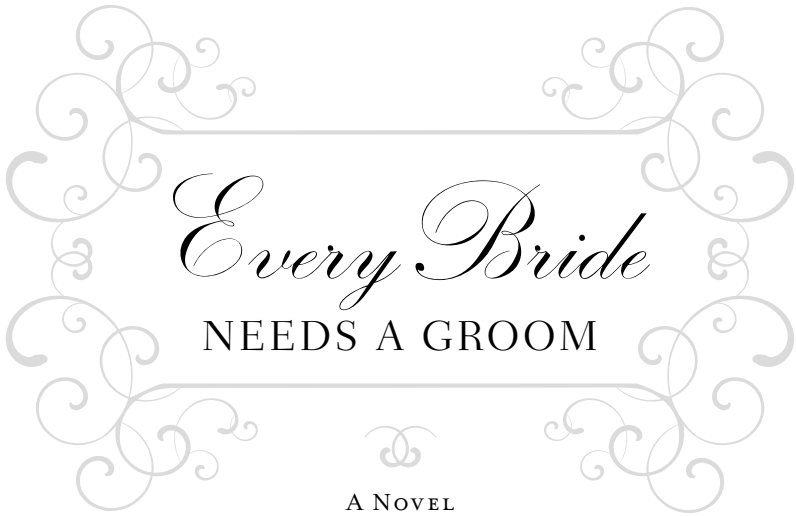


BRIDES *with* STYLE • 1



JANICE
THOMPSON


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Janice Thompson, *Every Bride Needs a Groom*
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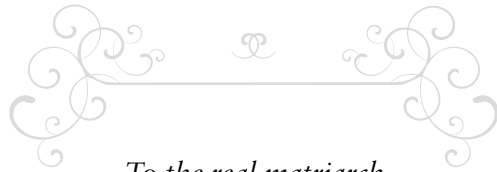
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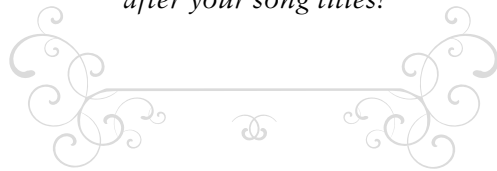
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*To the real matriarch
of Fairfield, Texas: Eleanor Clark.
You have inspired me, reshaped my view of
the golden years, and given me hope that
I can continue to share my gift all of my
days, no matter my age.*

*And to the queen of country music,
the amazing Loretta Lynn.
What fun to name my chapters
after your song titles!*



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1



God's Country

It was very much like Norman Rockwell: small town America. We walked to school or rode our bikes, stopped at the penny candy store on the way home from school, skated on the pond.

Dorothy Hamill

That whole thing about being a big fish in a small pond is more than just a saying, at least in my neck of the woods. When you grow up in a sweeter-than-peaches town like Fairfield, Texas, you find yourself captivated by the love of family, friends, and neighbors. And don't even get me started on the church folks. They'll swallow you up with their bosomy hugs and convince you that you're the greatest thing since sliced bread.

If you're not careful, you'll start believing it too, especially if you're fortunate enough to be named Peach Queen like I was my senior year at Fairfield High. And why not? Why shouldn't a small-town girl like me allow a little lovin' from the locals to go to her head? Being a somebody in a small setting is a sure sight better than being a nobody in a big one.

Not that us small-town girls are unaware of the goings-on beyond our quaint borders, mind you. Oh no. I've had glimpses of life beyond the confines of my little town—say, on one of those housewives reality shows. But I can't picture it. Not really. I mean, who in their right mind would treat their friends and family members like that? And the language! If I ever took to swearin' like those potty-mouthed gals, my mama would stick a bar of soap so far down my throat I'd be gargling bubbles for days to come. No thank you. I may be twenty-four years old, but respect for my elders has been pounded into me. If I ever lost sight of it, my grandmother would be happy to remind me with a swift kick to my backside.

We small-towners aren't just taught respect, we genuinely care about our neighbors. It's not unusual for folks to linger in the checkout line at Brookshire Brothers grocery store to chat about the weather or discuss plans for the upcoming peach festival. And the investment at our local churches is stronger still. The big news there most often revolves around the various prayer lists, where the Pentecostals are interceding for Brother Sanderson, who has undergone a much-needed hip replacement, and the Baptists are shocked to hear that Bessie May Jenson, the congregation's oldest member, has recently suffered a gall bladder attack. This sort of news is always followed by a rousing chorus of "God bless 'em!" and "Don't stop praying!" from the prayer warriors.

And boy howdy, do those prayer warriors take their work

seriously. The Fairfield Women of Prayer—known to the locals as the WOP-pers—have pulled many a wandering soul back from the abyss. Take Levi Nash, for instance. Fairfield High’s best-loved football hero tried to get involved with drugs his freshman year of college. Stress *tried*. Party-lovin’ Levi never stood a chance, not with the WOP-pers beating down heaven’s door on his behalf. Before he knew it, the dear boy, as they called him, had seen the error of his ways. He’d also transferred to a Bible college in the Dallas area, where he planned to major in theology. Go figure. No doubt the WOP-pers would pray in a godly wife for Levi and a couple of precocious kids to boot.

Yep, those prayer warriors clearly had an inside track straight to the Almighty. My grandmother—known to the locals as Queenie Fisher—insisted this had something to do with the fact that the WOP-pers didn’t discriminate. They invited women from all of the local denominations to pray in one accord. Even the Presbyterians. Whatever that meant.

“There’s something to be said for praying in unity, Katie,” Queenie would say as she wagged an arthritic finger at me. “When you’re out of unity with your fellow believers, you’re prone to wandering.”

And heaven forbid any of us should wander. Not that the temptation rose very often. Most of us wouldn’t trade our small-town living for any amount of money. Okay, so my oldest brother, Jasper, talked incessantly about moving away to Houston, but Pop always managed to reel him back in by reminding him that he would one day manage our family’s hardware store. That seemed to pacify Jasper, at least for now. And Dewey, my middle brother, had talked loosely about going to A&M but ended up at the local junior college, closer to home. This, after Queenie insisted she might just have a heart attack if a family member ever moved away. My grandmother

had nothing to worry about where my youngest brother, Beau, was concerned. The way Mama coddled that boy, he would never leave home. Or learn to do his own laundry. Or get a job.

With the exception of my older cousin Lori-Lou Linder, no one in my circle had ever moved away to the big city. Who would want to leave paradise, after all? Certainly not me. Not now. Not ever. In my perfect small-town world, Daddy coached Little League, Mama directed the choir at our local Baptist church on Thursday nights, and Queenie sat enthroned as Fairfield's most revered matriarch. And that was precisely how I liked it.

I pondered my idyllic life as I drove to the local Dairy Queen on the last Thursday in April. After a full day's work at our family's hardware store, I was due a break, and what better place than my favorite local hangout? Besides, Casey would be waiting on me in our special booth, the second one on the left. If I knew him well enough—and I did—he would have my Oreo Blizzard waiting for me.

Waiting.

Casey.

Hmm. Seemed a little ironic that my boyfriend would be waiting on me for a change. How many months—okay, years—had I spent waiting on him to ask me to marry him? Seemed like forever. Oh well. Something as great as a marriage proposal to an amazing fella like Casey was worth the wait. Besides, I had every reason to believe it wouldn't be long before he popped the question. The signs were all there.

Any moment now I'd have a wedding to plan. Not that the lack of a proposal had slowed down my hoping and dreaming. I'd started mapping out my wedding at the age of six, when I'd first served as a flower girl. In the years since, I'd turned wedding planning into an art form.

A delicious shiver ran down my spine as I thought about

how wonderful my big day would be. I'd planned out every single detail, right down to the music, the colors of the bridesmaid dresses, and even the flavor of the cake. Of course, all of it hinged on one thing: Casey's proposal. Which, I felt sure, would arrive any day now.

Just as I pulled into a parking spot at the DQ, my cell phone rang. I recognized my cousin's number. After turning off the car, I climbed out and took the call. "Hey, Lori-Lou!"

Her usual cheerful voice sounded from the other end of the line with a hearty, "Hey yourself! What are you up to today? Working?"

"Hmm? What?" I waved at Casey through the big plate-glass window at the front of the DQ, then pointed at my phone to let him know I'd be a minute. "Oh, yeah." I turned my attention back to my cousin. "Just wrapped up at the hardware store. We've been swapping out the window displays for the upcoming summer season. Now I'm meeting Casey at Dairy Queen for an Oreo Blizzard."

A lingering sigh erupted from Lori-Lou's end of the line. "I'm so jealous."

"Of what?" I leaned against my car but found myself distracted by the pensive expression on Casey's face. Weird.

"A Blizzard sounds great in this heat." She sighed again. "It's sweltering outside and it's not even summer yet."

"Ah. It is hot."

"Our AC is on the fritz and we don't have the money right now to fix it. That's not helping things. But honestly? I'm most jealous because I can't remember the last time I had a minute to do anything fun with Josh like hang out at Dairy Queen."

"Aw, I'm sorry." And I was. Sort of. I mean, how bad could it be? The girl had a great husband and three adorable—albeit rowdy—children.

“You have no idea what it’s like to be married, Katie,” she said.

Gee, thanks.

“Well, married with kids, anyway. We never have date nights anymore. These three kiddos of ours are so—” The intensity of Lori-Lou’s voice grew as she hollered out, “Mariela, stop eating your sister’s gummy worms! Do you want to end up in time-out again?”

I giggled. “Nope. Don’t want to end up in time-out again. And give that ornery little girl a hug from me. I miss her.”

“Sure you do.”

“No, really. I miss all of your kiddos.”

“Stop it, Gilly!” Lori-Lou hollered. “If you smack your sister one more time, you’re going to spend the rest of the day in your room.” The shrill tone of her voice intensified further. “*Why* are you kids so out of control? You. Need. To. Calm. Down! You’re going to wake up your baby brother!” This led to a lengthy period of time where I lost my cousin altogether. I could hear cries coming from the baby moments later. Lori-Lou finally returned, sounding a little breathless. “Sorry about that . . . You know how it is.”

Actually, I didn’t. But she happened to be offering me a living illustration. “Oh, no problem.”

“Hey, not to change the subject, but has Casey popped the question yet?”

Ugh. She would have to go there. Again. And how had we transitioned from ornery kids to marriage proposals? I couldn’t help the rush of breath that escaped. “Not yet, Lori-Lou. I tell you that every time you ask.”

My gaze shifted back through the window to my boyfriend, who gave me a little wave. My heart soared with hope as I waved back. I could almost see it now—me walking down the aisle

in a fabulous dress, Casey standing at the front of the church with his groomsmen at his side. Six of them, to match my six bridesmaids. Okay, maybe seven.

“Right, I know.” My cousin’s voice startled me back to reality. “But do you think it’s going to happen soon? I have a special reason for asking this time, I promise.”

“Oh? Well, he *has* been acting a little suspicious.” I glanced through the DQ window once again and noticed that Casey had engaged the elderly store manager in conversation. “I didn’t see him at all yesterday. He just sort of . . . disappeared.”

“Very odd.”

“That’s what I was thinking. I have a sneaking suspicion he went into Dallas to pick out my ring.” The very idea made my heart flutter. For years I’d worn my grandmother’s antique wedding ring on my left ring finger. She’s always called it my purity ring—a reminder to stay chaste until marriage. The idea of replacing it with a modern ring from Casey made me giddy with anticipation. *Where* would he propose? *How* would he propose? *When* would he propose? My imagination nearly ran away with me as I pondered the possibilities.

“Ooh, you think it’s going to happen soon?” Lori-Lou giggled. “Well now, that’s perfect.”

I nodded, which was dumb, because Lori-Lou couldn’t see me over the phone. “Yeah. Why else would he be gone all day? Casey never leaves Fairfield unless it’s important.”

“Good, because I wanted to talk to you about something that involves him. You read *Texas Bride* magazine, right?”

“Usually.” I released a lingering sigh. “To be honest, I’ve been trying to lay off of bridal magazines for the past couple months. I guess you could call it a self-imposed fast. Since the proposal hasn’t actually taken place yet, I decided not to get too caught up in the wedding stuff just yet, for my own sake

and my family's. They're getting tired of hearing all of my plans, I think."

"Ah. Well, I wondered why you hadn't said anything about the contest."

"Contest?" That certainly piqued my interest.

"Yeah. They announced it a couple of issues back." Lori-Lou hollered at one of the kids, then stopped a toddler tantrum in the background. "The magazine is linking up with Cosmopolitan Bridal in Dallas. You know about that shop, right?"

"Of course. They have the most exclusive bridal gowns in the state."

"In the country," Lori-Lou said. "And here's the great part. *Texas Bride* announced that they're teaming up with Cosmopolitan Bridal to sponsor a contest. An essay contest. Deadline is May 1."

"May 1, as in tomorrow?"

"Right. By midnight. Then one month later, on June 1, they're going to announce the winner."

"Okay." I tried to figure out what this had to do with me. "What does this winner get, anyway?"

"Cosmopolitan Bridal is going to give away a couture gown to one lucky bride-to-be. And—drum roll—she also gets to be on the October cover of *Texas Bride!* Can. You. Believe. It?"

Whoa. No wonder Lori-Lou was so excited. "Sounds like the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Right? And I totally think you should enter. You would stand a great chance, since it's an essay contest. Your writing skills are amazing."

"You think?" I sucked in an excited breath and considered her words. In my wildest dreams I couldn't imagine winning a dress from Cosmopolitan. "Oh, Lori-Lou, this is . . ."

"The best news ever?" She giggled, then called out, "Gilly,

if you hit your sister one more time, you will never eat another gummy worm as long as you live!”

I did my best to ignore the ranting going on from the kids in the background as I thought this through. Every wedding dress at Cosmopolitan was a one-of-a-kind. Brides came from all over the country to have specialty gowns crafted for their big day, and they paid for it . . . to the tune of multiple thousands of dollars per gown. All of this per *Texas Bride* magazine.

“They’re going to tailor a special gown for the winner,” Lori-Lou added. “Can you even imagine?”

Oh, I could imagine, all right. The idea of walking down the aisle in an original Cosmopolitan gown made my head spin . . . in a good way.

“So, I have to write an essay? About what, specifically?” I glanced through the window of Dairy Queen once more and gave Casey a thumbs-up to let him know I was okay. He nodded and turned his attention back to the restaurant’s manager. “By midnight tomorrow night? Do I email it or something?”

“Yes, there’s an email address. Just write five hundred words about your dream dress and your dream day,” Lori-Lou explained. “Easy-breezy, right? All of the essays are going to be read by Nadia James, and she’s going to choose the one that she feels the strongest about. Or, as the contest entry says, ‘the most compelling.’”

“Nadia James?” Whoa. Texas’s most touted dress designer would read my essay? The very idea made my palms sweat. The woman was revered among brides across the continent, not just in Texas. “I’m sure hundreds—maybe thousands—of girls will enter,” I argued. “And most of them will actually be engaged. You know?”

“I read the rules, even the fine print. There’s nothing in there that says you have to have a date set or anything like that. It

just refers to the entrant as the ‘potential bride’ and leaves it at that. You’re a potential bride. I mean, c’mon. All single women are, right?”

Ugh.

“So, I think you’re okay to enter,” she said. “I honestly do.”

“You really think I stand a chance?”

“Yep. It won’t hurt anything to try. You can write a compelling essay. Give it a title. Call it ‘Small-Town Wedding, Big-Town Dreams.’”

“‘Small-Town Wedding, Big-Town Dreams,’” I echoed. Sounded about right, though I certainly had no aspirations of becoming a big-town girl.

“What have you got to lose?” Lori-Lou asked. “Wouldn’t you like to win a gown from Cosmopolitan Bridal?”

The idea of wearing a designer gown on my big day seemed like something out of a fairy tale, not something likely to happen to a girl like me. Still, what would it hurt to write an essay? Maybe I could play around with the idea a little.

After having an Oreo Blizzard with my sweetie.

I waved at Casey and then said my goodbyes to Lori-Lou, promising her that I would at the very least pray about it. No harm in that. Surely the good Lord would show me what to do. And maybe, just maybe, I could throw in a “please let Casey pop the question soon” prayer while I was at it.

After all, what was a potential bride . . . without a groom?