

ALTAR-ed Plans

Era: Early 1990s

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"So you're in trouble with your mom again?" I said to my niece. "You've been swiping carrots out of the garden down the street?"

Charlie nodded her head and covered her eyes. They were red and swollen from crying.

"And playing spin-the-bottle with the boys? I'm sure your mom never did anything like that when she was growing up."

Charlie sobbed, a heartfelt jerk that tore at her chest. "Oh, Auntie Lois, don't tease."

"Tease you? No way. I'm just laughing because Lindy is trying awfully hard to stop you from doing the things she used to do when she was your age. Come here and I'll tell you a story."

Charlie slid over on the swing and curled up next to me, her thirteen year old, rail-thin body anxious for comfort.

"Did you know your mom left home when she was eighteen? No one in the family knew where she was. And she only wrote twice. In her second letter, Lindy said she wasn't coming home because she'd had it with Dad. The final straw, she said, was the bill he sent her - for her room and board. According to the letter, Dad said she hadn't paid anything between the time she was born and the time she turned thirteen - which was true."

Charlie laughed. "What about the rest of the time?"

"I have my suspicions - but you have to promise you won't mention my stories the next time you get caught playing spin-the-bottle."

"I promise," Charlie shook her head. Her eyes were shining now.

"I'll tell you about your mom's first wedding. Not the one where your mom married your Dad. Bet you didn't even know about this other wedding, right?"

"Really?" Charlie's eyes were like saucers now.

"As I remember it, George bowled your mom over when she was seventeen. He walked up to her and started making sheep's eyes at her."

"George? You mean Uncle George, Auntie Lois?"

"Just be patient. You have to let me tell the story. Anyway, your mom went buggy. She started wearing dresses instead of jeans and learning how to toss pizzas instead of playing hockey. She was ailing. She wouldn't even argue with me anymore and I was her sister."

"You're right - that doesn't sound like you and mom."

I nodded. "The whole thing went on for months. Eventually she and George got engaged. She was so google-eyed, I decided to forget about her and pretend she wasn't around."

"That's what I wanted to do today." Charlie's eyes narrowed, speculatively.

I gave Charlie's hand a squeeze and smiled at her.

"Well, your mom was love sick and she never recovered, until the morning the engagement ended and the wedding was supposed to start. I figured out she was better THAT day because she woke up yelling at everybody."

"That sounds like Mom."

"I think I know what brought her to her senses. A few days before, I had noticed that your Aunt Julie was vamping George."

"Aunt Julie? So you ARE talking about Uncle George." Charlie's eyes were wide as saucers.

"We all need a sense of purpose. There were a lot of days when your Aunt Julie found hers by walking off with things your mom really liked."

"Really?"

"Oops! I shouldn't have said that. But Julie was definitely making George sizzle. Literally sizzle. I think she arranged a steak-out for him. Cornered him as often as she could in the pantry, not to mention the park, and I was thinking the whole engagement thing was heading for disaster.

"But your mom, she always believed in making the best of a bad situation. For instance, another story - one time Lindy had to take some cookies to school. Your grandma made the cookies, then Grandma went shopping." I poked Charlie. "I come by my love of shopping honestly."

Charlie smiled. "Maybe that's why Grandpa needed to charge Mom room and board."

I laughed. "You might have a point? Anyway, Julie was kind of resentful. She wanted a batch of cookies, too, so she dumped all of Lindy's cookies into the toilet. Your mom knew your grandma would be mad at Julie if she found out. So your Mom grabbed the cookies out of the toilet, shook them off and dried them out in the oven. According to your mom, everybody at school thought the cookies tasted great. The teacher even asked for the recipe.

"But back to that wedding! Everybody in the family was worried about it - worried that it wasn't what your mom really wanted.

"Consider George.

"George used to bring all his washing over for us to do. He wasn't so dumb - helpless, but not dumb. When your Grandma talked about George, I remember her saying, 'A person should keep their options open - especially if they don't know how to iron clothes.' Grandma liked people to be smart, even if they weren't useful.

"But Lindy didn't want to hurt George's feelings, even if he and Julie were spending a lot of time arranging the cans in the pantry. That's just the way your mom is. And remember, George was meeting minimum expectations. He was keeping his options open.

"Then there was Dad. Lindy didn't want to hurt your Grandpa. You know - that old weasel belly-ached all the way to the church about the cost of the reception hall. Your mom didn't have to be a genius to figure out he wouldn't be happy if he lost his deposit.

"Your mom told me once she wanted to do something exciting with her life. Like canoe down the Amazon River or ski to the North Pole. And here she was getting married and probably gearing up to make little Georges. I tried to talk to her a couple of hours before we headed for the church.

'Lindy, I'm quite worried about you,' I told her. 'You don't want this wedding.'

'How do you know what I want? You're just upset because Dad will pick on you when I'm gone.'

I ignored that.

'Sometimes you've got to put the brakes on, Lindy. You don't have to go through with this.' She downed an eight ounce glass of rye poured from your grandpa's bottle. 'You can't do this Lindy.'

'I have to,' she smiled. 'George needs somebody to do his washing.'

How could I argue with that?

Just before the wedding, the best man picked us up - Lindy and Julie and me. Lindy was dressed in clouds of chiffon. Her dress had a special snap-on skirt that billowed all around her like a 1950s crinoline. Julie and I were wearing slim purple dresses.

"Lindy looks like a thundercloud," Dad said as we left the house. I have to admit that, once in a while, he knew what he was talking about.

Lindy asked the best man to stop at the corner grocery on the way to the church. Her mouth was still dry, she told him.

He stopped. The four of us piled out of the car and we walked into the place just in time to see a guardian angel pulling off a heist.

He was a tall, muscular guy and looked as good as anyone can look when his face is wrapped in panty-hose. He was waving a gun at the grocer, Mr. Toddle. Toddle was filling up one of the sacks he uses to make his bank deposits.

So I start screaming, right off. Then Hose-head gets a little nervous and waves his pistol at me, points me toward the door. 'Okay sister. You're with me.' He grabs me from the back and covers my mouth. 'I need your car.'

I scream even louder.

Mr. Toddle hands Hose-head the sack of money but Hose-head has trouble hanging on to it. Not surprising, considering he has my mouth in one hand and the gun in the other. Toddle finally sticks the sack under Hose-head's arm.

Luck is what you make of it and your mom is very creative. 'Let Lois stay here,' Lindy says. 'You can take me. See. I don't scream. I'm nice and quiet.'

'Not in that dress, sister. I won't be able to see to drive the car.'

Your mom kind of raises her eyebrows - stands there thinking for a second. Then twists her wrist, and unsnaps that billowing chiffon from her waist - tosses it to Julie. I'm so flabbergasted I stop screaming. So Hose-head lets me go. 'Is that better?' Lindy asks. Then she pirouettes to show Hose-head the skirt is gone.

Hose-head is still a little hesitant. Apparently he isn't keen on a willing hostage. 'We're going to need a car. I'll have to kick your friends out on the street. How will they get to the wedding?'

'They can call a taxi,' your mom tells him.

'They'll be late.'

'Doesn't matter. A wedding needs a bride and I'm not going to be able to make it.'

'Maybe we should drop them off at the church.'

'Are you stalling?'

'Cars stall. I make excuses.'

'Blast the excuses. The church is around the corner; they can walk.'

Can you imagine? There I was with my mouth hanging open.

In a burst of energy, your mom flies from the store and climbs behind the steering wheel. Hose-head follows and sits beside her on the front seat, not quite sure what to do with his gun. Before your mom starts the car, he drops it into a brown paper bag he takes out of his shirt pocket.

Julie, the best-man and I just stand beside the car and watch until it squeals out of the parking lot.

So, ten minutes later, we arrived at the church, sobbing our eyes out because we were worried about your mom. And your Grandpa was heaving around the place like a card shark that had lost a poker game.

'What about my deposit on the reception hall?' he yells at Mom.

'What about Lindy?'

'Forget about Lindy. She has no problem. Everybody thinks she's wonderful. Everybody is gushing about how she rescued Lois and Julie. Besides, she doesn't have to explain the wedding is off. Or pay for the reception hall.'

'Don't you think we should call the police?'

'Where is that crook? I'm going to sue him. He should have waited until after the wedding.'

'I'm sure he will next time, if you tell him how much the reception hall is going to cost you.' Your grandma gave your grandpa her rotating-drill-bit eyeball look. He quieted down and glanced over to where Julie was sobbing in the corner. Your mom's fiancé, had his arms around Julie and was comforting her as best he could without looking too obvious.

Then Dad, the old coot, joined them and they huddled like football players for a couple of minutes.

Mom went down the hall to phone the police. She told me later the guy on the other end of the line was efficient and co-operative. Said he would have a car there in a minute. All the time Mom was on the phone, I kept worrying about Lindy. In the background, the organist was playing the same three tunes over and over and people were restless and talkative. There wasn't too much doubt the wedding guests had figured out something was wrong. I was wishing Dad would get on with the business of canceling the wedding when he hiked over to the phone where Mom was standing. He was beaming from ear to ear.

'Everything's set,' he says to her. 'Tell the organist he can play the wedding march.'

'What are you talking about?'

'Julie and George are going to get married. That way, we can still use the booze and the hall and we don't have to disappoint anybody. Julie and George think it's a great idea.'

'You go ahead and do what you blasted well please,' Mom said to him. Then she stepped on his toe and left the church.

The guys in the police car arrived a few minutes later. They had to interview Julie and me and the best man and insisted on stopping the wedding to get details. They said Lindy's life might depend on it. Eventually the ceremony got going again. Everyone thought the whole thing was a smashing success - a truly unique wedding.

Later that evening at the reception, I heard news that allowed me to breathe easier. I was just about ready to go home when a clean-cut young man, dressed in blue jeans and a turtle-neck sweater, ambled up to Dad and said:

'The fellow at the door told me you're Lindy Ross's father.'

'So?'

'I'm trying to return her father's car keys. Are you Mr. Ross?'

Dad held out his hand to accept the keys. He didn't say anything.

'So you 'are' her father? The car's just out in the lot. A guy at the airport asked me to return it to you. Said he dropped your daughter off to catch a plane. He told me to tell you that you shouldn't worry about her. He gave her some money. She'll be okay.'

Dad's shoulders straightened perceptibly. Curiosity wrinkled his brow.

'You mean she's not kidnapped any more?'

'Nope.'

'And she won't be home tonight?'

'I wouldn't think so.'

'Where was she going?'

'I didn't stick around to find out.'

'What's your name young fellow?'

'Thomas Rider.'

Charlie was busting at the seams. "You mean it was daddy?"

"Who else?" I laughed. "So your Grandpa asked him, 'You the one robbed Toddle?'"

"Toddle? Did somebody rob Toddle?"

"Your grandpa turned around so he could slap your Dad on the back. 'Why don't you come over to the bar and have a drink? Weddings are a time for celebrating, don't you think? This was a good one - one wedding, two daughters. So I want you to enjoy it.'

"Your Grandpa didn't make it home until ten o'clock the next morning. And his exuberance lasted long past the wedding. I mean, he gave me money a week later to buy a new pair of shoes."

Charlie laughed. "Right, Auntie Lois."

"Things worked out okay for your Aunt Julie, too. She's been really happy with your Uncle George. Doing his washing and ironing was just the thing." I smiled.

Charlie moved over a little and looked at me earnestly. "As soon as you said that guy's name was George, I wondered if it was Uncle George you were talking about. Wow! I never heard that story before. Do you think Daddy was the one who robbed Mr. Toddle?"

"Oh no, I wouldn't think that for a minute."

"Wow, Aunt Julie is a bit of a character isn't she, Auntie Lois?"

"Well, your Aunt Julie is happy. And your mom got what she wanted. I couldn't believe it when she said she was going to fight fires in the oil fields. It's not for me - boiling like a lobster behind a metal shield, but I guess it's okay for your mom - since she wants a bit of adventure, hey?"

"Am I really like my mom?"

"You bet. She picked a good name when she called you Charlie. With a name like that you're bound to be adventurous. But I don't think your mom is going to like it."

Charlie laughed and hugged a secret satisfaction to her chest.

"Want another story?" I asked her. "Maybe about the time your mom set the police station on fire? I'll bet she's never told you that one either. I think we need a glass of lemonade to go with it. I'll be right back."



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