

And then the Heat Broke

by Jim Breslin

Melissa Burnham had dreamed of a beach wedding since she was eight years old. When her boyfriend Robert McGrath proposed on an icy New Years Eve as they watched fireworks over the river, her first thought was, “Can I still book the Beach Club for July 4th?” They kissed. She fell into his warm embrace as snowflakes fell from the sky.

She was fortunate that her father, a portfolio investment banker named Peter Sullivan, had the means and the contacts to make things happen.

Melissa immediately began preparations. Her mother Cathryn bought bridal magazines and books on how to organize an affair. Together they created spreadsheets, to-do lists and monthly checklists. Melissa tackled the wedding with enthusiasm, occasionally catching herself in a reflective moment, smiling with the realization she was fulfilling her childhood dream. Over the months, she grew obsessed with making everything perfect on her big day. But some things are beyond a young bride-to-be's control.

Exactly a week before the wedding Melissa's grandmother died. Though the matriarch of the family was eighty-two years old, her death was quite unexpected. The mailman had found Nanna face down on her front porch. When the medics attempted resuscitation, an olive popped out of her windpipe. The empty martini glass had rolled under a side table.

The family now faced a dilemma. Melissa tried calling Robert, but he had left for his bachelor party. She was distraught over the situation, over the timing of events. She loved her grandmother dearly but now felt as though her wedding plans would be overshadowed.

She sat at the kitchen table with her parents as they ran through options.

Cathryn asked, “Should we postpone the wedding?”

“No!” Melissa cried.

Peter glanced at Cathryn and let slip the faintest smile.

"You never liked Robert!" Melissa stood in a rage. "I knew it!"

"Relax honey," Peter said as he took his daughter's arm. "Its not that we don't like Robert."

Cathryn added, "It's just all been so quick. We don't feel like we really know him..."

"Don't worry, dear," Peter said, "We won't postpone your day."

After much debate, it was decided to hold Nanna's funeral the day before the wedding.

"How can I go from a funeral to a rehearsal dinner in the same day?" Melissa cried. At one point she sobbed, "I have to wear black one day and white the next?"

Cathryn consoled her, rubbing her back. "Everything will be fine. We'll review all the plans again in the morning. Your wedding will be perfect!"

On Friday morning, Robert held Melissa's hand at the funeral service. She noticed his knuckles looked bruised. From the pulpit, the Reverend scanned the crowd. "Nanna lived a long and productive life. She died doing something she loved. What more can we ask?" Melissa broke out in a wail and Robert hugged her.

The wedding was set to commence on a boardwalk platform overlooking the beach. The boardwalk sat upon a small stretch of dunes, with a ramp leading up directly from Beach street.

Melissa had visualized every moment of the wedding. Although Nanna's death had caused a ripple effect, and the the final week had been a flurry of activity, Melissa believed she had the event under control.

It is worth noting the details Melissa fretted about: the sheen on her wedding dress. The color of her bridesmaid dresses. The shade of the bow ties and cummerbunds. The flute and violin duo. Whether one tier of cake should be chocolate. The plastic bride and groom figurines being placed on the cake. The buttercream icing.

She fretted over whether to arrive in a white Rolls Royce Phantom, a white Bentley or the white Extended Hummer. She fretted over the wedding favors. The guest list itself. The boutonnières. The crab-stuffed mushrooms. The ordained minister. The open bar. Her hair coloring. The marriage license. Her manicure and pedicure. Their wedding vows. The puffed pastries. The Calla lilies. The flower girl's bouquet. Baby's Breath.

However, Melissa was unaware of a second ripple that had started the previous Saturday. She did not know Robert's friends had rented a black Extended Escalade. That they'd reserved a private room at Indulgences. That they chose the top tier whiskey, Bushmills 1608. Smoked big black Cuban cigars. She did not know Robert's skin was sliced and bruised from the twelve pound ball and chain locked to his ankle for sixteen hours that night.

Melissa was not aware of the strippers and the cocaine, the tequila shots in their navel, the duck tape and the roofies. Strippers who provided favors. For a price. She did not know about the itching and the burning.

She did not know about the raucous fist fight in the darkened parking lot at three am. She was unaware of the severe thrashing inflicted on a burly bodyguard named Rocco who had escorted the women to the rented room. She did not know about Rocco's seventeen stitches or his collapsed lung.

She was unaware that Rocco was a former convict, or that Rocco was not the type of person to turn the other cheek. She did not know Rocco had connections, that he rode with men who wore big bushy goatees and shaved heads. Men who inked spider web tattoos on their elbows. Men who didn't believe in the sanctity of marriage. Men with bad breath.

She did not know that Robert's old college roommate Zach, a dirty dreadlocked bass player in a speed metal band named Pig Vomit, had unexpectedly shown up at the bachelor party, had paid a stripper five hundred dollars for his own satisfaction in a back room, and then, in a moment of post-coital bliss further enhanced by white

lines and tequila, asked her to be his date for a wedding being held on Saturday at 4 pm at the Beach Club.

On this sweltering sunny July 4th without a cloud in the sky, the white chairs were set in orderly rows on the platform overlooking the dunes. Paper wedding bells were tied to the threshold. Everything in it's place. Beyond the dunes, the ocean called. It was a small strip of dunes and the cars had slowed all morning as they drove down Beach Street, staring at the festivities being meticulously prepared.

When Melissa stepped out of the Rolls Royce Phantom at the curb, she felt like a movie star. The photographer snapped pictures in the heat. Her entourage of bridesmaids crowded around her. The chairs on the platform were filled with friends and family, and they turned in hopes of catching a glimpse of the bride in white. A few kids in bathing suits watched from afar. A little girl with curly hair excitedly pointed towards Melissa. When Melissa waved, the girl broke out in a big grin and clutched her heart.

Just as the flutist and violinist started playing Mendelssohn's Wedding March, Melissa's rehearsed cue to walk down the aisle with her father, she heard a rumble of engines from down the street. She paused for a moment, thinking the motorcycles would pass by momentarily.

Unfortunate timing, like Nanna's passing. She shook her head wondering why she couldn't get a break, and then she started walking down the aisle as the rumbles grew louder. She felt the heat of the sun. She tried to maintain a stiff upper lip.

Her father patted her hand, "Everything will be all right," he said through a clenched grin. She tried to hold her smile as she started to perspire.

The motorcycle engines soon drowned out the musicians. She felt parched. Halfway down the aisle, she saw Dennis, the best man, wipe the sweat off his forehead with a handkerchief. He looked beyond her in a state of shock.

She now felt the motorcycles on the boardwalk, the vibrations piercing through the wooden planks. The noise gave her a headache. She watched Luke, the groomsmen on the end as he swiveled and ran, leaping over the railing onto the dunes.

Melissa locked eyes on Robert, searching for a sign of assurance. Robert stood wide eyed staring past her, his mouth open in dismay. He fidgeted nervously. He glanced at her for a brief moment and bit his lower lip. He placed his right hand in the pocket of his suit jacket, as though he had something to hide. His right eye began twitching. Melissa suddenly felt nauseous. He didn't look her in the eye again.

She heard the thunderous rumble as though they were right on top of her. But she would not turn around. She felt a shortness of breath. And then the heat broke. From deep within an arctic chill crackled through her, tingling her skin. She shivered. The groom's face contorted in terror. For a second she stared blankly. She wondered who he was. As her hand brushed across the satin of her wedding dress, Melissa had the final fleeting sensation her finger tips were gliding over ice.

