**Two Pieces of Silver**

A mother’s summons is a siren song with many voices, some wholly welcoming and loving, but some as full of foreboding as that which lured Greek sailors to their death in the time of Odysseus.

It was one day during the spring of 1954 that I felt my mother’s siren song, the ominously silky-smooth one, drag me with irresistible force towards the most forbidding rocks in my three-year-old world. She had a “proposition” for me, but I knew from the get-go that I wished to be no part of it. The fake earnestness of her half-forced smile blew her cover. Whatever this was about, it had to involve the strange, intimidating, and odious ways of the adult world, and it smelled of certain embarrassment, of being center-stage in an adult ritual which would subject me to their judgmental, prying eyes.

Mum took me gently by the shoulders, bowed her head slightly so as to look straight into my eyes, and broke the news. “Your Aunt Lilly is going to be married and she wants you to be her Page Boy!”

Her eyes sparkled and her voice sounded excited, but something about her broad smile just didn’t seem right – too asymmetrical, too perfect? – and the glee in her voice seemed just a bit too, well, gleeful in that exaggerated, false kind of way. On guard and fearing the worst, I pursued a probing, but nervous, line of inquiry.

“So… what does a paid boy do?”

“Page boy, dear. Page boy. He has a very important job. He holds the train of the wedding dress!”

“And, what does he wear?”

“A lovely, white satin blouse with black velvet bow-tie, black velvet trousers, black patent leather shoes, and, of course, a beautiful carnation flower!”

“How long does the wedding take?”

“Oh, just a short time – an hour or so – and it’ll be so much fun! Everyone in the village will be there to see you.”

Enough said. Everything about my presumed role in this wedding was overwhelmingly too girly for me. Moreover, to have all the village gawk at me in this emasculating spectacle was too much to contemplate.

“I’m not going to do it,” I declared with tight-lipped emphasis.

My mother knew enough about me already to know that my most emphatic refusals were not so easily overcome even in the face of punishment. I was more than willing to stoically endure pain and confinement in the defense of the greater cause of sticking to my guns, of preserving the womb-like sanctum in which I precariously existed. For me, spotlights do not illuminate my talents, my beauty, or any notion of *joie de vivre*; rather, they expose all my thin-shelled vulnerabilities with laser-like precision. This wedding clearly threatened the core of my being; it threatened to burst the cocoon in which I lived. There was absolutely no way I was going to go down this road, and my mother feared the worst.

So, there I stood, like Horatio on the bridge, a resolute defender against the foreboding intrusions of the adult world. For the moment at least, I had resisted this initial attack from my mother. She retreated in silence, hoping that the ensuing weeks might soften my defenses.

I was born with it, so in a way it was “just there” when I first became self-conscious, when I first saw myself in a reflection. The gash and the huge pinch in the upper part were part of the same package that brought me my arms and legs, fingers and toes. But then, shortly thereafter, came the social reaction to my physical stain, my Mark of Cain, and from then on there was no avoiding it, not at least until adult maturity and multiple surgical wonders had done their trick. “Split lip” became my Scarlet Letter, the ego shrank, and being the center of attention was the last thing I ever wanted to be.

I had a double hare lip and cleft palate.

Wedding day arrived bathed in glorious June sunshine, but my cloudy mood was no better than when I had uttered my blanket refusal to be a page boy some weeks before.

And then, I was ushered into the bridal chamber, uncooperative feet scuffing as much of the carpet as they could muster. I glared at the scene with the iciest, steeliest, stare-down I could muster, and I was wretched with self-pity.

Then I heard my mother say, “Doesn’t your Aunt Lilly look beautiful?”

Something magical in the apparition that appeared before me melted my soul. Aunt Lilly, sitting at the dressing table, turned to face me. Her tiara sparkled, her delicate veil framed her fresh-faced beauty, and from the waist of her tight-fitting, sequined bodice fold upon fold of bridal gown cascaded all around her, like the gauzy, floating white of a summer sky filled with gathering cumulus clouds.

She gave me the kind of smile an Aunt gives to her favorite nephew, unconditional and effusive. It was the smile she had often surreptitiously given me behind my mother’s back whenever I had gotten in trouble, forging a conspiratorial bond between us – just her and me. It was an embrace which said: *Don’t worry. Everything will be alright. I’m here for you.* I was putty in its radiance, and my Mark of Cain was momentarily forgotten in its comforting presence.

Like the layers of an onion peeling away, I shed the bony carapace of my sour mood, the deep frown that suffocated my smile, and the coldness that chilled my heart. From somewhere deep inside me a wave of affection towards my aunt cleansed me with an empathetic spirit.

My Mum said, “You wouldn’t want Aunt Lilly to trip and fall over her train, would you?”

I said nothing. I gave just the slightest nod of agreement. Without any cajoling, I walked over to where my aunt was sitting and picked up the corners of her wedding dress train, just as matter-of-factly as that. I grasped the material with the most vice-like grip I could manage and did not let it go for the duration of the ceremony. I even kept on holding tight as the bride and groom went up to the altar and then when they went into the vestry to sign the marriage license. It was as if I was a farmer struggling to control an obstreperous mule team or a water skier straining to stay upright against the waves, such was the dedication I applied to the task once so hated but now so all-consuming. When I was finally persuaded to release my grip, the material remained steadfastly creased and wrinkled as if I had imprinted my personal seal upon it, as if all my conflicting emotions had become permanently embedded in the deeply pinched folds where my grasping fists had been.

In the local newspaper the next day the wedding picture appeared. A large wedding party is assembled in front of the main door of the church. Slap bang right in the center of the photograph, right in front of the bride and groom, stands yours truly. I’m squinting in the glare of the late afternoon sun, looking none-too-happy. The camera has made me aware that I am at the center of things once again, and right at the center of me sits that ink blot of a stain - the Devil’s curse, ugly, but perfectly suited to my glum mood. My hands are thrust deep into my trouser pockets, and it’s clear that my fists are clenched once more in the vice-like grip with which I had held the train. Draped from head-to-toe in velvet and satin and patent leather I’m as embarrassingly cute as can be.

The newspaper caption should have read: *Miss Lillian Thorpe Weds Mr. Ronald Ford.*

Instead, like a megaphone to the world, it declared: *Weddings Are Such A Bore, Says Ian!*

In spite of everything the wedding had become centered on me. And after I had done such a good turn!

At some point of course, my hands had to come out of those trouser pockets, and when they did and the fists relaxed and the fingers opened up and the palms turned upward, two shiny coins were revealed. Two half-crowns, no less! For a three-year-old in 1954, it was a veritable fortune. Some member of the wedding party had given them to me that day – I can’t remember who or at what point. Sometimes I still wonder, were they proffered as reward or bribe? And I still struggle to figure out whether there’s a meaningful difference.

My Aunt’s wedding day now lies in the distant past, well over half-a-century ago. I have become an old man and I live an ocean apart from my family. Every year or so, I make a pilgrimage back to the old country. And, after a day or so, after we have caught up on each other’s news, my Mum and I engage in what has become something of a ritual, a photo-journey down memory lane, a lingering attempt to extract the remaining sustenance from the shared nostalgia of times long gone by, depleted by distance and time apart. After dinner one night, the washing up correctly done and nothing interesting on the TV (the BBC isn’t what it used to be), Mum will go to the closet and retrieve from its cluttered shadows an old shoe box full of tattered and dog-eared invitations, black-and-white photographs, and newspaper clippings. In a carefully choreographed routine, Mum will present each treasured memory to me along with its accompanying story, made ever more apocryphal with each telling.

We have gone through this ritual many times, but it never loses its appeal. We sit side by side on the sofa, Mum with the shoe box on her lap, and I with a quarter-turn leaning gently over her shoulder, looking on. She’s the emcee and I’m her adoring audience. Mum’s a dedicated raconteur, telling each tale as if she were revealing their secrets for the very first time, and even though her punch lines are always exactly the same, we still laugh with joy, as if her jokes get funnier the more times she tells them. It’s a shared humor of a special kind; although episodic, it nurtures our mother-son bond stressed by the ravages of time and distance. It is made the more precious in its increasing rarity, and its importance only increases as the photos fade and are lost and the clippings yellow with threadbare thinness.

There are the photos of our family sitting on the beach at Skegness on some supposed English summer day wrapped tight in blankets and overcoats, smiling wanly at the Kodak Brownie, as the inevitable gray skies fail to dampen our indomitable spirits. There are pictures of me at play – me and Susan Creasey, the girl next door, posing in cardboard boxes, god knows why. Susan seems completely oblivious to my Mark of Cain, and I seem confident in her approval, even admiration. And then, the moment we have both been waiting for, the moment that has a special place in our remembrances. From the bottom of the shoe box, buried beneath the pile of photographs, Mum retrieves a yellowing, thinning, torn newspaper clipping.

*Weddings Are Such A Bore, Says Ian.*

We laugh, and Mum tells me the story yet again, but it has not lost its joy for her, no matter how many times she recounts it.

But, as I laugh, there’s a nervous edge to it, and I hope she doesn’t notice. A hair or two on the back of my neck stand up, a couple of beads of sweat break out on my brow, and my heart skips a beat. I wonder if she’s going to mention the two pieces of silver, those two precious half-crowns, but she doesn’t. She doesn’t have to. My bulging pockets in the wedding picture are there for all to see, pregnant with incrimination.

Still, final judgment remained suspended. The evidence remained purely circumstantial. Was I a cherubic angel saving his aunt from potential catastrophe, or a Judas in page boy’s clothing, jealously guarding his two pieces of silver?

My Mum came out to see me recently. She asked me how my fiction writing class was going. I told her that my first story was about my being a page boy at Aunt Lilly’s wedding. She smiled at the memory. “Weddings are such a bore, says Ian,” she proclaimed. We laughed.

“Would you like to read it?” I enquired, knowing full-well that she would.

“Oh, yes. Yes, I’d love to.”

I handed her the story, and she read it in silence. I looked at her face to see if I could detect what she thought of it, but it remained locked in studied concentration. All I could see were her eyes moving back-and-forth as she carefully read the story. Then, a few tears welled up in her eyes. I guessed she was near the end, the bit where we’re on the sofa going through the shoe box. She finished reading and looked up.

“Oh, Ian, that’s really lovely.” Her face was flushed. I could tell she meant her praise. The story had struck a cord deep within her.

“I’m glad you like it,” I said, lamely.

“But, tell me though, did you really feel that way about being a page boy?” She sounded worried.

“Oh, no, not really. It’s fiction,” I lied.

She relaxed, apparently satisfied that I had not suffered at her hands all those years ago. I felt confirmed in my angelic innocence, that I had done a good deed under the most trying of circumstances. I had been a brave three-year old, my love for my aunt shining through.

“By the way,” Mum continued, “about a year after Lilly’s wedding, Mavis, a friend of the family, was planning to get married. One day, while we were in the car, you said to me, completely out of the blue, ‘Do you think Mavis will need a page boy? I could do it.’” I could feel those two half-crowns burning a hole in my pocket as she spoke. “I think you were thinking you would get paid again if you did.” Mum smiled at me, but I couldn’t quite tell whether she was being sarcastic or not. Was she accusing me of something? I said nothing. I just stood there staring back at her blankly. “I told you that Mavis would probably have her own nephew as page boy, and so you wouldn’t be needed. After that, you never mentioned being a page boy again.”

Well, that’s something… I guess.

In any case, in 1971 Britain switched over to a new currency, just pounds and pence, and half-crowns, along with sixpences, florins, shillings, and the like, ceased to be legal tender. Seems to me like there’s some absolution in that, right?