

## BRIDE OF CHRIST JENDI REITER

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BRIDES UNDER ARCHWAYS OF CREAMY WHITE FLOWERS. A Black and white at the ballroom window, in soft cinematic light, pressing a pensive hand to the rain-streaked glass. Ballerina blonds, black prom queens who wore their ambitions as tastefully as a string of pearls, but also the average girls, those normally afflicted with plump torsos and ethnic noses, now lavished with the same beautician's care, grateful for their single day of admission to the pantheon. A democracy of brides. And what of their accessories, the grooms? Banished to the back pages, in the cheesy honeymoon-suite ads. Whatever the magazine, the progression was as scripted as the parade of dignitaries at a coronation. First the gowns, then the housewares, then the mothers and girlfriends in their coordinated pastels, and finally the happy couple taking a bubble bath in a giant champagne glass in the Poconos.

It was a ready-to-wear fairy tale Laura Sue Selkirk could share with her students at Greenbriar Academy, the boarding school where she'd worked as a guidance counselor for the last five years. Some instinct in them ran deeper than the cheerleaders' rhinestone Playboy belts or the bookworms' genderless flannels. Girls were girls. The genes said babies and wedding cake, and you denied them at your peril. How different from the women in Julian's magazines, stacked on the other side of her coffee table, which until recently had been the main objects of her girls' fascination. The women her brother photographed for *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* were hard, untouchable beauties. They drifted from Rome to New Orleans with no ballast. They never smiled, as the brides did, in anticipation of a future where they wouldn't be the only one in the picture.

The brides had families, but where were their fathers and brothers? Offstage writing checks, drafting fond, over-long speeches on scraps of paper that would fit in their suit pockets. The first time she'd seen her eldest brother Carter taunt little Brian, his four-year-

old, for crying over a T-ball bruise, she'd wanted to shake him, no, slap him, scratch his face, crying, *Don't you remember?* But she could no more shake him than a squirrel could sway an oak tree. Her role was to be the pretty little princess baby, who toddled into the grownups' parlor and made the shouting stop. She was the flower in the gun barrel; you wouldn't shoot a flower, would you?

Houses were going up all over Atlanta. Houses for brides, with the green-and-ivory Selkirk Builders sign on their clipped, modest lawns. Daddy had taken a beating in the stock market, but the banks still smiled on him and his partners. Homes stayed strong, and they would carry the economy through. She wouldn't live in one of them. Tad Bingham, her boyfriend, now her fiancé, already owned a downtown condo with a sunken living room and the tiniest little strip of terrace with a white iron railing. Laura Sue liked to stand on that flimsy perch on a windy day and pretend she was at the prow of a great ship sailing out, out into forever.

*Brightly beams our Father's mercy, from his lighthouse ever more . . .* Tad's father was the pastor of a large Baptist church with glass walls and mauve carpeting. The lights were bright and they sang with their hands in the air. Burly men in Braves T-shirts had tears in their eyes when they talked about the Cross. You thought you knew people, Laura Sue discovered, you thought you could sort them into housewives, mechanics, brokers, geezers, ladies and gentlemen, winners and losers, and then suddenly the old lady with bobby pins in her hair and a dress like a sofa cushion would tell you that God saw your heart—yes, yours, that old box of unflattering snapshots—and you didn't have to keep the lid on anymore.

Naturally her mother thought it was all too declass . Well, Bitsy could take her St. John Knits and Tiffany cocktail shaker and . . . Laura Sue didn't finish the thought. There were lots of thoughts she'd trained herself not to finish, and she didn't expect that would ever change. Like when she was sitting in church on her padded folding chair next to Tad, holding his big warm hand, and her eyes wandered to the youth pastor, whose black hair flopped soulfully over his brow when he played the guitar. Putting on an engagement ring caused all the neurons in her brain to fire off their last million bursts of alternate lives, popgun sparks that she knew better than to fan into flame. She wouldn't trade Tad for anything, but this abundance could drive her a little crazy. She needed a hundred husbands, fathers, and brothers to surround her in a football huddle of safe and saved men.

Her younger brother, Julian, didn't realize that that was all he needed, too. Julian had to drag everything down to the level of bodies wanting, sweating, posing. He'd visited their church eight months ago, at Easter, down from New York on vacation after a grueling six weeks of runway shows at home and in Europe. "I've given up sleep for Lent," he said, unrepentant as ever. She sat rigid between him and Tad, her arm protectively around her

favorite brother, but she was intensely nervous about how he might see the congregation. Would he say something sardonic afterwards about the old men's powder-blue blazers and white loafers, or the overweight women's bouffants? She forgave Julian's snobbery less the more she noticed it in herself. But he sang heartily with the rest and was polite, even shy, during the coffee hour. Oh, how she smiled at him, the morning-after smile of the alcoholic's daughter, squiring him around to all her new friends and pretending he was fine fine *fine*. Because Julian saw into her heart too, knew her fears as she knew his, and took up the old pattern of protecting each other by pretending there was no danger at all.

She'd always assumed Daddy was wrong about them. As a girl, she was Bitsy's responsibility. The boys were the ones who reflected on him. All she had to do was keep her legs shaved and her hair its natural auburn, graduate from a junior college and not get pregnant till she turned twenty-one. This was enough to consider herself a righteous individual. So she watched from her safe harbor as Carter became a pint-sized copy of his father, like the bulldog puppy who toddled after Spike on the *Tom & Jerry* cartoons, and Julian became secretive, allowing himself only the weaknesses of too much appetite, not the deep wells of emotion that had led Daddy to brand him a sissy long before any of the kids had known what a sexual preference was.

Tad was uncomfortable around him, she could tell. Was he afraid her brother would leap on him and plant a big flaming kiss on his lips in front of his Promise Keepers buddies? This was the unspoken bargain the men of her new extended family had made. In exchange for the freedom to weep in each other's arms, to slap each other's rear ends after a touch-football game, to sing love songs to a Jesus whom Laura Sue had only ever known as a dusty, emaciated statue, but who to them was the most loyal and forgiving of friends—in exchange for all this, they had to be absolutely clear that they were not *ho-mo-sexual*. Whereas the Selkirks artfully hid their emotions and eccentricities like the fingerbone of St. Denis that Grandmere Dupuis claimed was concealed in her gold-handled cane, which she'd brandished to spook Carter when he was naughty.

*I saw the light, I saw the light, no more darkness, no more night . . .* Laura Sue longed to slam the door on the whole twisted history of her family and emerge simple and clean, without secrets. But once when she had casually referred to her brother's "boyfriend" (even that still a whitewash, knowing by now that Julian's relationships had a shorter shelf life than his photos), Tad's expression had turned stiff and pained. She loved him so much that for a few seconds she felt sorry first of all for him, because she had ensnared him in the conflict of loyalties that was her habitual mode of being. They were at a potluck at the home of his aunt, who after a confused silence had smiled forgivingly and gone on ladling out egg salad. However kind they were, Laura Sue felt the heat of her difference flushing her face. She was

back in second grade, the only child wearing long sleeves in June, preparing a story about something too heavy she'd tried to lift, in case she were interrogated about the pinch-bruises on her arms.

In the car, with Tad driving her home, her anger had boiled up. How could he be so judgmental? Her brother was a real person, not a symptom of America's moral decline. He apologized, it hurt him too, what could he do; it was in the Bible. He was so sincere, she could tell in how his forehead beaded with sweat and he bit his lip, his blue eyes almost pleading, as if he was an intern in some more life-and-death specialty than back pain and was steeling himself to deliver his first fatal diagnosis. "Look," he said, "if I had a compulsion to steal, or to look at pornography . . ."

"I'd still love you. I wouldn't be ashamed of you."

He took one hand off the wheel to squeeze her shoulder, hard, the way he clung to Jesus when the clamor of voices for and against everything made him uncertain of his own name. "Let's not talk about this. I believe what I believe, but it shouldn't come from me. You're all I care about."

"No, tell me what you were going to say."

Tad wiped his brow. He tapped his hand against the fuzzy steering wheel cover of the Beemer while he focused his thoughts. "Just that . . . it would hurt me, but I'd want someone to hold me accountable, if they loved me . . ." He took a deep breath. "For not living the way I should."

"I love my brother." Laura Sue began to cry, hating herself for this true outburst that would nonetheless seem manipulative. "I love my family." Mascara smudged the cheeks that she'd dusted so demurely with Estee Lauder *Pacific Sunrise*. She remembered the rainy day, over twenty years ago, when she and Julian had raided their mother's dressing-table for powders and grease pencils to paint each other's faces like mirror-image clowns. Why was normalcy for her a sin for him? Didn't they see the world through the same clouded lens?

"Of course you do, honey. That's what I love about you. Darn. I told you, I shouldn't have said anything." And he looked so hangdog that her protective feelings swung to him, relieved to find one love she could affirm without complications.

Now that complication had arrived, in a white linen suit, bearing enticing gift boxes from Paris and Milan. Julian told you what you wanted, exotic items you'd never ask for yourself, and he was usually right. But this time the jewelled dragonfly he clipped in her hair failed to delight her. No one in Tad's family would wear such a thing. It was too much on the surface and too little underneath—like the Selkirks, like their old church with its asthma-inducing puffs of Holy Week incense that Julian admitted he didn't miss. Unmindful of his clothes, he bent down to the muddy grass to retrieve a ball for some boys who were chasing one another

around the church lawn. He should be buying presents for a wife and kids, Laura Sue dared to think, but her imagination couldn't encompass the future Mr. and Mrs. Selkirk doing anything more intimate than trading witty aphorisms across a dining room table.

"What are you worrying about now, sweetcakes?"

She studied her brother's familiar, perfect appearance: the deep-set brown eyes in the lean oval face, the bemused twist of his thin lips, his tall wiry frame that she still thought of as fragile despite the well-cultivated muscles. If he couldn't catch up with the rest of them, move on to the next stage of life, let him stay young and flawless forever, a painted angel.

"I'm not worried about anything," she lied. But she didn't let him out of her sight for his entire visit. Accountability. They couldn't talk about it, but she could keep him beside her on Tad's aunt's couch while they played Pictionary, instead of letting him prowl the bars around Piedmont Park. Like Vanna White displaying a new dinette set to a lucky wheel-spinner, she could show him what it was like to have a family that held hands and sang around the dinner table, to know the joy of a gap-toothed girl presenting you with her grubby dolls as a token of friendship.

"Did you have a good time?" she asked eagerly, sitting in his hotel room armchair while he lay on the bed in his clothes and shoes.

"Sure I did. Very cozy. Sort of like a foreign exchange program for children of dysfunctional families."

"It wasn't that bad."

"I didn't say it was bad. They seem like very kind folks."

"They've been good to me. They make me feel . . . different." She braced herself. "We could all be different, Jule, we really could."

"Mama and Daddy too?" Skeptical humor crept back into his voice.

"If they came here, if they heard . . ."

"What?"

"That we're okay with God, right now, with nothing to hide."

"Okay? It's okay that he beat me for hiding the car keys when he was drunk? That he made Carter shoot his sick dog instead of putting him down at the vet's, to prove he was a man?"

"I don't want to remember any of that."

"I'm sorry, Lulu."

"I'm not mad at anyone. I just want to know . . . can't we do better?"

"You already have, darling." He slid off the bed and knelt beside her chair, patting her hand. "But I suspect this conversation isn't about you, is it?" She shook her head, then nodded, confused as to the right response. "You want me to get born-again and put on a polyester necktie?"

“It’s not a joke.” Could she get through a single day without crying?

“Hey, we all dodge the bullet in our own way.” He handed her a tissue. “These folks aren’t my style, but if they’re taking good care of you, that’s all that matters.”

“But you . . . don’t you want to live . . . I don’t know, more . . . ?” She let the question trail off, foolishly. She couldn’t hurt him again, not even to pluck the thorn from his flesh, as it said somewhere in the Bible. Then what? Let it fester? Maybe Daddy should’ve made *her* send old Rex to the great boneyard in the sky. Do them all a power of good.

“I live more every day, sweetie.” He flipped open his laptop. “Here, let me show you Paris.”

Leaning on his shoulder, she watched the slideshow and was soon entranced by bridges of twinkling lights and spectral gray cathedrals. The women in the runway shows interested her less—to her amateur eye, they seemed interchangeably angry and underfed—but his backstage candid shots reacquainted her with her brother’s quiet generosity. His lens could turn flaws such as a torn stocking or an unpinned coiffure into a gift of individuality, vulnerability, that the model offered up. How could he not like women?

“Have you ever been in love?”

“What is this, a Celine Dion song?”

“Jule.” She grabbed his hands, pleading with her eyes for him to understand what she was too weak and cowardly to say. “We don’t have to be like our parents. Change is possible.”

“That’s what the brochure says.” He snapped the computer off. “Let’s call it a night, okay? That last game of Pictionary really wore me out.”

She spotted it in his trash can as she was leaving. A glossy pamphlet from Exodus, the ministry Tad’s father had told her about, that helped “people like your brother.” At home in the dark, in her chaste twin bed, Laura Sue tried to pray, but her will seized up like an engine choking on the wrong kind of gas. She didn’t want what she should ask for, and was ashamed to face what she did desire, the easy way, the soft rotten fruit of undisciplined kindness. She hated that Bible, buttoned up tight in its black leather cover. It would tell her everything she had avoided knowing all her life. Think about something else. Angels in veils. Plunging into the swimming pool in her white dress. *Sin had left a crimson stain, he washed it white as snow.* White as sleep, white as pillows, flannel and fleece. Count those sheep, every one of them she loved, leaping over the fence, floating like girls in taffeta skirts, away from the slaughterer, back into the fold.