

THE RELUCTANT BRIDE

By Sofronia Anne Strong



ILLUSTRATED BY CHAS

A 'HER TV' NOVEL

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By Sofronia Anne Strong

Now that some years have passed, I have grown quite mellow. I have been able to process the mixed emotions and deeply felt experiences that fell to me as a very young man owing to a dreadful mistake I made, a mistake of the kind that very young men make.

The mistake was one that is common enough to be part of our cultural tradition. It is the old story of the jilted bride, the beautiful girl on her wedding day, fully arrayed in elegant, shining white bridal attire, surrounded by her cadre of bridesmaids in equally elegant dress, a church full of people expectantly waiting for the sounds of the Mendholsson march... and there is no groom to be found anywhere. No groom, no wedding, just the humiliation of being stranded at the church in front of the whole world. There is the broken heart, the oceans of tears, the feelings of rejection before the whole world.

To be left standing at the altar that way is every girl's most horrid nightmare, as I would soon be made to understand. Unlike many stranded brides who slink away, disillusioned and ashamed, my bride, in her rage and pain, swore to find me and make me pay for what I had done, to own up to it and put it right. The story I now find I can tell, in retrospect, is that of how I learned the courage and fortitude that I lacked on that wedding day.

I, Randy Gilson, was the missing bridegroom, of course. And the story I have decided to tell is that of the consequences I earned by my cowardly and unmanly act of stranding my bride at the altar. First I will recount what I can of the details of my flight.

There had been a lovely bridal dinner the night before the wedding day, right after the wedding rehearsal at the church. It was an elegant affair at the Westwood Country Club, where both our parents were members. It had been thoroughly formal, in a private dining room and consisting only of the members of the wedding party: my four ushers, my bride's four beautiful bridesmaids and our respective families. The gentlemen wore all black tie and the ladies lovely gowns.

The food was outstanding and quite freely passed out. We broke up about 11:00 and my best man, who dutifully had remained quite sober, drove me home. I was fairly sloshed and feeling little pain. I was living, at the time, with my parents. I was recently graduated from the local university and had fallen in love, so was looking forward to setting up housekeeping with my bride. Through some connections of my dad's I had landed a very promising job as a junior account executive at a high powered advertising agency operated by the daughter of one of its founders. My boss was a stunning

middle aged woman we called Miss Eggleston. She was a divorcee and had resumed the use of her maiden name, hence the “Miss”.

It was an exciting job, full of challenge. I was learning a lot, quickly, and looked forward to a steady string of promotions, over time, that would take me to the top. I admired Miss Eggleston and enjoyed working for her. She had taken me on as her hand picked young exec. I had shining prospects and a promising future, and was about to marry an exquisitely lovely girl with whom I was genuinely in love. Mine was a nearly perfect world, every young man’s ideal.

I was the first to get home, so I rolled myself into bed and quickly dozed off (passed out, perhaps). I didn’t even hear the folks come in with my sister, who, incidentally, was the Maid of for this affair. I think it was around four or five AM that I stirred and went down the hall to relieve myself. I then padded back to my room and, before falling asleep was struck with the full Impact of what tomorrow would bring. I sensed loss of freedom, a closed-in feeling and an overriding sense of being utterly trapped.

I remember dozing off, filled with an intense anxiety. Then I had the nightmare. I remember dreaming of a disembodied bridal gown (I had not yet seen my bride’s, of course). There were yards of satin, lace, pearls, petticoats and veiling floating above me as I lay naked on the bed. Then suddenly, with a rustle and a flutter, it fell, dropping onto me, wrapping itself around me, covering my face with heavy satin and suffocating me. It was ghastly, for one is helpless in such nightmares to do anything to help oneself, such as running away or fighting back.

I blessedly awoke before I suffocated and lay in a panic on the bed, covered with sweat. I had majored in psychology at the university. Thus it was with perfect clarity that I understood the meaning of the dream: marriage would prove to be completely suffocating, the end of my delightful life, a form of enslavement in which my life would cease to be my own. I absolutely panicked! I failed to realize that these were my fears only and not necessarily how married life would actually be.

All I could see and feel was the terror implicit in the nightmare, that of being destroyed by the symbol of my upcoming marriage.

Thoughtlessly, mindlessly, driven by an irrational terror, I climbed into some clothes, threw some more in a bag, grabbed my wallet and checkbook (and the cash stashed for our honeymoon), jumped in my car and burned out. My mindless objective was to get as far away as possible as fast as possible. I drove fur about five hundred miles, stopping only for gas and grub, before I wore out, found a motel and crashed.

Thus it was that I was diving away from my terror in a blind panic, as my bride realized what I had done to her. My parents had tried their best to dig me up. My best man said he had seen me home. They didn’t realize until late in the game that I was even gone. My bride learned from them that I could not be found only shortly before the ceremony was to have begun. As I slept off my fatigue and panic, all hell was breaking loose at home.

I hid out for three days, afraid to be found and knowing that I couldn’t just vanish forever. I was afraid the police might find me, but didn’t realize that having committed no crime the police would have been of no help. I did realize it, finally, that after 72 hours I could be reported as a missing person, and my license plate would do me in. It

was this idea of being arrested and held in some pokey while my family came to get me, that turned me around.

On the third day, I got sufficient hold of myself to drive home, prepared to face the music. It would turn out to be tune very difficult to dance to.

Put briefly, the family was immensely relieved to find me home, alive, and healthy. I was asked to explain what had happened, and I confessed quite fully and asked for forgiveness, taking full responsibility for my stupid flight.

My family, save perhaps for my sister, Felicity, who felt as cheated and disrespected as my bride had, was understanding and forgave me. We agreed that having had such an unexpected panic attack that it might be wise for me to see a therapist, which I willingly did.

Dad had squared things with Miss Eggleston, who I learned was also quite angry at my disappearance, but she agreed to have me back. However, the promotion that was to have been my wedding present from the boss was canceled. I would also have to endure a temporary demotion that would be still more painful. Then I would remain a very junior account executive for some time.

The Treadwells, my bride's family, were no longer speaking to any of us. No channel of communication could be found. What few words I could garner about my bride's feelings are not exactly printable. Whoever said that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned was very sage. My bride's fury was simmering, gestating, growing within her, and it would soon scorch me like a blast from hell.

With no communication, I had no opportunity to tell her that my flight had nothing to do with her, but only to do with me, with my irrational fears. I wanted to apologize, explain, reassure her of my love for her and begin to mend the rent I had made. None of this was possible without a medium of communication, and I was allowed none at all.

It became clear that the love she had for me had gone to the other pole and become a hatred.

A few weeks went by. I worked listlessly. Miss Eggleston found the pettiest and least important projects and hung me with them. Her displeasure was obvious. I hung out with my buddies and was generally miserable. I was filled with remorse and realized I had blown out a promise of real happiness.

One Friday, dad came home, poured himself a martini and sat down next me. He dropped a bundle of blue bound papers on the chair beside me.

"Well, the shit has hit the fan, old boy. We're in for it now." He handed me a martini as I picked up the blue clad bundle. In a few moments I learned that the Treadwell clan had declared war on the Gilson clan, in the quiet way we wage these wars in our society — in the courtroom.

I remember dad once admonishing me in high school, when I had lost my temper at some injustice: "Son, we don't rant and rave and hit. We don't complain. We sue!"

Well, we were being sued. As no one had done anything criminal, it had to be a civil suit. It asked for a couple of million compensation for breach of promise (contract) ,

and three times as much in damages for pain and suffering. My first reaction was to laugh at it, until I heard dad clear his throat.

“I don’t think this is a laugher, Randy.”

“Why not? It’s absurd. They’ll never get anything like that. I just want to apologize and try to make amends. I have admitted that I acted like an idiot, but she won’t let me near her to make an apology.”

“Randy, she is so pissed off, humiliated, that she can think of nothing but revenge. It’s probably a good thing you can’t get next to her. I think she would surgically alter you if she could find a way. This suit is real and we have to deal with it.”

“Okay, what’s the best case scenario?”

“We find some negotiated middle ground and pay them off. Doing that is going to cost a bundle in legal fees alone, and you will be paying off the settlement for the rest of your life, probably. Have you got funds to pay lawyers to defend you?”

That sobered me. Of course, I didn’t. “And the worse case scenario, like if they won’t settle?”

“We spend a gob on lawyers, drag it before a jury and it’s a coin toss. If the jury is sympathetic to the Treadwells we could end up owing millions we haven’t got. I can easily imagine a good trial lawyer making you look like the devil incarnate and getting a jury to cry their eyes out for Annette. Note, if you will, that this entire family are co-defendants, so we are all on the line. They know you haven’t got anything, but we do and they are just likely to get it all, and then some.”

“Oh, shit!” I gulped at my martini as I realized that I was in very deep trouble indeed, up the proverbial creek without a paddle. “I’m sorry! I really am, dad. What do we do now?”

“Well, I guess we have our lawyers talk to their lawyers and explore what it will take to settle. I reckon they are going to have it their way. The right of it is on their side, and we are going to pay something, you can be sure.”

I sank back in the chair, feeling really miserable. I had a stupid, brief moment of idiocy and was wrecking the lives of everyone around me. It was with real relief that I poured out my misery on my therapist over the next few weeks.

Dad reported that talks were under way the next week, and on Wednesday he hand delivered an envelope from my bride. I gaped like an idiot as I read it.

My dear Mr. Gilson:

You have humiliated and publicly shamed me in a manner which I find altogether unforgivable. I have not allowed you to beg my forgiveness because it is not forthcoming. I want you to pay dearly for what you did to me. Only then am I willing to excuse you. Be advised that I want you to pay, and pay dearly for what you did to me. You have seen the kind of cash value I place on myself, and I insist on being compensated on my terms.

Our attorneys have been seeking a way of settlement. Please understand that I am not really interested in impoverishing you and your family, but as a last resort I will.

This letter is coming to you only to inform you what I will require to settle out of court. This is my only offer for settling this case. If you accept my terms we can put this behind us to my satisfaction. I will be satisfied when I am convinced that you have suffered as much public humiliation, pain and embarrassment as you subjected me to, several times over, as compensatory and punitive amends. I want you to show your shame to the world in exactly the way I was made to bear mine. Therefore, I make the following demand upon you. If you accept my terms the lawsuit will be held in abeyance. If you fail in your part of the agreement the suit will resume. Here is what I want from you:

- 1. You will dress yourself in formal lady's bridal attire, completely and exclusively at all times for a period of one year and one day.*
- 2. I will select all of the bridal attire that you will wear and determine what you will wear and when.*
- 3. Your wardrobe will consist solely of formal bridal gowns and trousseau sleepwear.*
- 4. You will be responsive to my invitations, accepting all that I tender and appearing when and where I ask you to appear.*

If these terms are acceptable to you, please advise my attorneys and they will provide you with a settlement agreement for you to sign.

I realize that my demands are unusual, but I do think this plan is altogether appropriate. If not accepted within seven days, I will withdraw this offer and we will proceed with the lawsuit.

Very sincerely yours,

Miss Annette Treadwell

I hit the ceiling, of course! It was the most outrageous and bizarre thing I had ever heard. Suddenly I was very glad I had not married this crazy bitch. It was Friday. I called a couple of buddies and we went bar hopping. I got sloshed and put the whole wretched business out of my mind. On Saturday, I went into the office and immersed myself in work just to cool out.

As we sat at Sunday brunch, my mom quietly brought me back to reality.

“Ralph, dear, I think you have only five days left to give Annette an answer. If you have calmed down enough, I think we need to talk about it.”

“Right... I want to talk to the bitch... er, Annette... and talk some sense into her. This offer of hers is insane. I can't do that! If I do what she wants, it will destroy me. No one will ever take me seriously again after that. I am sure if she and I can just talk, we can negotiate something more reasonable. At least I am entitled to that.”

Dad poured cream in his coffee. “Unfortunately. I understand she is not going to give you the chance to bargain with her. It seems to be a take it or leave it offer. It's her terms or no terms, as I see it. Well, that is just how your defection made her feel. Annette feels that no one can take her seriously again after what you did to her. Can you understand that?”

The trouble was that I did understand that. Down inside I admired the elegance of what she was demanding. The trouble was I just couldn't countenance it. Dad put down his coffee.

"At the risk of making you a scapegoat, son, you have to consider that if you don't satisfy Annette by accepting her offer, she will impoverish the lot of us. I can't ask, or even expect you to accept. We will support you in whatever decision you make, but think this through very carefully. It's your karma here, and you can either accept it or walk away. In any event we won't hold you for ransom, so to speak."

My sister, ordinarily a good friend, was still simmering over being cheated out of her Maid of Honor moment. "You never saw Annette's gown, brother dear. It was absolutely, totally gorgeous. I wonder how it would look on you? Frankly, I think you would make a perfectly adorable bride, big brother. You are kind of pretty anyway, and in the right gown I think every guy in town would flip for you."

"That'll do, Felicity," Mother growled. "Randy is in a real bind here, and we must help him deal with it."

Felicity smirked. I could have hit her. "I guess I want to talk to Dr. Wetherill tomorrow and see what she thinks. I just can't believe that anyone is serious about this insane notion of my paying Annette off by running around in bridal gowns for a year. What in the world will Miss Eggleston think, and our clients and customers? I won't even have a job, I am sure. I can't run around in dresses, especially not in bridal gowns. She's trying to turn me into the world's biggest sissy. It's just ghastly! Don't you see that?" I was in a rage, covering up the fact that I was on the verge of tears.

"I am sure you could find work as a model," Felicity jibed and broke down in giggles. Dad told her to leave the table. For a grown woman in the middle of a law school education, she could be such a twit sometimes.

As I seethed at her, mother explained that Felicity was deeply embarrassed for Annette that wedding day and shared in the humiliation. She said I could hardly expect her to be sympathetic. I said I didn't see why I had to put up with her insolence, but mom just smiled at me. I was beginning to see how many people I had really hurt with my stupid flight.

Dr. Wetherill whistled after she read the letter. "You're right Randy; it's pretty bizarre. But it has a certain rather elegant logic to it. She wants to be paid back in kind; a shaming for a shaming. We can hardly say her idea of a punishment doesn't fit the crime. She is really saying that if you are willing to submit to the same thing you subjected her to, she will forgive and forget. It's your shot. You have to call it"

"Yeah, but a year? Where is she going to drag me? What's that about 'accepting all her invitations'? If I accept this deal it's a year of being hauled out everywhere and shown off in wedding gowns. It's absurd and it's too much to ask!"

"Yes, it's all those things, but so what? What is your alternative?"

"Oh, God, I sink my whole family..."

"Right, but let's not talk about your family. Let's see what you are going to do. What do you want, Randy?"

“I want out of this mess. I don’t want anyone to get hurt because of me. I want to make it up to Annette, somehow, and be free of the guilt from what I did. I feel just awful about the whole thing and want to put it behind me, behind all of us.”

“Okay. As I understand it you do have a way out of the mess. It’s right there on the table, and no one gets hurt. You have to suffer a lot of pain and humiliation for a year, but in the end everyone is square with the world. It looks to me like you have the answer before you if you can bring yourself to take it. It’s up to you.”

I covered my face with my hands and began to cry. “Oh, God, I really have to, don’t I? It’s the only good way out, isn’t it? I will never get square with myself, my family, Annette, anyone ever if I don’t resolve this.... But her terms are so outlandish!”

“Of course they are. She means to be outlandish, but it’s all you have, isn’t it?”

I sighed, dried my eyes, and told her I appreciated her good, sensible advice. She does what a good therapist does, gets one back in touch with realities. As I left the office she smiled and took me by the hand. “So when I see you next week what will you be wearing?” Her eyes twinkled. I shook my head in relief

“A bridal gown, I guess. Probably Annette’s. The irony of that will be too poignant for her to pass up.”

“And I, for one, am sure you will look just wonderful in it... Randy, I’m on your side, of course, and I expect I can help a great deal as you work to get used to being a bride. From where you stand now what Annette is demanding seems bizarre and outlandish, but I think we can work together to get you through your ordeal with a minimum of discomfort. Once you submit and actually start wearing the gowns, I think you will find it won’t be as bad as it seems now. We’ll work this through together, okay?”

I looked at her in amazement. “Do you mean you think I can live in bridal gown for a year and survive?”

“Of course you can. We’ll work it out together.”

Suddenly I felt a lot less miserable. I went home and over cocktails told dad I had decided to take my medicine, to become the reluctant bride. He went to the desk drawer and produced the agreement that Annette had provided. I signed it, and he and mom witnessed it.

It was Monday evening, and I had five days left in my pants. I was to report to my executioners on Saturday. I had an appointment at the Salon Exquisite at 9:00 on Saturday morning to begin my transformation into a bride.

As the week wore on my anxiety grew exponentially. I knew that by Saturday afternoon I would be arrayed in some huge gown of satin, rustling taffeta, lace and pearls, veiling trailing behind me... I was terrified of what Annette might have in store for me. The clause requiring me to accept all her invitations made it clear that I was not going to be allowed to hide.

Still, as the terrors of my ordeal subdued me, I did have a warm feeling inside that I had found the courage to bite the bullet and do the right thing.

Every time I tried to picture in my mind’s eye what I might look like by Saturday evening, I began to shake and cry. It took every nerve I possessed to resist the tempta-

tion to run away again. I tried to put it out of my mind, but visions of myself in satin and lace veiling kept popping up in my head. Driving by the bridal shop, I noticed a particularly egregious Victorian style gown. I became fixated on it and couldn't get it out of my head.

The week was such a torment I actually found myself wishing it were Saturday so I could begin my penance. The nightmare of being suffocated in satin returned.

I was holding together pretty well until I opened the morning paper on Saturday morning. Annette had struck with perfect timing. The headline jumped out and smashed me in the face: "*LOCAL EXEC TO BECOME BOY BRIDE!*"

The article beneath it, which was clearly a press release prepared by Annette, outlined the terms of our agreement, explained the reasons for what we were doing and included an interview with Annette and a reporter, in which she gossiped amiably about the various styles that she would try out on me.

The phone began to ring. Mom took it off the hook.

Then Felicity delivered me to my executioners. She dropped me off at the Salon Exquisite, where I was delivered into the hands of Dolly Beckwith, Cosmetologist.

I emerged from the salon, Annette holding me by one elbow, and was met by a phalanx of cameras and reporters. As Annette walked me slowly to the car, the news hounds shouted all sorts of questions at me, some of them quite insulting, which I ignored as Annette had asked me to do. I felt absolutely absurd: I was a young man in trousers, shirt, tie and sweater, but with shining blonde tresses falling upon my shoulders, in bright, striking bridal makeup and long red talons.

As we sat in her mother's car and pulled away, Annette grinned broadly. "And so the ordeal begins, sweetheart. I hope you are beginning to squirm. It doesn't feel very good, does it?"

She broke out laughing. I gritted my teeth and scowled.

"No scowling," she ordered. "A bride smiles, always. A bride is enjoying the happiest day of her life. This is the happiest day of your life, isn't it, sweetie?"

I took a deep breath. "Yes, ma'am," I sighed and flashed a big grin. She grinned back at me like a cat tormenting a mouse, which is a pretty apt analogy. We sped along swiftly toward my destiny, as I smiled sweetly and tried to stop being aware of myself.

Annette dabbed at the speck of stray mascara lodged in the corner of my shadowed eyelid with a lace handkerchief.

Ninety minutes later, I found myself standing before a double winged mirror in the Babette Bridal Salon. The figure in the mirror was awash in the kind of shimmering, rustling white satin, lace and pearled gown that I had seen in my nightmares. I realized that the dream had been more prophetic than I had imagined. Babette Benson, the beautiful, cool and sleek owner of the bridal shop, fluffed out my sleeves and laid out my train one more time. She stepped back, looking toward Annette for approval. Felicity had been dead right.