INSPIRATIONAL FICTION

The Great Pettibone Wedding Weather Debate

Ruby and Harlan Pettibone have been married fifty-five years, and for fifty-four of them they have disagreed about the weather on their wedding day.

Harlan says it rained. Not a sprinkle, either. “It came down like the Lord had been saving it up,” he’ll tell you, “and decided June the fourteenth was the day to spend it.”

Ruby says there wasn’t a cloud in the sky.

They have this discussion every June in the fellowship hall at Cedar Fork Community Church, usually beside the coffee urn, and the rest of us have learned to step back the way you would from a lawn sprinkler. It isn’t a fight. It’s more like a hymn they both know by heart and insist on singing in different keys.

So when the hospitality committee decided to give them a fifty-fifth anniversary reception, and I said out loud, in a meeting, that somebody ought to make a little toast, I should have seen what was coming. On a church committee, the

person who suggests a thing is the person who does the thing. I have served on enough committees to know this. I keep forgetting it anyway.

I decided my toast would be a gift. After fifty-four years, I would settle the question.

I started with Ruby's sister Opal, who was maid of honor and remembers everything, including several things that never happened.

"Oh, it poured," Opal said. "My hair went flat as a flapjack. I've got a picture somewhere."

The picture, when she finally dug it out of a shoebox, showed Opal from the shoulders up in front of a brick wall, looking put out. Her hair was certainly flat. Whether that was the rain or simply 1969 was hard to say.

Next I called on Mrs. Lindquist, whose late husband performed the ceremony. She is ninety-one and still does the crossword in ink, and she was very sure it was hot.

"Hot as blazes," she said. "I remember because the butter mints melted together into one big mint. Somebody had to cut it with a cake knife."

That made one vote for rain, one vote for sun, and one vote for mint.

Then I went to the source. I borrowed the Pettibones' wedding album "for the slideshow," which was not entirely a fib, since there was going to be a slideshow and it was going to have pictures in it. Halfway through I found Harlan standing on the church steps with the shoulders of his good gray suit soaked dark.

"There," I said, and showed Ruby. "That's rain."

Ruby studied it over the top of her glasses. "That's punch. Opal's boy knocked the bowl over on him."

"Ruby, he's standing outside."

"He went out to dry off."

I should mention that Ruby taught fourth grade for thirty-eight years. You do not win a point with a woman who has heard every excuse a nine-year-old can invent. She has better ones of her own.



Which is how I ended up at the county library on a Tuesday morning, in a dark little room with the microfilm machine. Toby, our patient young librarian, threaded the reel of the old Pruitt's Ferry Courier for me and backed away slowly, the way people do when a church lady has that look.

The Saturday morning edition, June 14, 1969, had the forecast right on the front page: "Fair and hot."

I cranked ahead to Sunday's paper. Page three had a headline about a sudden storm flooding Main Street. Three inches of rain in forty minutes, Saturday afternoon around four. A wedding party at Cedar Fork, it said, had been obliged to carry the reception indoors in a hurry, "with the punch bowl among the casualties."

The society write-up didn't run until the following Thursday. It was clearly composed by Ruby's mother, who never met an adjective she didn't like. "Under sunny June skies," it began, "the radiant bride wore ivory peau de soie."

So the ceremony was sunny. The reception was a flood. And Opal's boy really had knocked the punch over, right onto the groom, in the stampede for the door.

They were both right. I sat in that little room and laughed until Toby came to check on me.

✦

The reception was the following Saturday evening. The fellowship hall was full of ham biscuits, cousins and a sheet cake the size of a card table. Thunder had been grumbling over the river all afternoon.

When it was my turn, I stood up with my paper cup of punch and my notes.

“Ruby and Harlan were married,” I said, “on a day the Courier promised that very morning would be fair and hot.”

Ruby lifted her cup like she’d just taken a blue ribbon at the county fair.

“And by four o’clock that afternoon, Main Street was under three inches of water.”

Harlan slapped the table so hard the forks jumped.

I explained the rest, sun for the vows and rain for the reception, and everybody clapped. I sat down feeling like I’d negotiated the end of a long war. I may have been a little proud of myself.

Ruby leaned across the table. “Well, the wedding is the ceremony. Everybody knows that.”

“The ceremony’s twenty minutes,” Harlan said. “The reception’s where you find out what you married. That’s where you find out if she’ll share her cake.”

“I did share my cake.”

“You shared half.”

“It was a generous half.”

And off they went, as content as I have ever seen them. I had not settled a thing. I had given them new material.

Right then a crack of thunder rattled the windows, and rain started sheeting down the glass. Harlan pointed at it like he’d ordered it from a catalog.

“See there?”

“That’s not our wedding, Harlan.”

“It’s our anniversary.”

“Then it doesn’t count.”

He slid his plate over to her anyway. She took a generous half.

Driving home, Dale and I listened to the wipers for a mile or two before he spoke up.

“I’m glad we never had a silly thing like that between us,” he said.

“We have the first apartment.”

He kept his eyes on the road for a long time. Forty-six years teaches a man caution.

“The green one?” he finally said.

“Blue.”