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THE WEDDING PEOPLE

ALISON ESPACH



PHOENIX

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TUESDAY



The Opening Reception

The hotel looks exactly as Phoebe hoped. It sits on the edge of the cliff like an old and stately dog, patiently waiting for her arrival. She can't see the ocean behind it, but she knows it's there, the same way she could pull into her driveway and feel her husband in his office typing his manuscript.

Love was an invisible wire, connecting them always.

Phoebe steps out of the cab. A man in burgundy approaches with such seriousness, the moment feels as if it has been choreographed long ago. It makes her certain that what she is doing is right.

"Good evening," the man says. "Welcome to the Cornwall Inn. May I take your luggage?"

"I don't have any luggage," Phoebe says.

When she left St. Louis, it felt important to leave everything behind—the husband, the house, the luggage. It was time to move on, which she knew because that was what they had all agreed to last year at the end of the divorce hearing. Phoebe was so stunned by the finality of their conversation, by the way her husband said, "Okay, take care now," like he was the mailman wishing her well. She could not bring herself to do a single thing after except climb in bed and drink gin and tonics and listen to the sound of the refrigerator making ice. Not that there was anywhere to go. This was mid-lockdown, when she only left the house for gin and toilet paper and taught her virtual classes in the same black blouse every day because what else were people supposed to wear? By the time lockdown was over, she couldn't remember.

But now Phoebe stands before a nineteenth-century Newport hotel in an emerald silk dress, the only item in her closet she can honestly say she still loves, probably because it was the one thing she had never worn. She and her husband never did anything fancy enough for it. They were professors. They were easygoing. Relaxed. So comfortable by the fire with the little cat on their laps. They liked regular things, whatever was on tap, whatever was on TV, whatever was in the fridge,

whatever shirt looked the most normal, because wasn't that the point of clothing? To prove that you were normal? To prove that every day, no matter what, you were a person who could put on a shirt?

But that morning, before she got on the plane, Phoebe woke and knew she was no longer normal. Yet she made toast. Took a shower. Dried her hair. Gathered her lecture notes for her second day of the fall semester. Opened her closet and looked at all the clothes she once bought simply because they looked like shirts a professor should wear to work. Rows of solid-colored blouses, the female versions of things her husband wore. She pulled out a gray one, held it up in front of the mirror, but could not bring herself to put it on. Could not go to work and stand at the office printer and hold her face in a steady expression of interest while her colleague talked at length about the surprising importance of cheese in medieval theology.

Instead, she slipped on the emerald dress. The gold heels from her wedding. The thick pearls her husband had lain across her eyes like a blindfold on their wedding night. She got on a plane, drank an impressively good gin and tonic, and it was so nice and cool down her throat she hardly felt her blisters exiting the plane.

"Right this way, ma'am," the man in burgundy says.

Phoebe gives the man twenty dollars, and he seems surprised to be tipped for doing nothing, but to Phoebe it is not nothing. It's been a long time since a man has stood up immediately upon seeing her get out of a car. Years since her husband emerged from his office to greet her when she got home. It is nice to be stood for, to feel like her arrival is an important event. To hear her heels click as she walks up the old brick entranceway. She always wanted to make this sound, to feel grand and dignified when walking into a lecture hall, but her university was made of carpet.

She goes up the stairs, passes the big black lanterns and the granite lions guarding the doors. She walks through the curtains into the lobby, and this feels right, too. Like stepping back in time to an older world that probably was not better, but at least was heavily draped in velvet.

Then she sees the check-in line.

It's so long—the kind of line she expected to see at the airport, and

not at a Victorian mansion overlooking the ocean. Yet there the line is, stretching all the way through the lobby and past the historic oak staircase. The people in it look wrong, too—wearing windbreakers and jeans and sneakers. The normal shirts Phoebe used to wear. They look comically ordinary next to the velvet drapes and the gilt-framed portraits of bearded men lining the walls. They look like solid, modern people, tethered to the earth by their titanium-strength suitcases. Some are talking on their phones. Some are reading off their phones, like they're prepared to be in this line forever and maybe they are. Maybe they don't have families anymore, either. It's tempting for Phoebe to think like this now—to believe that everybody is as alone as she is.

But they're not alone. They stand in pairs of two or three, some with linked arms, some with single hands resting on a back. They're happy, which Phoebe knows because every so often one of them announces how happy they are.

"Jim!" an old man says, opening up his arms like a bear. "I'm so happy to see you!"

"Hey, Grandpa Jim," a younger man says back, because it seems practically everyone in line is named Jim. The Jims exchange violent hugs and hellos. "Where's Uncle Jim? Already on the course?"

Even the young woman working the front desk seems happy—so dedicated to looking each guest deeply in the eye, asking them why they're here, even though they all say the same thing, and so she replies with the same thing: "Oh, you're here for the wedding! How wonderful." She sounds genuinely excited about the wedding and maybe she is. Maybe she's still so young that she believes everybody else's wedding is somehow about her. That's how Phoebe always felt when she was young, worrying about what dress to wear for a month, even though she sat in the outer orbit of every wedding she attended.

Phoebe gets in line. She stands behind two young women carrying matching green dresses on their arms. One still wears her cheetah-print airplane neck pillow. The other has a bun so high the messy red tendrils dangle over her forehead as she flips through a *People* magazine. They are engaged in whispery debate over whose flight here was worse and how old is this hotel really and why are people so obsessed with Kylie

Jenner now? Are we supposed to care that she's hotter than Kim Kardashian?

"Is she?" Neck Pillow asks. "I've actually always thought they were both ugly in some way."

"I think that's true about all people, though," High Bun says. "All people have one thing that makes them ugly. Even people who are like, professionally hot. It's like the golden rule or something."

"I think you mean cardinal rule."

"Maybe." High Bun says that even though she understands she's baseline attractive, something that has taken her five years of therapy to admit, she knows that her gums show too much when she smiles.

"I've never noticed that," Neck Pillow says.

"That's because I don't smile all the way."

"This entire time I've known you, you haven't been fully smiling?"

"Not since high school."

The line moves forward, and Phoebe looks up at the coffered ceiling, which is so high, she starts to wonder how they clean it.

Another "Oh! You're here for the wedding!" and Phoebe begins to realize just how many wedding people there are in the lobby. It's unsettling, like in that movie *The Birds* her husband loved so much. Once she spots a few, she sees them everywhere. Wedding people lounging on the mauve velvet bench. Wedding people leaning on the built-in bookcase. Wedding people pulling luggage so futuristic it looks like it could survive a trip to the moon. The men in burgundy pile it all into high, sturdy towers of suitcases, right next to a large white sign that says WELCOME TO THE WEDDING OF LILA AND GARY.

"Your rule is definitely not true about Lila, though," Neck Pillow says. "I mean, I seriously can't think of one way she's ugly."

"That's true," High Bun says.

"Remember when she was chosen to be the bride in our fashion show senior year?"

"Oh yeah. Sometimes I forget about that."

"How can you forget about that? I think about how weird it was once a week."

"You mean because our guidance counselor insisted on walking down the aisle with her?"

"I mean more like, some people are just born to be brides."

"I actually think our guidance counselor is coming to the wedding."

"That's weird. But good. Then I'll actually know someone at this wedding," Neck Pillow says.

"I know. I pretty much don't know anyone anymore," High Bun says.

"I know, ever since the pandemic, I'm like, okay, I guess I just have no friends now."

"Right? The only person I know now is basically my mom."

They laugh and then trade war stories of their terrible flights here and Phoebe does her best to ignore them, to keep her eyes focused on the magnificence of the lobby. But it's hard. Wedding people are much louder than regular people.

She closes her eyes. Her feet begin to ache, and she wonders for the first time since she left home if she should have brought a pair of sensible shoes. She has so many lined up in her closet, being navy, doing nothing.

"So what do you know about the groom?" Neck Pillow whispers.

High Bun only knows what Lila briefly told her over the phone and what she learned from stalking him on the internet.

"Gary is actually kind of boring to stalk," High Bun says, then whispers something about him being a Gen X doctor with a receding hairline so minor, it seems like there's a good chance he'll die with most of his hair. "How did you *not* stalk him after Lila asked you to be a bridesmaid?"

"I've been off the internet," Neck Pillow says. "My therapist demanded it."

"For two years?"

"They've been engaged that long?"

"He proposed just before the pandemic."

They inch forward in line again.

"God—Look at this wallpaper!"

Neck Pillow hopes that her room faces the ocean. "Staring at the ocean makes you five percent happier. I read a study."

Finally, they are quiet. In their silence, Phoebe is grateful. She can think again. She closes her eyes and pretends she's looking at her husband across the kitchen, admiring his laugh. Phoebe always loved his laugh, the way it sounded from afar. Like a foghorn in the distance, reminding her of where to go. But then one of the Jims yells, "Here comes the bride!"

"Jim!" the bride says.

The bride steps out of the elevator and into the lobby wearing a glittering sash that says BRIDE so there is no confusion. Not that there could be any confusion. She is clearly the bride; she walks like the bride and smiles like the bride and twirls bride-ishly when she approaches High Bun and Neck Pillow in line, because the bride gets to do things like this for two or three days. She is a momentary celebrity, the reason everybody has paid thousands of dollars to come here.

"I'm so happy to see you!" the bride cries. She opens her arms for a hug, gift bags hanging from her wrists like bracelets made of woven seagrass.

Neck Pillow and High Bun were right. Phoebe can't identify one thing that is ugly about the bride, which might be the one thing that's ugly about her. She looks exactly how she is supposed to look—somehow both willowy and petite in her white summer dress, with no trace of any undergarment beneath. Her blond hair is arranged in such a romantic and complicated tangle of braids, Phoebe wonders how many tutorials she watched on Instagram.

"You look beautiful," High Bun says.

"Thank you, thank you," the bride says. "How were your flights?"

"Uneventful," Neck Pillow lies.

They do not mention the surprise flock of seagulls or the emergency landing because the bride is here. It is their job for the entire wedding to lie to the bride, to have loved their journeys here, to be thrilled by the prospect of a Newport wedding after two years of doing practically nothing.

"When do we meet Gary?" High Bun asks.

"He'll be at the reception later, obviously."

"I mean, obviously," Neck Pillow says, and they laugh.

The bride hands out the seagrass bags (with "emergency supplies") and the women gasp as they pull out full-sized bottles of liquor. All different kinds, the bride explains. Things she picked up when she and Gary were traveling in Europe last month.

Scotch. Rioja. Vodka.

"Oh, how fancy," High Bun says.

The bride smiles, proud of herself. Proud to be the kind of woman who thinks of other, less fortunate women while traveling Europe with her doctor fiancé. Proud that she returned a woman who knows what to drink and not to drink.

"Here you go," the bride says to Phoebe with such intimacy it makes Phoebe feel like she is a long-lost cousin from childhood. Like maybe once upon a time, they played checkers together in their grandfather's dodgy basement or something. She hands Phoebe one of the bags, then gives her a really strong hug, as if she has been practicing bridal hugs the way Phoebe's husband used to practice professorial handshakes before interviews. "Just a little something to say thank you for coming all this way. We know it wasn't easy to get here!"

It was actually very easy for Phoebe to get here. She didn't stop the mail or line up a kid in the neighborhood to water the garden or get Bob to cover her classes like she always did before vacations. She didn't even clean up the crumbs from her toast on the counter. She just put on the dress and walked out of the house and left in a way she's never left anything before.

"Oh, I . . ." Phoebe begins to say.

"I know, I know what you're thinking," the bride says. "Who the hell drinks chocolate wine?"

The bride is good. A very good bride. It's startling to be spoken to like this after two years of intense isolation, of saying, "What is literature?" to a sea of black boxes on her computer, and none of the boxes knew, or none of the boxes cared, or none of the boxes were even listening. "What is literature?" Phoebe asked, again and again, until not even she knew the answer.

And now to be given a hug and a bag of chocolate wine for no reason. To be looked in the eye by a beautiful stranger after so many years

of her husband not looking her in the eye. It makes Phoebe want to cry. It makes her wish she were here for the wedding.

"But it's better than you think," the bride says. "Germans love it, apparently."

The bride smiles and Phoebe sees a bit of food stuck between her two front teeth. There it is: the one thing that makes the bride ugly today.

"Next?" the front desk woman calls.

It takes a moment for Phoebe to realize it's her turn. She sees High Bun and Neck Pillow already walking into the elevator. She takes the bag, thanks the bride, and walks toward the front desk.

"You must be here for the wedding, too?" the woman asks. Her name is Pauline.

"No," Phoebe admits. "I'm not."

"Oh," Pauline says. She sounds disappointed. Confused, actually. Her eyes flicker to the bride in the distance. "I thought everybody here was here for the wedding."

"I am definitely not here for the wedding. But I made a reservation this morning."

"Oh, I believe you," Pauline says, typing as she speaks. "I just think that someone here has made a very big mistake. It might have even been me! You'll have to excuse us, we're a little understaffed since Covid."

Phoebe nods. "Labor shortage."

"Exactly," Pauline says. "Okay, what's your name?"

"Phoebe Stone."

This is true. This is her name, the name she has come to think of as hers. Yet it feels like she's lying when she says it now, because it's her husband's family's name. Whenever she hears herself say it, it somehow pushes her outside of her body. It makes her see herself from up above like a bird, the way the wedding people must see her, and she's sure from up there, they can spot the one thing that is ugly about her, too: her hair. Something should be done about that hair. She completely forgot to comb it this morning.

"Here you are," Pauline says. She is so focused now on giving quality

service she does not even look up when one of the wedding people walks through the doors and slips on the floor behind Phoebe.

"Uncle Jim! Oh my God! Are you okay?" the bride shouts.

Uncle Jim is not okay. He is on the floor, yelling something about his ankle, and also the floor, which is a terrible floor, he says, not to mention, total bullshit. The men in burgundy gather around him and start apologizing to him about the floor, which yes, yes, they agree is the worst floor, even though Phoebe can see it's some kind of Italian marble.

"There it is," Pauline says. Pauline is a hero. "You're in the Roaring Twenties."

"Is each room a decade?" Phoebe asks. She pictures each room having its own hairstyle. Its own war. Its own set of stock market triumphs and failures. Its own definition of feminism.

"You know, I don't actually know what all the themes are!" Pauline says. "I'm new. They seem kind of random to me. But that's a great question."

She opens the drawer, searches for the right key.

"It's our penthouse suite," she says. "The only one with a proper view of the ocean."

It feels practiced, as if Pauline whispers something to each guest to make them feel special. *It's our only room with a desk from the Vanderbilts' family home. It's our only room with an infinite supply of toilet paper.*

"Wonderful," Phoebe says.

"So what brings you to the Cornwall Inn?"

Even though she knew this question was coming, Phoebe is startled by it. When she imagined herself here, she didn't imagine herself having to speak to anybody. She is, simply, out of practice.

"This is my happy place," Phoebe blurts out. It's not the entire truth, but it's not a lie.

"Oh, so you've stayed with us before?" Pauline asks.

"No," Phoebe says.

Two years ago, Phoebe saw the hotel advertised in some magazine, the

kind she only ever read while waiting in the fertility clinic. She looked at the pictures of the Victorian canopy bed, overlooking the ocean, and she thought, Who actually plans their vacations by looking through a travel magazine? She felt angry at these people, not that she knew anybody who did things like that. Yet days later, when her therapist asked her to close her eyes and describe her happy place, she pictured herself on that canopy bed because she could only imagine herself happy in a place she had never been, a bed she had never slept in.

"Well, this is a happy place, indeed," Pauline says.

Phoebe picks up the key. It's already been too much conversation. Too much pretending to be normal, and she is not paying eight hundred dollars just to stay here and pretend to be normal. She could have easily done that at home. She feels herself grow weary, but Pauline has so many more questions. Would she like to add a spa package? Would she like to book a visit with their in-house tarot reader? Would she like a normal pillow or a coconut pillow?

"What's a coconut pillow?" Phoebe asks.

"A pillow," Pauline says, "with coconut in it."

"Are pillows better that way?" she asks. "With coconut inside them?"

That's what her husband would have asked. A bad habit of hers, a product of being married for a decade—always imagining what her husband might say. Even when he's not around. Especially when he's not around. Phoebe didn't think she'd end up being a woman like this. But if the last few years have taught her anything, it's that you really can't ever know who you are going to become.

"Pillows are much better that way," Pauline says. "Trust me. We'll have one sent right up."

Phoebe walks into the elevator and feels relief when the doors start to close. Finally, to be getting away from the wedding people. To be doing something for a change. To have a key to a place that is not her house.

"Hold the elevator!" a woman calls out.

Phoebe knows it's the bride before she sees her. She yells like she deserves this elevator. But nobody deserves anything. Not even the bride. Phoebe presses the button to close the doors, but the bride slides

a hand between them. They don't bounce open like they're supposed to, maybe because the Cornwall was built in 1864. An old hotel has no mercy, not even for the bride.

"Fuck!" the bride shouts.

"Oh, God!" Phoebe says. She pries the doors back open, then stares at the bride's hand in disbelief. "You're bleeding."

The bride holds up the gash across the back of her knuckles like a child and takes the tissue Phoebe offers without saying thank you. Phoebe presses the button, and the doors close again. The women don't say anything as the bride politely bleeds into the tissue and they begin to ascend. Phoebe hears the bride try to steady her breath, watches the tissue darken.

"I'm really sorry," Phoebe says. "I didn't realize that would happen."

"Oh, I'm sure it'll be fine," the bride struggles to say. She clears her throat. "So, are you in Gary's family?"

"No," Phoebe says.

"Are you in my family?"

"You don't know who's in your own family?" Phoebe asks. The question makes Phoebe want to laugh, and it's a strange feeling. The first time she has wanted to laugh in months. Years maybe. Because how does the bride not know her own family? Phoebe knew everybody in her family. She had no choice. It was so small. Just Phoebe and her father, tiny enough to fit inside his old fishing cabin.

"I have a very large family," the bride says, like it's a big problem.

"Well, I'm not in your family," Phoebe clarifies.

"But you have to be in one of our families."

"No," Phoebe says. "I'm not in any family."

It had been a crushing realization, one that started slowly after the divorce, and got stronger with each passing holiday, until she woke up this morning to such a quiet house, she finally understood what it meant to have no family. She understood it would always be like this—just her, in bed, alone. No longer even the sound of her cat, Harry, meowing at the door.

"But everybody is here for the wedding. I made sure of it." The bride