

Kate Wilhelm - The Happiest Day Of Her Life

THE DAY BEFORE THE HAPPIEST day of her life did not have an auspicious start for Reba Cameron. She heard her bedroom door open and opened her eyes enough to see a dim light coming in from the hall; she closed her eyes again. Her mother had slipped into the room; she could smell her. Still dark outside and Sonya was already doused with perfume, and, no doubt, had all her makeup perfectly in place. Reba did not stir as she tracked her mother's soft steps around the room; she would finger something or other, put it down, straighten something, move something else, pause at the mirror to smile at her reflection, move on.... When the door closed again, Reba looked at the clock. Six-thirty.

She groaned and pulled the blanket up over her head, desperate for at least one more hour of sleep, but now she could hear her mother's voice in the hall outside her door.

"Of course, I didn't wake her up. She's sleeping like a baby...." Reba drifted as the voice faded, then it sounded closer again. "I have a right to look at my child, for heaven's sake!...trying to sneak in her wedding without letting me know a thing about it." She was walking back and forth in the hall, apparently, the sound of her voice rising and falling as she neared the door, then drew away. Talking to Aunt Rebecca? Someone whose voice was too low to carry into the room, through the blanket.

Reba put her fingers in her ears.

"...ages ago! How was I supposed to know she'd still be engaged after such a long time?"

Reba had written to her four months ago, announcing her engagement, the date, everything, and in return had received a postcard with her mother's scrawl:

Darling, I am so excited...(illegible) Me, too. Mr. Wonderful... (illegible)...

(illegible). Sonya. Yesterday Sonya had called, and last night she had arrived with Mr. Wonderful, the New Guy. They were always the New Guy, this was number five. Maybe six. It didn't matter. He was the New Guy.

"I know we were all just a little excited last night, but it's perfectly clear that Bob should give her away. After all, he's her stepfather, and he brought his tuxedo...."

This time Sonya's voice faded away and didn't return. Maybe Aunt Rebecca had dragged her downstairs. Pushed her down the stairs? Reba shook her head. No such luck. Reluctantly she sat up, well aware that she would not go back to sleep that morning. She added items to the mental list of things she had to get done that day, and headed the list with the number one in importance. Tell her mother to butt out; the wedding was planned down to the last detail, and not a single thing would be changed. Uncle Walt, the only father she had ever known, her mother's brother, would walk her down the aisle, not the New Guy, whose name

Reba couldn't even remember.

During her entire life she had lived with her mother for a total of six years off and on; the first two years she and her mother had lived here in Aunt

Rebecca's house. After that she had been shipped off to Aunt Rebecca now and then while her mother and the current New Guy tried to work things out, or while her mother was in pursuit of a new New Guy, or for some other reason. When she was twelve she had come to stay.

According to Sonya, Reba's father had been a prince, a beautiful young man who had swept her off her feet, loved her passionately, and then mysteriously disappeared without realizing she was pregnant. She didn't know his last name.

Just Cary. Like Cary Grant, only much, much better looking. Sonya, of course, had been a lovely naive girl, ready to be swept up, one who, Reba suspected, had always exuded clouds of pheromones. She never had any trouble landing a New Guy, and, pretty as she always had been and still was, never kept any of her catches more than a few years. Throwaway fish who didn't measure up to the Prince.

The problem was that the New Guys too often seemed to be intent on getting Reba killed. The first one, Harvey Wilson, had died in a stupid wreck that threw Reba out of the car into a shallow pond with a nice cushiony mud bottom. A different

New Guy had fallen asleep on the couch and dropped a cigarette; a neighbor had dragged him out, but neither of them had remembered there was a child sleeping in the house. Reba had crawled out a dog door, following the poodle to safety. A miracle, everyone had declared. How had she managed to fit through? Later, a new

New Guy had gone skiing with Sonya and Reba; the gondola lift had jerked; he had lurched forward and managed to push Reba over the side down to where she should have been killed on jutting basalt boulders. Instead, she had landed in a deep new-powder drift between rocks.

Reba continued to sit on the side of her bed, brooding about her mother, and her new New Guy. An omen, she thought bleakly. She had avoided her mother's New Guys for years, purposely had never paid them a visit. There had been a number of parental visits over the years, when Sonya would appear by herself, rearrange things for a few days, buy Reba some clothes or trinkets, try to curl her hair, give her advice about how to walk, how to sit, how to eat, what to eat; then she would leave, and Reba and Aunt Rebecca, sharing quiet relief, would restore order and get on with their lives.

And now there was a new New Guy in the house, an evil omen, certain to doom her wedding, doom her in all likelihood.

By the time Reba dragged herself into the shower, dressed and went downstairs, she had a grade-A headache. She stifled a groan when she saw that her mother was making a list...

"Darling, good morning!" Sonya cried. "Are you ill? Just nervous? You shouldn't drink coffee, if you're nervous. And it's perfectly normal to feel a bit jittery, but believe me, sweetheart, tomorrow will be the happiest day of your life. Your wedding day is always the happiest day of your life."

"The voice of experience," Aunt Rebecca said, pouring coffee for Reba. "I was just about to scramble eggs. Walt will be down in a minute."

"None for me," Reba said. "Just coffee. I'll get a bite later. Mother, the wedding is all taken care of. There's not a thing for you to do except take it easy, relax. Okay?"

"Darling, you wouldn't believe how much I have to do! What I thought we'd do is shop a little. I can't wear a violet dress if Rebecca insists on wearing blue.

And the wedding gift, of course. What pattern of silver do you have? But that's so boring, isn't it? I want something memorable for you. Then, I thought we'd meet and have lunch, just you and I, and Bob, of

course. Or maybe not with Bob.

A mother and daughter should have lunch alone on this occasion. Yes, definitely, just the two of us --"

"Mother! I'm sorry. I'm tied up all day, people at work planned lunch already

--"

"She's so much like her father," Sonya said to Rebecca. "It took my breath away looking at her sleeping; she looks so much like him, and talks like him." Then she turned to Reba and said, "Darling, I don't want to upset any plans you already have, of course, but it does seem that on the last day of your life as a single girl you could take a little time out for the only mother you'll ever have."

The last day of her life! "Mother! I'm not a girl. I'm twenty-nine years old.

I'm really happy you came in time for the wedding, but I have to work today, and

I have a million things I have to take care of. I'll see you tonight." She put down her coffee cup, snatched up her purse and jacket, and headed for the front door.

Aunt Rebecca walked out with her to the porch. "Don't worry about her," she said, patting Reba's arm. "I won't let her near your room."

"Or the Gilfords, or the church, or the hotel," Reba muttered. "I'll call the hotel and tell them to add two more to the dinner party."

Sonya was coming toward them. "Darling, I hope you made an appointment to have your hair done..."

Reba fled.

It was downhill for the rest of the morning. Traffic crossing the bridge from

Vancouver, Washington, into Portland, Oregon, was bumper to bumper with long inexplicable pauses between small incremental forward movements. Once she reached the hospital where she worked in the Records Department she found a message from the woman she had been training to replace her; she was ill, and would try to make it back by Monday. No one knew where she had put the mammograms from the previous week. A woman in Akron, Ohio, called demanding her complete records from twelve years ago. Two insurance companies were sending representatives to present the new requirements for their bookkeeping department. Reba was expected to drop everything else and see to the needs of the insurance companies....

Her office was the size of a small closet, and now, with a second chair for her replacement, there was so little space that when the door opened, it banged into the second chair. The only bright spot so far that morning had been a bouquet on her desk with a big number one on a stick poking out from a dozen yellow roses.

Michael had started the countdown at day ten, and now there was one day left before the happiest day of her life. The phrase from her mother's lips made her own lips tighten. She called Aunt Rebecca to find out the name of the New Guy for his place card at the dinner party.

After that she phoned the special events coordinator at the New Columbian Hotel, only to be told that he

was in conference, and would be available for a short period between twelve and twelve-thirty.

"I have to make a couple of changes for a dinner party tonight," Reba said. "Can

I just leave him a message?"

"Hold on, I'll see if I can find his assistant."

Reba held the phone and tapped her fingers on the desk, knowing that the way things were shaping up, this call was doomed. Still holding the phone, she walked around her desk, out to the wide hall where people were scurrying around carrying X-ray films, stacks of medical records, someone pushing a cart of medical files, a lab technician with his blood-sucking gear walking her way. She spotted her friend Zelda and waved her over, then, holding her hand on the mouthpiece of the phone, she said she would not be able to make it for lunch.

She had lied about the office party luncheon; she and Zelda had planned a very quiet lunch with just the two of them.

She was explaining when the phone squawked in her ear, and at the same time the lab technician said, "Ms. Cameron?" Another cart of records was moving toward them; she waved the technician into the office, and said into the phone, "I'm here, still waiting."

"I can't find Mr. Warner's assistant. She must have stepped out or something.

Maybe you'd better come around and tell him what you want."

Reba looked at her watch, twenty minutes before twelve. "I'll be right over," she said, and shoved her office door open to reenter.

The technician apparently had been standing by the second chair in the cramped space and the opening door hit his arm, sent his equipment flying; glass vials shattered on the desk, on the wall, on the floor.

"Oh, God!" he moaned. He looked as if he might cry.

Reba stared at the mess, as near tears as he seemed to be. "Good heavens! I'm sorry. I'll tell someone to send for maintenance. I'm terribly sorry." She went around her desk, hung up the phone, and got her purse from a drawer. He stood like a statue, as if hypnotized by the scattered equipment, the shards of glass.

"Hey," she said, more sharply, "I said I'm sorry. It's not the end of the world.

Shit happens. What did you want, anyway?"

"Just to draw some blood from you. I'll get some clean stuff. Will you wait a minute or two?" He looked at her with a despairing expression.

"I can't. What's it for? Who told you to draw blood from me?" She paused at the door.

"Dr. Bressler," he mumbled. "It's a...a new test or something. He said to get yours first since you'll be leaving."

"I don't know a Dr. Bressler," she said coldly. "I don't participate in new tests that I know nothing about, and I have to leave like this very second." She left him standing there with an agonized look on his face.

THE NEW COLUMBIAN Hotel was a vast complex, hotel, conference center, convention hall, private party rooms.... It had not been the Cameron group's choice for the dinner party, too expensive for them, but Michael's mother had prevailed, and

Reba had seen little point in getting into a fight over it. Now, when she stepped from the revolving door into the lobby, she came to a dead stop, gaping.

The lobby was immense, on several levels, part of the floor purple and green marble, part of it grape-colored plush carpet. There were many crystal chandeliers, dozens of arrangements of green and gold sofas and chairs, black marble table tops, black marble counters... And scurrying about were several dozen men in funny hats, some wearing striped engineers' overalls, some carrying oil cans, some carrying parts of train sets, others laying track. Half of the lobby was roped off with gold velvet ropes and behind the barrier the men were laying out miniature railroads.

The revolving door revolved and someone bumped Reba from behind; she began to walk toward the information counter. She paused at the bulletin board announcing current events. A rather fat bald man moved a little to one side to make room for her. A convention of train buffs, she realized, was happening this weekend.

Also a conference of scientists and computer people. A golden wedding anniversary party dance, other events. Near the bottom of the list the announcement of her wedding party, to be held in the Blue Heron Room. At least that part was okay, she decided, and continued toward the information counter.

The clerk at the counter called Mr. Warner, who would be out in just a minute.

Leaning against the counter, waiting, she watched the railroad buffs setting up a maze of tracks complete with tunnels, bridges, switching yards. A lot of onlookers were calling out encouragement,, giving advice, heckling.... And up on the mezzanine another group of spectators was laughing, pointing, nudging one another. The computer people, she thought; their meeting rooms were all on the mezzanine level. They looked very young for the most part, dressed in jeans, sweatshirts, with too-long hair.... Stereotypes all, she mocked herself. Then she noticed that one of the upper-level spectators was gazing fixedly at something other than the trains, something that held him with rapt attention, apparently. She turned to see what it was and was shocked to see the lab technician whose day she had ruined talking to the old bald man near the bulletin board.

The older man was red-faced, furious looking; the other man more abject, more miserable than before, his head ducked, hands twitching at his sides, not saying a word. Abruptly the bald man turned and stalked away; the young man followed, keeping a few steps behind him.

Reba looked again at the mezzanine, but now the rail was just packed with the young jeans-clad men. The one who had been watching the little scene at the bulletin board was out of sight.

Then Mr. Warner appeared from his office and he held her hand with both of his and called her my dear. Of course, it was no problem to seat two additional people, he reassured her. She gave him the names to put on the new place cards,

Sonya and Robert Zucker, and if she had left it at that, she would have been done with it in five minutes, but she added that Mrs. Zucker was her mother.

"Oh dear! We'll have to rearrange the entire seating plan!"

"No, no, we won't, just put Mother down at Dr. Gilford's right, and Mr. Zucker at her side, and leave the rest alone."

"No, no, my dear. It's customary to have the mother of the bride-to-be at one end of the table, and the father of the groom-to-be at the other end. And of course the happy couple side by side in the center with the bride-to-be closer to her mother."

Very carefully she said, "I don't want my mother to take my aunt's place at the head of the table. I don't care what is customary." The wedding party was for the immediate families, the attendants, and, of course, the bride and groom, twenty-two in all now. She wanted the New Guy as far away from her as possible.

"But the arrangements, the flowers, the little special things that make it so very unique. Think of the photographs, your keepsakes.... Think how it would look if you didn't honor your mother by letting her have her proper place."

She told him again how she wanted the seating arrangement, and he explained again what was customary, and how bad it would look. People would think he didn't know any better, and she said, "Mr. Warner, think how it would look if I didn't pay for this dinner party!" But she knew she would have to arrive before anyone else did, and make certain the place cards were where she intended them to be.

She was cursing under her breath when she left him, her lunch hour blown. The lobby was more crowded than before; more railroaders, more observers, more people arriving with suitcases. People were clustered at the bulletin board.

Trying to ignore them all, she was heading for the revolving door when she paused and looked at the group studying the current events. Among them was the man she had seen on the mezzanine, the one who had been fascinated by the bald man and the lab technician. Only she no longer believed he was a legitimate lab technician.

The man she had been watching left the group, came to a halt and smacked himself on the forehead. She distinctly heard him say, "Wow! Dummy! Of course!" He ran toward the entrance of the hotel, didn't bother with the revolving door, but pushed the heavy glass door open and ran out.

He didn't look crazy, she thought. He was nice looking, dark hair, not long enough to be a computer guy, although he looked young enough to be one of them.

The clincher was that he was dressed in a sports coat and slacks, shirt open at the neck, and real shoes, not in the computer nerd uniform of jeans, sweatshirt and court shoes. He didn't look old enough to be a mad scientist, but maybe he was working at it.

She shook her head, a mistake; her headache was back.

That afternoon was even more hectic than the morning had been, since there had been yet another interruption when she had to arrange for maintenance to come clean up broken glass. Her aunt called at three.

"Honey, I asked Jack to drop off a few things from the grocery for me. Can he bring anything back there

for you?"

Jack, her cousin, who was more like a brother to Reba, lived in Portland. For him to go shopping for his mother, drive over the bridge and back again could only mean that Sonya and the New Guy were hanging around; Aunt Rebecca didn't dare go off and leave the house to them.

"Aren't they going out to shop or something?"

"In and out, in and out," Aunt Rebecca said lightly.

Within earshot, Reba guessed. She made up her mind quickly and told her aunt about the place cards. "I have to get over there by six-thirty to make sure that creep got the message. If you could slip away and put my dress and shoes and stuff in a bag and ask Jack to bring it all over here to the hospital, I won't even try to drive home, dress, and get back over that early. I'll go straight to the hotel and dress there."

"No trouble, not at all," Aunt Rebecca said. "See you later."

People began to drift in to tell her goodbye, wish her bon voyage, congratulate her, express envy, and she knew there would be no more work done that day. She began to straighten out her desk, tried to call Michael again, and got his machine again. He had called while she was out, naturally, and they had missed each other throughout the day. He had worked that morning, post-op patients, he had said with a sigh. He was an ophthalmologist, like his father, and worked in the same clinic where his father played God as head of it all, and he had put in a full week, just as she had done. Even if he had as much to do as she did, he could have called, she thought angrily; she had been in the office all afternoon. He didn't even know yet that her mother had turned up.

Two more co-workers came by and chatted a few minutes, left again. She regarded a half-eaten sandwich on her desk with disgust and tossed it into the wastebasket where shards of glass glinted. It was really Michael's fault, she thought suddenly. This had been one of the worst days of her life and he was to blame. When her lease expired in July she had suggested that she might move in with him instead of going through the hassle of trying to find a new apartment, moving; it would have to be on a monthly basis, not yearly as her old apartment had been. She might be kicked out again any month. But he had shaken his head and said gravely, "Darling, you don't realize the high regard my folks have for you, how much it means to me that they are so crazy about you. But if we started living together before the wedding.... Well, I don't think we should."

His father, she had thought bitterly, would not approve. Then, at her aunt and uncle's urging, she had moved back to their house, back home. It would save her a lot of money, and God knew she needed it. But if she were living in Michael's apartment, just a few blocks from the New Columbian Hotel, she wouldn't be waiting for Jack to sneak clothes to her, making her feel like a fugitive; there would be a good safe distance between her and the new New Guy, time now to go take a shower, relax a few minutes.

Jack appeared with a garment bag and a carry-on flight bag. He gave her a conspiratory wink, and left again just as Zelda appeared in the doorway to bid

Reba a tearful goodbye.

The hotel lobby was a crush of people, four deep around the gold rope keeping spectators away from the whizzing trains. A whistle sounded, and a bell....

Groups of people were standing around with drinks in their hands; it appeared that most of the chairs were occupied, waiters were rushing around with trays.... It was Happy Hour. Reba pushed her way through to the corridor that led to the Blue Heron Room, and found the double doors closed and locked. She went to the front desk jammed with people who evidently had just arrived.

The bell captain was busy directing traffic; the woman at the information counter was swamped. Finally Reba stepped in front of a hurrying waiter. "I need to get in the Blue Heron Room. Who can open the door for me?"

"Not until after six-thirty," he said, side-stepping around her. "Private party, can't have people wandering in and out." He scurried away.

Resignedly she started to make her way back to the corridor. She saw the bald man who had been in the lobby earlier and was startled when he detached himself from a group, keeping his gaze fixed on her. She hurried out of the lobby to find a women's room where she could change her clothes.

By the time she was changed, had found a cloakroom and checked her things, it was past six-thirty; she had to push her way through the lobby once more, and again she saw the bald man, this time talking to a young woman with frizzy blond hair and a lot of makeup; both of them were watching her. They turned away swiftly. What was he? Security or something? Did he think she was a jewel thief?

A pickpocket? Angrily, she continued to her own party room, and this time found the doors unlocked. Two waitresses were fussing around the table when she approached. She nodded to them, and began to pick up the place cards, more furious than ever. That sneaky little bastard had arranged them to suit himself,

Sonya at one end of the table, Dr. Gilford at the other.

"You're not supposed to be in here yet, Miss," one of the waitresses said timidly. "You can't move things around."

"I damn well can. It's my party!" She picked up two orchid corsages and moved them to their proper places. She glared at the two women. "If you touch them or tell anyone, I'll find you and wring your necks!"

The other waitress shrugged and said, "Fine with me."

Reba sat down to wait for her party to begin. Drinks at seven, dinner at eight, out by eleven, she had promised Mr. Warner, and she only hoped out by eleven would happen. After eleven quite a few of the guests would go up to the lounge where there was live music, a dance floor, even a floor show on weekends. But out by eleven would be more her speed, she thought tiredly.

A few minutes before eight there were twenty-two people in the room, immediate family and wedding attendants, all talking at once. Sonya was charming the two doctors, senior and junior, and Reba was carefully dodging the New Guy, keeping out of his reach. She mouthed, "Powder room," to her aunt, slipped out, and headed for the nearest women's room. A few minutes later, at the sink, she reached up with both hands to smooth down her hair. Dr. Gilford always tousled it as if she were a small child.

The door flew open and Sonya cried, "Darling, he's gorgeous! What a catch!"

At the same moment another voice said, "Hold still, there's something crawling in your hair."

Reba whirled around to glare at her mother, and her elbow caught the other woman in the face. She screamed piercingly.

Sonya cried, "She was attacking you!"

Reba stared at the woman, the frizzy-haired blond, who had her hand clapped to her eye.

"I'm hurt! You hit me in the eye!"

"Mother, go get Michael." Sonya hurried out. Reba put her arm around the other woman's shoulder and said, "Let's go out to a chair. Let you sit down. A doctor's coming. I'm sorry. God, I'm sorry. I didn't even see you." She took the woman out to a small alcove with several chairs and seated her there, then stood patting her, trying to soothe her, or at least stop her from screaming again.

Michael came rushing down the corridor and he knelt on one knee before the injured woman and gently took her hand away from her eye. She had smeared mascara all over her face. "Let's have a look," he said. "See, the eye is a marvelous invention. When something gets too near, it just automatically closes down, shuts tight. You don't think about it; it just happens. A reflex." He talked as he examined her eye, then he turned and said to someone behind Reba,

"Maybe you could go find some crushed ice and a plastic bag, and a couple of small towels. Nothing serious here, just a little bump."

Reba turned to see the bald man staring at the woman, then at Reba. He looked frightened. The woman saw him, too, and she yelled, "I quit! You can keep your stinking work! I'm through!"

The man hurried away as Sonya and Aunt Rebecca appeared and Michael said in his reassuring doctor's voice, "Go on back and tell the folks that it's a little mishap, nothing serious. I won't be very long." He held up his hands with a rueful expression. His fingers were black with mascara.

"I'll be there in a minute," Reba said and ducked back into the women's room.

She was shaking all over. When she looked at herself in the mirror, she was deathly pale, like a person in shock. "I should have seen her," she said under her breath. If the woman had come from the side, from behind, from anywhere at all, Reba should have seen her reflection in the mirror, but she had seen nothing. "I'm losing my mind," she whispered. She doused her face with cold water, got a drink from a tiny cup, and gradually her shaking eased, some color returned to her cheeks.

When she returned to the alcove, Michael was doing something with a plastic bag of ice and the towel. He waved her away. "A few more minutes," he said.

She walked down the corridor again, then hesitated. Ahead, leaning against the wall with his arms folded across his chest was the other man, the one she thought of as the watcher, and he had a wide idiotic grin on his face. He gave her a thumbs up sign and she felt her cheeks flare with heat. She hurried inside the Blue Heron Room and was immediately surrounded by the party guests wanting to know what happened.

"She was attacked by this perfectly strange woman and she defended herself heroically!" Sonya cried. "I saw the whole thing. I'll be your witness when she sues."

Someone put a glass of champagne in Reba's hand, and although she rarely drank anything, she gulped it down. Sonya was going on about the attack, what she had seen with her own eyes. "I think she had a knife, or maybe just scissors, or a scalpel. Have there been serial murders in the area recently?"

Reba had a second glass of champagne, and since she had decided she was losing her mind, she realized that although it seemed too long a time for Michael to be gone, that could well be one of her symptoms, a time distortion of some sort.

Finally Michael reappeared. He took her in his arms and kissed her; there was applause. Then he held up her hand and declared, "The winner! And still champ!"

The loser has a shiner. Can we eat now?" There was more applause, and they began to sort themselves out at the table.

The most miserable dinner of her life, Reba thought gloomily, waiting for overcooked salmon to be removed, something else to be placed before her. Sonya, at the senior Dr. Gilford's right, was working on him, and he was lapping it up happily. Mrs. Gilford was not happy. The New Guy kept leaning forward to tell

Dr. Gilford about a mysterious recurring pain in his lower back. Michael kept reassuring Reba in an undertone that she had not done any damage to the woman, who, he said, was a graduate student Dr. Bressler had encouraged to attend the scientific conference. Dr. Bressler didn't have any idea about what she had meant by what she said. He was baffled, bewildered, at a loss. Michael went on and on, and Reba caught a hastily erased expression of concern, or even pity, on

Aunt Rebecca's face. Her aunt had not been as happy as her mother was about this engagement, the wedding tomorrow.

"Isn't it the most romantic place of all for a honeymoon!" Sonya was saying.

"Hawaii, the palm trees, warm water...."

"See, it just comes on without any warning. I'm fine, then whammo, right in the lower back. Like a toothache."

"We told the baby sitter we'd be back before twelve."

"And then just the tiniest movement, a finger twitch or something, and it hits you. The baby is there, it's moving."

"You wouldn't believe the estimates we've been getting for one lousy roof, not even a whole roof, a section. All over the map...."

She smiled and smiled until her face hurt. When she raised her glass she used elaborate caution. No more accidents. The third one would be fatal, that's how it worked. The dessert of flaming cherries jubilee filled her with dread. She might start a fire, burn down the hotel and everyone in it. How had she managed to get through a tiny dog door? The last day of her life. The toasts started and she sneaked a glance at her watch. It was eleven-thirty. Mr. Warner would charge a bundle for going overtime. The happiest day of her life would start in half an hour. They would have a house in the country, where the kids could have ponies.

Two or even three children, that's what Michael wanted, and for them to start a family right away, and she had agreed, but right away? He was thirty-six, it was time, he had said. As soon as his father knew he was really settled down he planned to retire, let Michael run the whole shebang. But right away? His father had been afraid Michael was gay, he had hinted; he had to prove something.

"Let's go up to the cafe and have a few quiet minutes after this is over,"

Michael said softly. "I'll take you home later."

"I have my car here."

"But you're in no shape to drive it," he said with a grin. "I've never seen you drink before, or look so happy before, either."

She smiled and smiled. But he was right; she couldn't drive, and she was terrified of getting in a car with the new New Guy. She nodded. And finally it was over, and Michael told her mother and Aunt Rebecca that he would bring Reba home later.

"I'll wait up for you, darling," Sonya said. "Don't be too late. You need a little rest before. You know."

The New Guy was singing "Get Me to the Church on Time"; there were hugs and kisses and gradually the room emptied. Michael took her hand and they walked out to the corridor, to the lobby and the elevators, to go to the cafe on the third floor.

Some of the wedding guests were going up also, heading for the lounge and the floor show, also on the third floor. They tried to talk Michael and Reba into joining them, but he shook his head. "Quiet time," he said, holding her, and she simply leaned against him, too tired to add a word.

They walked past the lounge; music followed them down the hallway around the corner and to the door of the cafe. Inside, the room was quiet, with a low hum of voices, and it was dimly lighted. Michael started to lead her toward a high-backed booth, but she pulled away and pointed to the tables by the wide windows, where she could look out and see the city lights and the reflections of lights on the river. She sank into her chair and breathed out a long sigh.

The waiter appeared instantly. "Double espresso," she said.

"Two," Michael said. "Decaf."

"Not mine. I need a shot of caffeine or I'll fall asleep sitting up with my eyes open."

The waiter left.

"Tough day?"

She nodded.

"Me too. You know that woman you slugged?"

"I didn't slug her. It was an accident."

"Oh, right. Well, the fellow I was talking to, her mentor, is pretty interesting. He's a famous scientist,

overdue for the Nobel for work in genetics. We chatted a couple of minutes."

She yawned widely.

"I've read about him for years, and his articles turn up all the time in journals. Reba, are you hearing a word?"

She had been watching how the reflections broke when invisible boats passed through them. "Sorry," she said. "I'm listening. Oh, good, the coffee."

The waiter put slender clear-glass cups down and withdrew; the cups reflected candlelight that turned the coffee deep red.

She lifted her cup and sipped; the coffee was too hot to drink yet, but she liked the way the candlelight shone through it.

"Reba, he asked me to help him with his work," Michael said. "Can you believe it! It's like Einstein asking someone for help with his equation. Actually, he wants both of us to help him."

Very carefully she set down her cup. She felt tingling all over, as if that one sip of espresso had revitalized every nerve in her body. "What do you mean?"

"He'll even credit me for assistance. You can remain anonymous, of course; no one wants to invade your privacy."

"What does he want?"

"Just a drop or two of blood, so he can examine the DNA, find a certain gene he's --"

"No."

"It won't be more than a pinprick. You've stuck yourself more pruning roses.

I'll swab off the tip of your finger --"

"No!"

He pulled a thin plastic package from his pocket, unzipped it, and drew out another slim package and as he started to unroll it, she could see instruments gleaming. A test tube, slides. "It won't take a minute, then a kiss to make it well."

"Michael, I said no. Put that stuff away. No!"

"Reba, be reasonable. It's not a big deal, just one little pinprick. Think what it would mean for me. I'm tired of walking in my father's shadow; this could be important for me."

He reached across the table for her hand, and she jerked away, upsetting her coffee that had looked like blood, but was simply a spreading brown puddle on the white tablecloth. In a continuous motion with the reflexive jerk of her hand, she jumped to her feet and started toward the door. Suddenly she stopped, and, feeling almost like a somnambulist, she returned to the table where Michael was hurriedly stuffing everything back in his pocket. He took his wallet out, fumbled for a bill. Wordlessly she pulled off her

diamond ring and laid it in the pool of coffee, and then walked out fast.

"Reba! Wait up! Hold it! Forget the whole thing."

She kept walking fast, out the door, down the corridor to the turn. Some train buffs were coming from the lounge, regrouping in the corridor, talking, laughing, carrying drinks. She did not slow down.

"Reba, for God's sake, stop! Let me explain."

She plowed straight through the group at the lounge. One of the men yelped and spilled his drink. She kept walking.

"Reba! Stop acting like a child! Stop this nons --"

There was a crashing sound and someone yelled, a woman screamed. Now Reba stopped and turned to look. Michael was sprawled on the floor. She shook from head to toe; she had done it again. Another accident. The third one, the fatal one. Slowly now she began to walk back toward the group. One of the men was kneeling at Michael's side; someone else said in a loud voice, "He slipped on the ice." Then a cat leaped out of the lounge and pushed its way through to

Michael. Reba blinked hard. A woman in a body suit with leopard spots. The woman pushed the man away from Michael and cried, "Mikey! Get an ambulance! Call nine one one. Someone do something! Mikey! Baby, open your eyes!"

Reba took another step.

Michael stirred and groaned. He tried to push himself up from the floor and groaned again, louder. "I think my leg's broken." He looked around dazedly, then said, "Crystal!"

She pulled his head to her breast and held him, crooning softly. "You'll be all right. An ambulance is on the way. Don't try to move, baby." He closed his eyes and didn't try to move.

Reba took one more step. Then she saw the bald man, the scientist, and he held up both hands before him, as if to ward her off, to defend himself. He backed up a step or two, turned and ran. The other one, the watcher, was leaning against the wall, laughing.

She turned around and walked again until she came to a wide staircase and followed it down until it ended on the mezzanine. There were only a few people there now watching the trains that continued to whiz around, up and over trestles that crossed streams, through tunnels, blowing whistles, ringing bells.

She leaned against the rail and watched the trains.

"I'd choose that blue and silver one with the smokestack," someone said.

"Me, too. A nice slow train to nowhere in particular. Why have you been following me?" She glanced at him then.

"Not you. I've been keeping an eye on Bressler, and he's been watching you, so there I was, too. Her name's Crystal Spring. She's a dancer."

"Ah."

"And you're Rebecca Cameron."

"I know."

"And your aunt is also Rebecca Cameron. That's what had me confused."

"Is this a guessing game? Am I supposed to try to guess what your name is?"

"No. I'm Tony Manetti."

"With the computer gang?"

"Not really. I work for a journal that covers meetings like this for a monthly feature. I'm on assignment."

They became silent as a siren sounded closer and closer, then abruptly stopped.

"He isn't hurt bad. Just a broken leg," Tony Manetti said. "I don't think it will slow him down much."

"I think you're right."

"What did he try to do?"

"Get a drop of blood, or maybe two. That's all."

"A drop today, a pint tomorrow. Who knows where it would end? Are you hungry?"

Want a hamburger? There's a pretty good place down the street about a block."

She glanced down at her party dress. "I have to get my jacket."

"Here," he said, pulling off his sport coat. "It's not very far." Holding it, she said, "You know what this is all about, don't you?" "Yes. Tell you the whole story over a hamburger and a shake. Deal?" She put on his coat. "Deal."

THE HAMBURGER joint was busy; a lot of the computer nerds were there, talking and eating, drawing diagrams or something on napkins.... Several of them waved to Tony when he and Reba entered. A couple of them motioned to Tony to join them. He waved back and kept walking.

"You understand what they're talking about? You go to their panels, all that?"

Reba slid into a booth and he sat opposite her.

"Not a single one. How it works is they give me copies of their papers, their presentations, and I read them in the privacy of my own home, write my summation, and I'm done for the month."

They ordered hamburgers with everything, fries, and chocolate shakes, and then she said, "So tell me about that crazy man, the bald mad scientist."

"You up for a dose of genetics?" She rolled her eyes and he grinned. "I'll try to keep it short. Bressler has done a lot of important work in the field, but a few years ago he came up with a theory he's been

obsessed with ever since. He believes that certain people have genetic material, one or more genes that act as guardians. The carriers of those genes have what look like miraculous escapes from death or at least serious injury. If genes themselves are immortal, as is generally accepted now, this particular genetic string has endured through the ages, and continues to get passed on, and he's hot on the trail of some people he's identified as having the right characteristics to qualify as carriers. Like girls who crawl out of a burning house through a doorway too small for them to fit through. He's trying to get DNA material from those people so he can identify the gene or genes, isolate them, and go on from there."

She was shaking her head in disbelief. "He thinks I'm a carrier?"

"He's certain of it."

"That's insane. A lot of people have lucky escapes from danger. You read about them all the time. Just plain ordinary people who got lucky."

"He narrowed his field of research to those who have had at least three such escapes. Under three he's willing to concede that it's coincidence, or luck, or guardian angel, or whatever. But three or more? He wants to have a look at their

DNA."

Their food came and she was starved, and apparently so was he. They ate in silence; she kept trying to make sense of what he had told her, and could find no sense in any of it. Then, with most of the hamburger gone, and only a few fries remaining, she said, "Why doesn't he just go to those people and ask for a sample of blood or something? Most people cooperate if they know it's for a good purpose, good research. People volunteer all the time; I see them at work every day, trying out new drugs, being tested for this or that."

"Not these people," Tony said. He was grinning. "It seems that every time he sends out one of his graduate students to get a sample, an accident happens. The genes don't want to be collected."

"Oh, God," she said with a groan. "Crazier and crazier. Okay, so he believes that, but he's mad. What do you believe? And how do you know so much about it?"

Did he tell you? Have you written about it?"

"One question at a time," Tony protested. "Last summer at a conference like this one he handed me a stack of his research papers. He wanted me to help get a DNA sample, and he told me a little about his project. The next day he yanked the papers back and said more or less to forget it. But I had copied all the papers, and I read them. That's how I know about it. Over the summer I visited a few of his subjects, talked to them, and they all fit the profile. Only children.

Miraculous escapes. Never really sick. Never gain too much weight, or lose it.

None of them would volunteer for any testing, or donate blood. And curious accidents happen to anyone who tries to sneak a sample." He laughed. "I witnessed part of your day. Was there anything else?"

She told him about the phony lab technician, and the accident in the women's room, and he laughed louder. "But wait a minute," she said. "If you know people are going to have accidents if they get near me, why aren't you afraid?"

"Because I'm not after your blood. The genes aren't afraid of me."

She shook her head. "You keep saying things like that. The genes cause accidents? They're aware of danger? Come on! Give me a break."

"You tell me something," Tony said seriously then. "Why did you come out with me tonight? The middle of the night, a strange man, and you didn't even hesitate."

Why did you even notice Bressler today? That lobby was crawling with fat bald men. Why did you notice me? I look like dozens of guys who come and go in a mob scene like that hotel." She realized she couldn't tell him. She didn't know why.

"I fell out of a barn loft and walked away from it," he said. "Lightning hit a boat I was in and two guys were killed. I swam to shore. I was shot twice; either one would have been fatal if I hadn't moved at exactly the right second."

They were just grazes instead."

She stared at him. "Why isn't he after your blood?"

"He doesn't know about me. I didn't make the newspapers the way you did."

Slowly then she said, "Let's understand one thing. I don't believe a word of this. I think it's insane. But if you do believe it, and if you know he's legitimate, that he's doing real research into something that could be important, why don't you just go to him and volunteer your DNA?"

"Why didn't you let your ex-fiance get a drop of blood tonight?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Neither do I. I don't think we can volunteer. The genes don't want to be discovered."

She stared at him as a shiver raised goose bumps on her arms. "Why not?" she asked in a low voice.

"I don't know."

"Eventually he'll find a way to get a sample," she said after a moment. "There has to be a way, even if he has to use force. Or bribery, like with Michael. If he hadn't tried to get the drop of blood then and there.... He probably would have succeeded after we were married. Then what?"

"I don't know. But I don't think you would have been allowed to marry him after he became a threat. Why did you say yes in the first place?"

She didn't even remember how she had answered that question when her aunt asked.

Slowly she said, "I kept waiting and waiting for something. I didn't know what it was. Then I thought you could wait all your life, but nothing ever happens."

He asked and I said yes."

"I never dated an eligible girl or woman in my life," Tony said softly.

"Apparently I didn't either."

His hand was on the table, palm up. With fascination she watched her own hand move, not because she was willing it to, or had even thought of moving it, but it reached out and came to rest in his hand, the first time they had touched each other. She closed her eyes hard and swallowed hard. His grip tightened and when she opened her eyes she saw that he had paled and his eyes were closed. He swallowed hard and opened his eyes.

"Sometimes," he said huskily, "something happens."

It was three o'clock in the morning of the happiest day of her life.

The End

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