I played a significant role: I was the best man, proud to be reversing tradition, delighting in the black suit worn with black heels, which seemed at the time precisely the right outfit for me.

But weddings were in the air that year in forms that were more threatening, and, I suspect, more influential. As I nursed the wounds of romantic rejection, I also created such wounds in others. Two men were pursuing me, relentlessly, without

encouragement. And here we come again to a problem of narrative—if this were a short story, I would collapse these two characters into one. Dramatic concision would be the more effective, and more convincing, way to tell the tale.

Yet in my life, these men overlap, both temporally and in terms of their strategy and effect. My romantic delusion—my belief that the groom waits for me—paradoxically joins me to two near-strangers whose harassment had frightened me into this escape. My fantasies mirror what they have expressed of their own. I share their longing, if not their doggedness in pursuing it. Mine is an inward game—I have never articulated my fantasy to the man at its centre, respecting his actual distance from it—while their game was targeted directly and compulsively toward the object of their affection.

Initially, I did not fear either of these men's advances: e-mails and letters and gifts. What became disturbing was how their communication continued once I had signalled my discomfort, how they perpetuated a correspondence without response, as if my own agency, my own will, were merely an obstacle to overcome. One man would e-mail his professions of love and then, when I didn't respond, he would become angry and insulting, and then he would forgive me, and entreat me once again: love then hatred then love once more, the wheel perpetually turning. He proposed marriage, and when I didn't write back, he threatened me through innuendo—quoting, for example, from a story about a couple who died on their wedding night. He let me know he was not afraid of jail. He was not afraid of his own death. He was not afraid of the dangerous consequences of his adoration.

To return to the wedding—because that is what I have done to protect myself for years, attend with trepidation to what these men were doing, and to what men like them have managed to do, and then create a mirror image of their assertions, returning and returning to this wedding, this escape from fear, this vision of complete love and utter safety, antidote to annihilation.

One year, I became delusional at a party—I was sure this party would transform into the wedding, that any moment my family were about to appear. Where were they, I asked, my mom and dad? We were a long way from my parents, an ocean away. But several party-goers sat with me and play-acted that we were indeed at my wedding. They grasped that I was in serious trouble, but they sensed I knew the way through. If I was your mother, one woman asked, what would I be doing? I remember my voice became small, like a child's. I remember how this woman held

my hand, how her voice was soft, encouraging, unfrightening. I said my mother would be gazing at me. If I was your father, one man asked, what would I be doing? I said my father would make sure I had something to eat. So through this caring theatre, these acquaintances were able to enlist from me some insight into what the roles at this wedding would be, what I needed and from whom. My psychological and physical self would be maintained by the other—by the loving gaze of my mother and by my father's concern for my bodily regulation. My answers reveal a regressive infantile wish for the literally sustaining presence of family. The wedding would do more than bring me securely into the collective human realm. The wedding would keep me alive.

He does not know—my beloved, who has never been mine—the role he has played in this preservative vision.

But I do.