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As Is

Bruce Jhonson

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As Is

Chuck will be home soon. It's almost five. You can hear the clock tick. Wendy sits at the kitchen table with two women, sharing a smoke and exchanging pleasantries, trying not to think of how furious he will be when he sees she's sold her dress.

The bride-to-be's name is Mel, short for Melanie, and she accepts a beer and a cigarette gratefully. She smells like velvety, flower-scented lotions, and her smile fills the room when she talks about her husband-to-be. "He's a hairdresser, but I swear he's straight," she says. She laughs, covering her mouth like a child who's just let some secret slip.

Tammi doesn't smoke a cigarette, or drink a beer. Tammi's all business. Everything she says is matter-of-fact, like a typewriter key stamping a letter to the page. "We should really be going," Tammi says.

"That's fine," Wendy says. "The dress is in the garage. I hope you like it."

But no one moves. No one, even the bride-to-be, really wants to see this unused wedding dress hanging from a plastic hook Chuck's hammered into the garage wall.

Wendy lives in a dying town an hour's drive outside Lincoln, NE. There's a post office, a bar/restaurant, a small cluster of homes, and Chuck's store. Chuck grew up here. Her house is small and run-down, but she bought it for almost nothing. When she looks around, she sees the way she wants it to look someday: a new coat of paint, modern appliances, marble countertops, and windows without rusted-shut locks. She doesn't notice the warped kitchen tile, the cigarette burns in the carpet, or the faint smell of piss that reminds her the previous owners had cats. At least, she tries not to.

Chuck will be home soon. But it would have been rude not to invite them in to have a seat. She posted the dress to Craigslist on a whim one night, sure no one would want it. She was furious because Chuck, her former fiancé, had made her cry when he yelled at her for shrinking his favorite yellow shirt. He's a wide, looming human being, with shoulders hunched like those of a cave man, and when he got like that his raised voice was the bark of a wild animal.

He never hit her, but damned if he didn't sometimes look like he wanted to. She posted the ad only as a gesture, a threat to remind him she'd kicked him out once and she'd do it again. But then her email filled up with messages from interested buyers willing to make the drive out from Lincoln, and she decided to see what she could get.

And now that they're here, she's not so sure she wants to sell it after all.

Over another beer, she learns Mel and her husband-to-be were together only a few months before their engagement. That they can't wait to make their lives together. She shows Wendy the ring, so Wendy can tell her how beautiful it is. It's princess-cut and molded in white gold, the diamond set shallow in the band.

"So why exactly are you selling this dress?" Tammi asks. "If it's so beautiful."

Mel shoots Tammi a look that could peel paint off the wall. Wendy smiles. She's feeling okay now, actually, a bit bubbly with drink. This is just what she needed. It's been a long time since she let herself just sit down and have a couple beers. Soon she'll be ready to sell the dress. She tells Tammi: "Sometimes things just don't work out the way you expect. Chuck and I had a rough patch a bit back, and he moved his things out. We're taking things slower this time around."

Hearing things described this way, the way she's heard Chuck describe them, they sound perfectly reasonable. She lights another cigarette, sucks the smoke deep into her lungs, and holds it there.

The former spouses-to-be are nowhere near marriage now. Last winter, while Chuck was in the other room clipping his toenails—a small, intimate act he still could not bring himself to do in front of her—she flipped through his phone's gallery looking for pictures of them together. She wanted to frame one as a surprise. What she found instead were pictures of the new stock girl at his store. There the girl was, couldn't be more than nineteen, posing in her underwear for Chuck's tiny camera, bare flesh white and pixelated.

Almost as an afterthought, Wendy adds: "We need the money. I need the money. And as far as secrets between couples go, this one will be pretty minor."

Tammi smiles. "So, Chuck doesn't know." Wendy can see Tammi relishes this new bit of info, sucking the flavor from it like the last bite of a fine steak.

"No."

"Are you going to tell him?" Mel asks. "I don't know if I like sneaking around like this."

Wendy stabs out her cigarette. "We'll see how you feel a little closer to the wedding," she says.

Wendy thinks she hears Chuck's key enter the lock of the front door, and her nerves turn tense. It's like every muscle is seized by a tiny spasm. Then she realizes it's only the sound of the tree branch scratching against the front door in the wind, the one he keeps saying he'll trim. The branches are dry and leafless. It's turned Autumn on her.

"I might try something harder," Wendy says. She goes to the counter, grabs Chuck's whiskey, and pours herself a small glass. It's only five thirty, the setting sun just starting to cast pink light through the blinds, but what the hell. She holds up the bottle. "Ladies?"

"We really ought to be going," Mel says.

"I wouldn't mind a glass," Tammi says. "A small one," she adds when Mel clears her throat.

Wendy sits back down and slides Tammi her whiskey. "Why should you be going?" she says to Mel, her tongue acquiring a cottony feel in her mouth. "You think your man will be mad you're gone so long?" She twirls her glass slowly on the rough surface of the tablecloth, leaving a small puddle of expanding water.

Tammi sips her whisky. "What do you think Chuck will do when he finds out?"

"I'm hoping he doesn't," Wendy says. "Not for a while at least. But like I said, we need the money."

"All due respect," Tammy says, "but if you didn't want to be caught I think we'd be on our way home by now." Her eyes are slightly glazed, her lips smacking a bit after each sip of whiskey. Mel turns red, and tells her to take it easy.

But maybe Tammi's right. Maybe that's the only reason anybody gets caught at anything: because they want to be.

"Darryl and I never keep secrets," Mel says.

Wendy laughs drily. "Honey, he's got his secrets. You just haven't had time to uncover them."

Mel shakes her head stubbornly, her tightly pressed lips forming a thin white slit. "You're just being bitter," she says quietly. "There's nothing he wouldn't tell me."

Wendy stares down at her drink, twirling it slowly on the tablecloth. There're so many things she wants to explain to Mel, among them how secrets are sometimes things you keep from yourself (not others) and that sometimes men need more than they know. She gives her thoughts a second to settle. "There's going to be a time that you'll love whatever last secrets you have," she says finally. "That they'll be all that's left that's just yours."

The other women glance at each other, and she's suddenly aware how strange she must seem to them, sitting at her hideous tablecloth, desperate for fresh sets of female ears. She drains her last bit of whisky and sets the glass back on the table. It's watered down now, bearing only the faintest remnants of taste. "Let's just get on with it," she says. "You came here for my dress, after all."

The two women stand on the crack-covered driveway and watch Wendy throw all her weight into lifting the old garage door. It opens with a screech and the smell of motor oil and rat droppings envelops them.

The garage is a wasteland of old, unused junk only half visible in the fading light, much of it from the previous owner. Wendy was so excited for the deal she got on the place she agreed to dispose of it herself, which of course she hasn't gotten around to. Since then she and Chuck have added their own piles to it—a couple broken heels, some faded fashion magazines, cigar boxes filled with receipts, a curling iron he swore he'd fix, a bin of worn sports equipment, cans of paint covered with cobwebs, and albums upon albums of faded photos.

And in the front corner, a prominent place that immediately pulls at the eye, a white wedding dress in a garment bag dangling unevenly off the wall. Mel doesn't let herself look. The three women hang back, just outside the upper lip of the garage entrance. Even to Wendy the dark garage seems somewhat sinister, like something ancient they're not meant to disturb.

"If you don't want to sell it," Mel says, "that's okay."

Tammi says, "Just because you wouldn't sell the dress doesn't mean she shouldn't."

Wendy walks forward and flips the light switch. So, here's her life, or what it's come to, piled in dusty heaps. She resists the urge to pretend this evening never happened, to just back out and shut the door and shoo these women away so she can let the heaps grow in peace.

"Come on in," she says instead. "It's too late to turn back now."

While Tammi and Mel watch, she makes a space to place the dress. There's a workbench buried here beneath old clothes, tools, cans of paint, and half a vice grip. She moves these things to the floor, using all her strength on the vice grip, and covers the bench with a bedsheet. "I guess we'd better lay it out," she says, breathing heavy, still not turning to face the women or the dress.

She's not sure what she's afraid of, what would be worse. Maybe the dress is still beautiful, and she won't be able to sell. Maybe it's hideous, was always hideous, and these women will laugh at her. Or maybe it's neither, not beautiful and not ugly, an utterly forgettable dress you might see on the rack at any bridal store. Nothing uniquely hers after all.

Mel takes the dress off its hook and lays it on the surface Wendy's made, a motion delicate as a mother placing her child to bed down in its crib. Light glints off the thick plastic garment bag. Wendy grabs a box cutter and slices it open, careless now, laying the tatters to the side. She's half-drunk and just wants this thing over. No time to be neat about it.

No one says anything at first. The dress, stark white and slightly disheveled, lays there lifeless. Seen here, surrounded by old trash, at first it seems unbearably plain. A testament to how plain all wedding dresses must be, torn off the bridal store rack and away from whatever magic might exist surrounded by the flash of professional photographers and family members dabbing their teary eyes. Laid out like this it's just a piece of white, strapless cloth, nothing more and nothing less.

Then Mel starts to smile. She picks it up and turns away from Wendy, holding it in front of her so Tammi can see what it will look like with her head peeking out. Then she turns to Wendy. The garment bag falls to the garage floor.

On Mel, the dress has somehow snapped back to life. Her face beams above it. Wendy faintly hears her say What do you think? hugging the dress to her skin. She can somehow sense Mel feeling the wedding band slide onto her finger. She senses Mel able now to taste the rich velvety wedding cake.

"Not bad," Tammi says, in a voice like she's sure Mel will turn it down.

"It's perfect," Mel says triumphantly.

Like new wedding dress, the ad said. Four hundred dollars. Unworn and as is. It's expected, Wendy knows, that buyers will haggle. But it's late now, Wendy realizes with a start.

"What time is it?" she asks. The back of her throat still burns with whisky.

The women shrug. They're discussing the frill of the lace, and the way the dress will look fitted to Mel's figure. But of course, Mel will try the dress on, to make sure it can fit with just a few alterations. It looks like it will.

"It's not past six, is it?" Wendy asks hoarsely.

Mel frowns. "I suppose it probably is."

Tammi pulls her cell phone from her purse and confirms. "Six fifteen," she says. "What time will Chuck be home?"

"God, any time. Any damn time now."

The women glance at each other. "I guess we can make the drive back this weekend if we have to," Tammi says skeptically. "I mean, she has to try it on before we can pay."

Mel's smile falters. Her eyes plead with Tammi, but she nods resolutely. She puts the dress back on the piled plastic and starts to wrap it around the dress, but it's ripped irreparably. She gives up, and puts her hands in her pockets. "I mean, if that's the way it has to be," she says. "You won't sell it, will you? There aren't any other buyers? You'll keep it safe?"

The whole bag's ripped open, tattered about the dress. What if Chuck comes outside to the garage? He'll see it here, the tattered bag, and ask what happened. The dress is practically the first thing you see when you open the

garage, and he keeps saying he's going to clean it. It was foolish to think he wouldn't notice the dress, missing or opened or otherwise.

He'll never let her sell it, she realizes. He might hide the damn thing. Out of sheer, dumb animal pride if nothing else. But she needs the money. What's more, the dress practically danced on Mel's skin, popping like a champagne cork and sparkling like a new bride's smile. Wendy knows now it will never do this for her again.

"Take it," she says, her fear and sentimentality turning to blind defiance. "Just take it."

Inside, after the women have left, after Wendy pushed away their money and protests and accepted Mel's teary hug and her hairdresser boyfriend's business card so they could be in touch, Mel looks at the clock to confirm its past six thirty. Chuck will be home soon.

The garage door is shut, the remains of the garment bag on their way to Lincoln with the dress and the bride-to-be, but Wendy knows it's only a matter of time. She glances out the window. He should have been home by now. Maybe he just won't come home at all, Wendy thinks hopefully. But deep in her gut, she knows he will, and she knows she'll be here to let him in, take his boots, and fix the two of them something for dinner.

She stands in the bathroom, and looks down at the hairdresser's business card. Darryl Hansen. 402, etc. What would Chuck do if he found this? What would he think? She could either tell the truth—and let Chuck know how to find Mel, how to find the dress—or, even worse, let him just wonder who this man was.

Besides, Wendy wants no part of Mel's happiness, not really. She could only dampen the bride-to-be's spirits, tamp them out like the flame of a candle. And what's more, that candle is bound to flicker out eventually anyway, and Wendy doesn't want to be there to see it.

Better not to take the chance. It's always better not to take the chance. So, Wendy rips the card into as many tiny pieces as she can manage and flushes them. Then she goes to the kitchen table, pours herself another glass of whisky, and waits for the former husband-to-be to come home.

About Bruce Johnson

Bruce Johnson is an MFA candidate at University of Nevada, Las Vegas. He is currently living in Santiago, Chile, in conjunction with the program's international component. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Cutthroat*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Bartleby Snopes*.