

## Marriage Vows

I couldn't lie to myself anymore. It was definitely lipstick on his undershirt. But I was pregnant—again. Where do you go when you're having a man's fourth child and you don't have a career or money? Nowhere. You throw the shirt in the washer, unpack his suitcase, and store it away for the next convention. And then you pretend it wasn't there and you cry—but no one knows and no one cares.

Roger Jenkins is my husband. He's a respected ophthalmologist in a leading medical center in metropolitan Philadelphia. He goes to church on Sunday and looks holy. He expects his children to reflect their good up-bringing and he pays his bills on time. Roger Jenkins is an adulterer.

Today I'm taking my wedding gown to the Salvation Army. We have three daughters, ages four, seven, and ten, but they shall pick out their own gowns – if they ever make the mistake of marrying. Today I'm bitter and disillusioned, but in a week or a month or ten years, I'll smile again and I'll shed a tear as I watch my girls head down the aisle on the arm of their dear father and he'll come back and stand next to me and touch my hand as if we had created this wonderful moment blissfully and without effort. And I'll lie to myself again. The lipstick on the shirt never happened.

“Mommy, Cindy bit me, and I'm gonna bleed!”

The suitcase was now resting in the proper space in the walk-in closet and I could attend to the mundane. “That's not blood, Ally, just teeth marks. Cindy, come in here. Why did you bite your sister?”

“Cuz she took my scissors and I told her not to.”

“Well, don't bite again.”

That's all the strength I had. After all, there was no blood.

The day was a collage of minor tragedies, boring moments, and mindless activities. Eventually the baths were given, dinner was eaten and there I was—sitting across from my husband, who read the paper. It was if our lives were perfect in every detail. I stared at the familiar angle of his jaw – his wavy dirty blonde hair perfectly combed. I watched his hands as he turned the pages and I admired his light tan and his well-manicured nails. His hygiene was always immaculate. But he looked dirty to me—disgustingly filthy.

“What's wrong, Denise? You're staring at me.” His blue eyes were too blue.

“I didn't realize.” It took effort to look at my book. His marvelous looks fascinated me. How could he have the potential to be so cruel?

“I'll be late tomorrow. Go ahead and eat with the girls. I'm meeting with my staff after hours, so I'll take them out for some dinner.”

“Where to?”

“I guess that new French restaurant on Midway.”

“The one you were going to take me to before I got pregnant?”

He nodded and turned the page of the newspaper, dismissing me.

“I wish I wasn’t pregnant.” It was a simple declarative sentence, but he gaped at me and put the paper down.

“I thought you were excited. And now that we know it’s a boy...”

“So what?”

“That’s what we’ve wanted.”

“That’s what you’ve wanted. I was perfectly content with the three girls.”

“It’s a little late now, don’t you think?”

“Yeah. A little late now.” I must have gotten up and left the room, because the next thing I knew, I was sobbing into my pillow quietly, so no one would hear. But I heard and it was like a stabbing that wouldn’t stop. And then his hand was on my shoulder and I heard his familiar voice. He sounded like he cared—like he used to when we were just two and he loved me and swore it would be forever. And I let him hold me and I was glad but I still wanted to be dead and not feel anything—ever again.

“Push now. It’ll be over soon.” The doctor’s green robe was all I saw. I knew it would be over but it was hell. Pain. Work. I pushed. Not yet. Again. Again. I heard his voice near my ear. “He’s coming, honey. Once more.” Then I heard the animal in me—a weird, wailing groan as if from another body—another world.

“He’s wonderful and you should see the size of him. Look, Denise, he has my curly hair.” I watched as Roger lifted the swaddled infant onto his left arm. “He weighed in at nine pounds!” Then remembering me, he placed the bundle in my arms and leaned over to kiss me. I smiled. I loved him again. A little.

The girls were ecstatic to have a brother. They watched fascinated as I changed his diapers those first few days and then it was over. He was just another person around to keep Mommy busy. I didn’t expect to love him this much. The pregnancy had been less than ideal, but my son is so perfect and beautiful. His mouth blistered in the beginning from nursing, but he was determined to get every drop of milk he could and he grew strong quickly and looked like his daddy. Handsome and intelligent. And now I loved his father for giving me this new miniature human being. His name is Roger, Junior, but we call him Dave, after his middle name.

Maybe I was wrong. Maybe it wasn’t lipstick.

As the children grew, so did our marriage. I no longer cried and my mother came when he went on his medical conventions so that I could go with him. He actually was pleased I wanted to come along and he never asked why. I used to refuse—claiming they were too boring. When we were alone we made love, but at home it was harder to find the time or the energy. We were careful now. I didn’t want to get pregnant again. Never again. I took the maternity clothes to a local pregnancy care center. They had been expensive and I was glad I could help. Roger was happy for the deduction and he never mentioned having another child. He had his son.

Now that the children were all in school, I took up my art again. In high school I had won awards locally and my teacher had encouraged me to apply to art school, but I wanted to marry. That's all I ever really wanted. Roger was six years older than me and we met when he came to the mall to see the art show. I remember him clearly. He had his back to me and he was looking at a painting I had done of the town park. He studied it for awhile and then smiled at me when I came over to him.

"You did this?"

"Yeah. Don't you like it?"

"I didn't say that. No, it's good—real good. Are you going to be an artist? Like professionally?"

That struck me as funny, I don't know why.

"I'm not that good, besides I want to get married and have lots of kids."

That seemed to be amusing to him. "Maybe you'll marry me." It was meant to be funny, but I never looked at anyone else from that day forward.

Dave is the only one left at home now. Cindy's married and the other two girls are in college in New Hampshire. I go watch Dave's games when I can. He is a defensive back—whatever that means. He runs a lot.

My art has taken off and I'm having a one-woman show next month. Things are different since Roger had his fatal heart attack. When they laid him to rest last week, I watched as if he were a stranger. I felt no pain—no loss. I just kept envisioning a stained undershirt.

And then I wondered if there had been an explanation. I had never asked and now it's too late.