

“Rehearsals” by Leslie Jamison, from *The Nervous Breakdown* (June, 2011)

Weddings are holiness and booze, sweat under the dress, sweet icing in the mouth. A whaler’s church in the afternoon, sunlit and salted, gives way to the drunken splendor of a barn-ish-space—who knows the names or categories of these spaces, where we gather to celebrate other people’s marriages?—and an entire island is suddenly *yours*, yours and everyone’s, the whole fucking thing. You feel the lift of wine in you, you feel the lift of wine in everyone, and everyone is in agreement—not to believe in love, exactly, but to want to. This, you can do. You dance with a stranger and think, *we have this in common, this wanting to believe*. In what, again? In the possibility that two people could actually make each other happy, not just today but on a thousand days they can’t yet see.

Weddings are hassle. Hassle is spending money you don’t have to celebrate the lives of people who have more money than you do. Hassle is not finding a cab at 5 pm in Manhattan because it’s 5 pm and all the cab drivers are switching shifts and everyone else in Manhattan is looking for a cab and everyone who isn’t looking for a cab knows better than to try—because it’s 5 pm! And the drivers are switching shifts! Hassle is getting stuck in traffic on the FDR and even worse traffic on the Brooklyn Bridge, listening to your friend’s boyfriend talk about getting his pilot’s license. Hassle is finding yourself booked on a roundtrip ticket Tulsa-to-Boston and wondering, *how did this happen?* Hassle is driving to Tulsa in the middle of the night. Hassle is taking the PATH train to Hoboken at two-in-the-morning, shoulder-to-shoulder with the drunkest Bridge-and-Tunnel crowd, thinking, *Bridge-and-Tunnel is such a demeaning phrase*, and also thinking, *these people are really drunk!*

Weddings are a plane, a train, a bus, and then a longish wait at the Woods Hole ferry station, where you pause at a little café to check your email, and find your new boyfriend left you a note to tell you how he just talked about you, for the first time, with his father. This makes the whole wedding feel swollen with possibility. You’re part of it. You’re someone who might someday be loved. You’re in the game.

Weddings are getting dropped at a post-office on a dusty road in the middle of the Catskills and waiting for a ride to the lodge. There’s always a lodge. There’s always cocktail hour at the lodge, and group activities at the lodge, and a hurried hunt for a bridesmaid’s missing shoes at the lodge. We go

distances to celebrate the love of people we love, and sometimes it hurts the heart to stand alone on an empty road and think, *What am I doing here?*

Everyone talks about weddings as beginnings but the truth is they are also endings. They give a horizon of closure to things that have been slowly dissolving for years: flirtations, friendships, shared innocence, shared rootlessness, shared loneliness.

Weddings are about being single and wondering about being in love, and being in love and wondering about being in love—what it's like for other people, and whether it hurts as much as it sometimes does for you. At every wedding, all of a sudden, all bets are off and everyone is asking when your boyfriend is planning to propose, and you are watching your boyfriend talk to the girl at the cheese table, and the wine in you wants to fight, and the wine in you thinks, *you will never love me like I need you to.*

You thought you knew drunk crying before you went to weddings. You'd gotten tipsy on cheap wine in the middle of the afternoon, alone, and read Rilke and cried. But you didn't know this kind of drunk crying: alone in the bathroom at your brother's wedding, or your second brother's wedding, and you couldn't even *explain* it properly—because you were happy for them, you were, but also feeling something else, only you'd gotten too drunk to remember what it was, and now you were sad because there was a kind of crying that was okay, and another kind of crying that wasn't—a violent, angry crying—and without quite noticing you'd crossed from one to the other.

Sometimes the best weddings are the weddings of strangers. You are only a date; no particular feelings are required. You cry as a groom remembers his mother, who died of cancer years before—even though you've never met this guy, he was in a band with your boyfriend way back, but you see the way he looks at his wife and you think his mother must have loved him well. You step outside the barn and it's sunset in early June and there are fields of something under the light, and you think of that Sting song, and you feel your boyfriend's arms wrap around you from behind—he only has one suit, you know its crispness well—and this moment might be a little too sweet, like wedding cake, if you knew it wasn't going to be broken immediately by something else, the ambient noise of so many almost-strangers gathered—one of his lesbian friends explaining her bid for a wedding announcement in the Times, or an unhappy man in ill-fitted tails strolling by to offer you another

pig-in-a-blanket made with grass-fed meat. At weddings, you call out your most primal, shameful, dreams—for some kind of life you learned to love in magazines—and feed them little quiches, these dreams, and hope that these will be enough.

You wonder what they feel, people who get married, at the precise moment they do. Is it only bliss, or also fear? You hope for fear. Mostly, you can't imagine feeling anything else. Except for, at moments, you feel the edge of a man's suit against your back, familiar, his hand on your arm, his voice in your ear.

By *you*, of course, I mean *I*. I wonder about fear. I don't want to be afraid.

At thirteen I took a flight from Los Angeles to San Francisco and wondered what my father loved in the woman he was about to marry, and what he'd loved in my mother, and what he *still* loved in my mother, if anything, and how these circles might overlap, if laid across one another. At the airport, my mother hugged me and tried her best, which was badly, to pretend she didn't feel betrayed that I'd chosen to go, that she wasn't buckling under the weight of thirty years' ending. Or she was going to buckle, once I left. I could see it. I took it with me.

At the wedding, I cried what my mother hadn't cried in front of me. I cried in a room full of the relatives of my father's new wife. I was that terrible step-daughter, the one from terrible movies, *making a scene* in front of everyone. I sat in the corner of a dim banquet hall and everyone else in that banquet hall was Chinese, or married to someone who was, like my father was going to be, except for my brothers—who tried, really did, to pat me on the back so I wouldn't feel so sad. They didn't have wives yet, then. I didn't want anyone to look at me, was part of why I started crying even harder—which of course must have seemed like just the opposite: a cry for everyone's attention. That afternoon is blurred for me, the way tears blur light.

When my parents separated, my father moved into a dark apartment in a modern white building on Sunset Blvd. I remember he got an ice cream maker so we could make ice cream together. I remember the ice cream tasted like crystals. I remember finding a photograph of a beautiful Asian woman with a face dimly lit but smiling. I remember all his pieces of art were propped against the walls. I remember thinking the whole place felt incredibly lonely. I remember feeling sorry for him.

Months later, when he told me he was getting married, to a woman I was just about to meet, I thought of the woman in the photograph and realized that his loneliness had lied to me. It wasn't his but mine, my own loneliness reflected back in the cage of his new life, a space in which I felt I had no place.

When I cried at his wedding, I cried for the betrayal of that dim apartment—how I'd imagined him lonely, when in fact he was happy, and how my sympathy had made a fool of me in the end.