

The Wedding Dress

By Maximillian Alexander Crumb

After twenty eight years of his life passed by, he met his love.

Dark hair like a Raven, pale skin kissed by the moons light, that gleamed in the feline pools that were her eyes. He fell in.

Their first child - born within the year - and when she reached the age of seven, her wish - that she never told anyone about - came true. A little brother was born.

Happy lives played out on endless summer days, in memories they were always like that, when you are young it feels you have forever. One morning he woke up and it was autumn, he wondered where the spring and summer had gone. For the first time in his life the man worried that winter was on its way. Together they found a house in the wild remote countryside; she swore she'd seen it before on a postcard. He'd seen it too. Wooden and black under a red tiled roof, White windows tall chimneys, it wasn't until the first heavy snow fall came, making his way back from town - they were miles from anywhere - in a blizzard of twirling snow that he realised the benefit of having a black house.

The children grew and flew from the nest.

The winters became longer and colder than they ever remembered. The world had changed. People that were once rich became poor, the poor became poorer and in this world of winter, the man became poorer still.

He lost his wife.

Each year passing was lonelier than the last.

Seven years now, he had been without his wife. She made him promise to live life to the full when she was gone and he tried, but the sad truth was he could not keep his promise, he was not good at keeping promises. Looking into the fires glow, the amber contents of his glass, the memories, together they warmed him and he had the strangest revelation that he had lived his life in cycles of seven years.

He had almost died when he was seven, forty nine when she died, seven years of being alone. The wind howled and it raged, thumped against and shook the house so hard that soot came down the chimney- *that* had never happened before- so much soot it covered the fire and almost put it out. Taking the iron poker from its stand, he stirred fire around the soot fell through the grate, but so did the embers that broke up. The fire was almost out. He realised he would need more wood to get it going properly again. He cursed himself for not bringing more in earlier, before the storm struck.

His chest heaved as he sighed deeply at the thought of going outside.

He put on his coat, and wrapped himself against the wind. Bracing himself, he stepped out through the door. Into the world outside, the world of winter, into the screaming wind that blew freezing bullets of snow into his face, so he could hardly see - but in that blizzard of twirling snow, he thought he saw a ghost in the shape of a great White bird and it was calling and he heard it.

It was trying to spread its wings, but something was wrong with them. Its face all confusion and fear, desperation, sadness all rolled into one. It looked at him. He could not bear it.

He rushed back inside to get a blanket for the poor bird, to wrap it with in case it struggled, but the bird seemed to know he was helping and let itself be carried inside without any struggle at all. He guessed from the broken pot near the porch outside that all the soot came from the bird snow-blind from the storm, colliding with his chimney it had injured its wing.

He gently bandaged it by the fire and made a bed for it. He nursed that bird all through the winter until spring, and though she had kept him company, and yes in his loneliness he had taken to talking to her - he knew that it was time to let her go, to fly away to her own kind spend her days in clear blue skies. Quite how he knew she was a female he wasn't quite sure. Maybe it was the knowing tenderness he often saw in her eyes, when he spoke to her.

On that first morning of warm uninterrupted sunshine, when everything was bright and green, a clean freshness in the air, he held her for the last time as he carried her outside.

He put her down.

She lingered.

'Go on' he said 'it's time for you to go'

Great tears had come to his eyes. 'Don't look at me like that; I *have* to let you go!'

She stared at him a moment more. Then she stood up tall - he could have sworn she was 5 foot 1 and maybe a half. She lifted her wings high then beat down slow at first, like she was unsure. Once, twice, her wings beat, her beak blew, the wind got beneath her magnificent snow white wings, she skipped and she hopped and then she flew.

He looked up to watch her go and his heart was heavy. She circled around him in a great arc, high above, looking down. He waved a final wave; she flew a final circle and then was gone.

Spring, then summer, autumn came and went. How time seemed to fly when you get older he thought. The nights drew in, it got colder and soon the North wind blew, bringing with it the first snow, the blizzards and the loneliness he felt, especially at this time of year. The fire, the Amber liquid in his glass and fond memories warmed him in his chair. He was almost asleep when he heard it.

A knock on the door. *Who could that be on a night like this?* He got up and peered through the window, through the driving snow. There, in the twisting of twirling snow, was a woman leaning exhausted against his door, completely covered in it, save for her face because she was constantly wiping it.

He went to the door and opened it.

She fell in. There was something about her beauty; something about his loneliness and the magic of the night. He fell too. He took her in.

When at last she was able to speak, when the warmth had loosened her tongue she explained how she had broken down and lost her bearings in the storm and she had seen his house, the black of it, the windows lit. She hoped he didn't mind. She couldn't remember who she was; she had nothing with her to help him find out about her. They would wait for the storm to blow over, they had to. Not even a helicopter could reach them in conditions like these. She would stay until the weather broke and he agreed.

I'm glad of the company if the truth was told.

She was tall, glacial blonde hair so fine and white, eyes of pale icy blue. They lit her face and her full lips gave it warmth. She had a complexion so fine and unlined, a wisdom about her - she could just as easily have been forty, as twenty years old.

She had only the clothes she stood up in and this embarrassed her. After they had eaten and talked a while he showed her round the house and though it was poorly furnished - times have been hard - she seemed impressed. In those few days spent together they fell in love. She wanted to marry; she wanted a wedding he couldn't afford anything lavish. Leave it to me she said.

At antiques fair she persuaded him to buy spinning Jenny wheels and a loom to keep her happy. So he did. And then the finest silks for weaving.

There in the workshop they had made, down the hall, makeshift as it was, behind the closed door she turned out the most beautiful of cloth.

Pure White silk brushed with a touch so light, it was the softest thing he had ever held, and there in the stillness, bright with the moon full outside, it seemed to glow. 'How do you make this cloth so fine?' he asked in wonderment.

She touched her nose with her forefinger and crinkled it with a smile.

'It is my secret' she said 'I am not allowed to reveal it to anyone. Not even to you, perhaps even especially *not* to you! You see I am making my wedding dress. Promise you will never enter the room while I'm working!'

'I promise' he said.

And they were married and the dress she had created was magnificent. She struggled to finish it in time, working all available hours, she became thin and poorly, but had recovered herself for the big day. Now quite by chance, and the strangest of things happen for the strangest of reasons, while they were posing for photographs by the statue of St Francis in the churchyard, a passerby admired her dress.

'I love that dress! Who is it by?' She asked.

'Well it's by *me*. I made it *actually*' New wife replied.

'If you are ever looking for some design work, just give me a call'

The lady passed her a business card.

She politely said she would - knowing she wouldn't - and passed it to her new husband. There in his pocket it remained.

Until one day when his work dried up. Completely.

Remembering the chance encounter and vaguely thinking she might be able to make some extra money, she retrieved the card from his suit pocket. **Bespoke Wedding Dress design by Sonya** it read. She dialled the number.

'Sonya?'

'Yes...Who is this?'

'You gave me your card by the statue of St Francis on my wedding day'

'Oh wow, I remember you! I'm so pleased that you called! I loved your dress so much, I have to admit when you didn't call before, I tried to source that beautiful material you made it with, and I couldn't find it anywhere'

'You won't find it anywhere, because I made it myself'

Sonya explains that she makes it her business to tour weddings for dress design inspiration and that she has a very rich clientele.

She makes an offer for a roll of the material.

'I'm a bit of a bird brain when it comes to business' she tells her
'Talk to my husband'

The negotiations begin. He says it's not enough.

She asks if she can test the Market with the original dress. The couple will not part with the original. It's a labour of love the wife explains. But she does agree to supply a sample straight away and roll of the cloth. She warns that the roll will take several months to make.

Soon Sonya has many orders to fulfil, just from the small sample.

The man is saved from financial ruin and all the while, his wife works harder and harder. He does not notice how thin and ill she is becoming. He loves her dearly, but is now thinking more about ways of making more and more money.

At night when she has finished her work and has bathed, he strokes her aching limbs. She will not allow him to even look at her feet, let alone touch them.

One night she falls to sleep through sheer exhaustion while he is massaging her, and he moves his hands across her soft and silky skin, feels the fine downy hair on her legs as he moves down them to her feet.

There is something unusual about the bone structure of her feet, she pushes his hands away and dreamily mumbles 'gerroff my feet!'

He pulls away and leaves her to sleep in peace.

He worries that she has lost so much weight. Maybe that's why her feet feel like that. He decides he must do something to help her.

The next day he decides to inspect the loom to see if he can speed up production somehow. He forgets his promise and opens the door.

He cannot believe his eyes.

For there, stood before the loom, weaving feathers in - plucked from her own breast, is the same great white bird he rescued the year before. His mouth drops open, he cannot speak.

On catching sight of him she returns to human form, just long enough to tell him he broke his promise and now she has to leave.

He is stunned.

'But I thought it was because of the wedding...' he can't make sense of it, at all 'Please stay'

'I wish I could, but I can't change the rules. A promise is a promise and you broke it'

Great tears had come to her eyes. 'Don't look at me like that; I *have* to go!'

She goes outside. She changes form. She stared at him a moment more.

Then she stood up tall - he could have sworn she was 5 foot 1 and maybe a half. She lifted her wings high then beat down slow at

first, like she was unsure. Once, twice, her wings beat, her beak blew, the wind got beneath her magnificent snow white wings, she skipped and she hopped and then she flew.

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An original interpretation and reconstruction inspired by The Crane Wife - A Japanese fable.

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There are many morals to this story.