

On Weddings

Liza Costello

Monday

The church has turned the dull gold of sepia. Now faded foliage frames the smiling couple and the brown-robed Italian priest standing on its steps – the leaves of a tree softening the corner behind you, a pink-flowered plant in the foreground palely mirroring your red roses. Gold wedding bands, worn for the first time that day, still gleam.

Twenty-five years lay behind you when that photograph was taken. But it is the future you were smiling into that shimmers in my mind, like a net cast wide on the sea. Glinting with acts of generosity. At your funeral, one of your former pupils, a grown man now, cried as he shook my hand, reminding me of one of those acts. The year the watercress in your classroom forgot to grow. You went to the shop, bought watercress, and bread, and made sandwiches before school began. Told your pupils it had grown overnight. A rare lie, because they could not know their tiny seeds in dark earth had not risen to the light in slender shoots of green. And so a watercress sandwich party was held at 9.30 in the morning, attended by twenty eight year olds and their teacher. I remember laughing with you at that story. I remember how easily laughter came with you. How characteristic, that the way you lived presents a final gift.

It is in giving that we receive, said St Francis of Assisi.

Altruism lies at the root of both temporary and lasting happiness, says the Dalai Lama.

Tuesday

In those days, I never imagined a time when my two sisters and I would not spend a couple of weeks each summer on our cousin's farm. We were having too much fun to think of such a thing. Jumping from stacked hay in the shed into our uncle's arms. Lying atop a trailer on bright evenings. Trips with our aunt to a nearby town for tea and cake. Our own Wimbledon tournaments held on the grounds of the church nearby. The time my cousin Denise, then about ten years old, accidentally sent a tennis ball through one of the stained glass windows.

I wonder if you missed us during those summer weeks away. I wonder what stories we clamoured to tell you when we got back, straw still in our clothes and our hair. I wonder where the past could be.

Twenty years later, all grown up, we return to those church grounds. The window is long mended. It is Denise's wedding day. Driving to the reception, fires burn bright and sharp beside each neighbour's gate. Their flames flick in the breeze. A tradition in the west, I am told. Dating from pagan times. Little stars of good wishes to mark the bride and groom's first journey. It seems we have always known that such a brave leap towards happiness needs all the warmth and light it can get. More importantly, those proud faces by the fires say, and despite everything, it remains an effort worth making.

Wednesday

I made it home from a three-month backpacking stint only days before my older sister's wedding to a flurry of dressmaker appointments and the chaos of the last minute. A photograph of us three bridesmaids in orange silk surrounding the bride fair, bouquets pointing every which way, captures the heady happiness of the day.

Forward three years. I am travelling again. At two in the morning I wake to high-pitched whimpers. A lamp reveals that my two-dollar a night bedroom is also the nest of more mice than I care to recall. I run into the pitch-black night. For over four hours, I watch the stars burn, then the slow revelation of Himalayan mountains, white peaks and green forest, the rooftops of the village below.

John O'Donoghue once wrote: 'If you had never been to this world and never known what a day was, you couldn't imagine how the darkness breaks, how the mystery and colour of a new day arrives.' While I was on that trip, my sister had her first child. They met me on my return. Hence the most amazing thing I'd seen in those six months was back in Dublin airport: a gurgling, giggling baby nephew. The mysterious yet undeniable presence of a brand new human being who I already loved. Where-ever did he come from? I wondered. Years later, the loss of you presents the reverse of this question. The arrival and the departure of those we love equally incomprehensible.

Thursday

There is a scene in the film *Vertigo* in which James Stewart and the heroine look at the cross-section of a cut-down redwood tree. On it are marked the Battle of Hastings, the year the Magna Carta was signed, the discovery of America and the Declaration of Independence. In this one image, we see the absurd shortness of our individual lives. Yet this is nothing. Collectively, the human species has inhabited this planet for roughly 0.0015 percent of the history of the universe. Living or dead, time makes us all look insignificant.

Einstein once famously said that the only purpose of time was so that everything doesn't happen at once. Like the night's sky that holds the stars apart. I suppose it is why we appreciate life, our own and that of those we love. I can still see something in a shop window and think, if for the briefest moment, maybe you'd like that. And then it hits me again, harder than ever. But grief is a secret society whose membership extends to most of the human race.

A year ago, I attended a beautiful wedding in Burgundy. People from all over Ireland brought together in the pretty village of Cluny. For days, we wandered around, bumping into each other on the cobbled streets, waving at friends and acquaintances from café terraces. The priest, an old friend of the bride, shared with us this Leonard Cohen line: There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Friday

The 28 December has arrived. My little sister's wedding day. Somehow, we get to the hairdresser and back again, fabulous concoctions crowning duffel coats and boots. Somehow, the make-up artist makes the treacherous journey to the house and three hours later, a bride like a Grecian goddess and three bridesmaids in shimmering blue slip and slide their way to cars that will take them to the church. No one falls, but it comes close.

You cried with happiness when they returned from New Zealand and told you the good news. Thirty years after you stood outside that church in Rome. Did you think back on all that had happened? Did you notice how much happiness there was? I do. I remember gifts on our pillows the nights you and dad went out. Date night and you still manage to pick up lucky bags. Years later, Saturdays of cappuccinos and shopping – you'd always treat us to something. Sunday lunches, your grandsons insisting on sitting beside you.

The day of the wedding has been blanched by the cold. We pass white fields along a white road, driving at the pace of horse-drawn carriages. Rows of white trees stand against a white sky, each branch and twig pale as though stained by moonlight. Inside, where fires burn high and warm, the groom swings the bride around and around. Outside, the snow continues to fall and the ice to harden. But here we are safe and warm, the smile on your daughter's face your legacy.

These scripts were broadcast on RTE Radio 1's A Living Word on 11-15 April 2011