



## MY TROJAN DRESS



*Kari Lerum*

AS A CHILD I WAS SCARED OF WEDDINGS, ESPECIALLY THE THOUGHT of starring in one. Although I was painfully shy, the kind of shy that physically hurts, my fear of weddings had nothing to do with stage fright. Rather, it was the vision of being ushered into a world away from my parents, forced to live alone with a man I did not yet know. When one day my mom said, cheerfully, "Someday you'll get married and have a house of your own!" I reacted with a horrified, "Do I have to?" To which she replied, "Don't worry, you don't have to think about this for a loonnngg time."

During my childhood, I never actually attended a wedding, never even saw a bride up close. Brides were contained within clusters of family wedding portraits: photos of my mom, aunts, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers, all in their late teens and early twenties, captured on their wedding days. Both of my grandmothers died young, so I knew them mostly through these photos. At Grandpa's house in farmland Wisconsin, my job was to dust the framed pictures. It was a job I liked: Wiping away layers of dust made me feel useful, and cleaning wedding photos seemed especially important. They seemed nothing short of a family pantheon, an exhibition of responsibility, belonging, and a model for future generations.

Dusting also allowed me to gaze closely at those brides. The faces of my Norwegian-Lutheran immigrant grand- and great-grandmothers were solemn, as the style dictated in those days. Photos from my parents' generation hinted at more abundance, full of smiles, wedding attendants, and flower girls. I wondered which of the brides were scared, if the non-smilers were less happy than the smilers, and if any of them wished they could just duck out of the wedding and run back home.

My anxious and dusty relationship to weddings took a giddy turn when Princess Di got married. I was thirteen and living in England—my dad was doing research there—when Diana Spencer took up with Prince Charles. Everyone thought that she was perfect for the job of queen-to-be: pretty, blond, demure, of royal blood, and so, so young. At nineteen, she was just six years older than me—and she was shy, tall, and lanky like me, too. But with her marriage, Diana would instantly and publicly morph into an adult woman.

Marriage might be a circus hoop through which I would eventually need to jump, but Diana's hoop seemed to be lined with opportunity, not dread; glamour, not fire. She seemed ensured to live happily ever after.

By the date of the royal wedding I was back at my *other* grandfather's house, this one in farmland Minnesota. Rising at 4:00 AM to sit alone in front of Grandpa's TV, I was, like millions of other vicarious princesses, witness to Diana's stunning metamorphosis.

I was most fixated on her dress: mammoth sleeves and skirt on a narrow bodice, twenty-five-foot train, oversized veil. While elegant, its massive girth made it far too bulky for hoop jumping. Perhaps Diana's transformation into princess-hood was not as effortless as I had imagined. Could it be that her dress was more of a Trojan horse? A sly way of storming the ultimate castle of privilege?

And so, as I marveled at her miraculous, enchanted life, a tiny voice inside also worried: *What will she do once the castle doors close behind her?*

When feminism sparked in my late teens and early twenties, the magic of Diana's wedding faded. I reverted to earlier suspicions about weddings, this time seeing their sinister facade. They were part of an industry that was responsible for the subjugation of women and the exploitation of global capitalism. The dazzle of the wedding seduced women to marry men, tricked them into giving men control through ideologies of romance, and exploited dressmakers in China along the way. The wedding dress was not a symbol of glamour, armor, or power as I once thought: It was a source of oppression and servitude. Those

heavy layers of silk, taffeta, lace, sequins? Intellectual distraction and suffocation. Besides, white didn't suit me; it clashed with my attitude and my olive skin. Black was my color of choice, and I collected a wardrobe full of it.

I notified my mother that it was unlikely that I would ever marry, but if I did I would sport a black lace dress—what I perceived to be the ultimate dare to my family as well as to the entire wedding industry. I fantasized my mother's response: *If she insists on wearing black to her wedding, then I give up! Let her go off and explore her godless intellectual ways!*

Despite my declaration, or perhaps because of it, my parents invited to dinner a tall, blond, athletic, Norwegian-Lutheran lad, clearly offered as a potential addition to the family pantheon. He was handsome and perfectly nice, but not my type. I was furious and told them to never do this again. What I didn't say was that my type, by that point, was as likely to be a lady as a lad, and that the Norwegian part was incidental.

So I strayed off the path to marriage and found other routes to adulthood. I played college basketball and helped start a feminist club on campus. I entered a PhD program. I settled in with my first real girlfriend, and at age twenty-nine finally came out to my parents. In an attempt to counteract their dismay, I informed them—in a part-promise, part-threat—“Someday, gay marriage is going to be legal!” They either didn't care, or didn't believe me. I wasn't sure I cared or believed it either.

Transforming from shy to outgoing to feminist-femme, I streaked my dark hair with pink and ruby red and modeled funky clothes in lo-

cal fashion shows for designer friends. I became a grassroots media activist, joined a pirate radio collective, and made documentary films about sex workers, punk rockers, and heroin addicts. I marched against the World Trade Organization and the Gulf Wars. I earned my PhD.

Then, my partner at the time got pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. For the first time in my adult life I was able to slow the pace of my mind and body and just literally sit—with my baby as well as with myself. Though a committed agnostic, through my baby I was given a glimpse into what seemed to be a sublime love force. I began to silently wonder if such transcendent love could ever be fully achievable (and possible to sustain) between two career-driven adults in the context of a romantic relationship.

When my daughter was still in diapers, I landed a tenure-track faculty job and threw myself into teaching courses in “family,” “inequality,” and “sexuality.” My students critically assessed the politics, practices, and race/class/sexuality privileges of marriage and the wedding industry. I bought a house in what was reported to be the most racially diverse census tract in the United States. I worried that I would become too soft, with my mainstream job and middle-class homeowner status, so I pierced my nose and placed a red glass stone in it to remind myself and others of my political edge.

I had created a colorful, meaningful, scrappy lesbian “lifestyle.” My parents were not thrilled with me being a lesbian (or raising a child outside of heterosexuality and marriage), but were starting to tolerate my life choices. I had no need, or desire, for marriage.

But then I met Shari. We were at a Sociology of Sexuality party—the sort of party where scholars discuss sex rather than engage in it.

For the occasion, my six-foot-two-inch frame looked taller than ever in a pink cowboy hat, tight hot-pink shirt, tight black skirt, and ruby red pumps. We were introduced by a mutual gay male friend: “You know Shari, right? No? You have so much in common! You simply *must* meet her.”

I had to bend slightly to shake her hand—she was petite and muscular, like a lightweight boxer. Unlike me, she was dressed more appropriately for this scholarly occasion: black dress pants, black oxford shirt, and black loafers. I was immediately taken by her handsome beauty and soon recognized her outrageous wit as well. But it took another friend to call my attention to her eyes. “Now those are eyes that you could fall in love with!” she said. When I turned back to take a peek, I saw the most startling, striking blue I’d ever seen.

This would be the first of many startling moments to come.

Our love affair began as a friendship. But after six months (and after both of us became single again), our connection pierced my heart and brought me to my knees. Our desire for each other’s company was also terribly inconvenient. She lived 3,000 miles away, in Manhattan, and was embarking on an ambitious career. I lived in Seattle, had a child (as well as an ex-partner, with whom I shared custody), and my own career. I was not moving, and she wasn’t either.

So for the next few years we had a bicoastal relationship—visits every four to six weeks punctuated by dozens of daily emails, texts, and phone calls. I relished the daily intensity. Our conversations never ran dry, she made me laugh out loud every day, and she was the most romantic person I had ever known. Despite the distance and the demands of our jobs, I had never before felt such a reciprocal, hilarious, and cre-

ative connection with a lover. Though neither of us are religious, when we were together it felt like we existed in a secret, shiny, sacred bubble.

Sometimes one of us would blurt out that we wanted to get married, though I don't know that either of us knew what that meant. Shari steadied her sights on not just the stabilizing idea of "marriage" but on *The Wedding*. She sent me photos of wedding dresses and rings. She already knew what music she wanted to play at *The Wedding*, and sent me romantic notes about living "happily ever after."

I was both titillated and shocked by these feelings, words, and images. Then came my questions: *What, if anything, did our daily engagement have to do with the institution of marriage? How would we get married, living 3,000 miles apart? Would we invite our parents to the wedding? Would they even attend if invited?*

Shari began developing a friendly, lighthearted relationship with my daughter. We met each other's friends and colleagues. Then we met each other's families. Hers is Jewish, from New Jersey via Lithuania and Russia. Mine is, of course, Norwegian-Midwestern farmers. Her parents liked me. My parents liked, respected, and approved of her as well. As a result, they seemed to respect me more, too.

Three years after we first locked eyes, Shari asked me to join her for a summer trip to France, where she was speaking at a conference. Our first night in Paris, on the eve of the city's Gay Pride parade, Shari asked me to marry her, this time "for real." I said yes. For real.

She gave me a princess-cut diamond ring with a band of ruby stones. It was extravagant—and confusing for me. My confusion had nothing to do with our relationship, but about who I would be wearing the ring. I couldn't stop staring at it, as if it were a crystal ball that would reveal its

own meaning. I loved glamour and sparkles, but along with other politically conscious white progressives I wore “bling” as an ironic statement, imagining that vintage hand-me-downs could somehow negate my class and race privilege. This diamond ring left no room for irony; it just called me out of the closet as a middle-class, professional, engaged woman.

I had a long time to furrow my brow over this, since we still had the bicoastal commute, which meant an extended engagement. Over the next two years, though, our time zones aligned: Shari landed a faculty job in San Francisco (a “mere” eight hundred miles away), we bought a home-base house in Seattle, and we were able to settle into a rhythm of seeing each other nearly every weekend and all summer. Shari cultivated a penchant for cooking; I savored her culinary treats and maintained my fondness for dusting. We adopted a cat and published our first academic journal article together. My daughter began to introduce Shari to her friends as her “almost mom.” Shari asked: “When will I be just ‘mom’?” My daughter replied: “Only after you marry my mom.”

Another year passed. I had made it this far before in previous relationships; I knew that after the initial breathlessness of new love wears off, so, too, do romantic wedding fantasies. What’s the point after already sharing home, friends, and family?

But six years after we had met, we were still madly in love. And both of us also wanted—for political, social, and family reasons—to step onto a new public platform as a “married” unit. We set a wedding date for the following year: September 3, 2010.

By that time, my ring had become a friend. It hadn’t interfered with my political commitments; if anything, it helped me clarify them in light of increased consciousness of my own social privileges. But



even with that awakened awareness, I still found myself swept up into the beautiful spectacle of wedding planning. Part of my enthusiasm was simply my fondness for high-femme pleasures. A chance to wear a pretty dress and host a fancy party? Twist my arm!

Still, a lesbian wedding was different. Over the years I had witnessed many hetero-feminist women attempt to exorcise from their weddings the misogynistic and anti-gay ghosts of the marriage industry. I empathized with and appreciated their symbolic subterfuge, but this did not change the fact that when their wedding was over, the social and legal privilege gap between them and me was wider. In contrast I felt that my wedding was inherently a slap in the face of heterosexism. In this era when gay marriage is still mostly unrecognized, the wedding is all we have; it is the entire point.

As a way of working through my thoughts about weddings and the wedding industry while I simultaneously planned our wedding, I launched a blog called "Sapphic Bride," which I dedicated to "Sapphic (queer, lesbian, trans, bi, or just cool) grrls who want an excuse to wear an outrageous wedding gown and/or have critical curiosity about the magnificent, awful, glorious spectacle of American Briededom." One of the blog's key missions was to wage a Sapphic love campaign: "a public quest for my wedding to be featured as a 'real wedding' (not to be confused with a 'real marriage') in *Seattle Bride* magazine."

Weddings are inherently public acts, serving many different audiences and purposes. While I knew that many would disapprove of our wedding (including, potentially, my family), the blog cast a wider net in search of allies and celebrators. I posted occasional photos of pretty dresses and hairdos, but mainly focused on stories related to same-sex

relationships and families. I began to see my own story as part of a much larger thread of global human stories, with unique characters searching for meaning and belonging within their cultural and political environments.

As news of our wedding plans spread we received a variety of responses, from euphoria to confusion to outright disdain.

The euphoria came primarily from women friends, straight and lesbian, who offered to do my hair and makeup, arrange flowers, shop for dresses, throw parties, sing, create photo slideshows, and even officiate. These offers surprised and delighted me; I had suddenly tapped in to a deep current of cultural scripts around wedding planning, perhaps made more enthusiastic due to the increasing visibility of gay marriage. I also realized how much stronger—perhaps even tyrannical—the cultural current must be for many heterosexual couples.

The confusion came from straight folks who weren't anti-gay but just ambivalent about marriage. Some would ask, "But is it legal?" To which I would reply, "There is no law against having a wedding." Others suggested that we skip the wedding, save the money, and "just elope." *Hub?* My adult life had already felt like a state of forced elopement, driven by other people's discomfort with my love choices. For us, "elopement" would not just be legally meaningless but redundant.

The disdain was expressed, subtly rather than overtly, by LGBTQ friends and acquaintances who wanted to preserve a particular historical understanding of "queer" life and identity in opposition to mainstream culture and institutions. I support critiques of all social institutions, but can't we not just critique but also help lead conversations on

how to best re-create and diversify mainstream institutions? In the past few decades, the institution of marriage in the United States has undergone many progressive legal reforms; can't we see same-sex marriage as simply the continuation of such progressive reforms and one of many pragmatic anti-oppression strategies? Or must LGBTQ activists resist opportunities to join all mainstream institutions, closing ranks around anti-marriage queer activism?

I chose the former strategy, and I began devising my Trojan dress.

In contrast to my youthful black-wedding-dress fantasies, I now (as a tenured professor in my early forties) envisioned something long and sleek, like something I could wear to the Oscars. I found Chrissy Wai-Ching, a hip young fabric artist who designs and sews organic silk clothing out of her studio just a mile from our house. Together, Shari, Chrissy, and I designed a floor-length two-toned cream-colored gown for me, with halter straps and kick pleats. It was both funky and elegant, and the most expensive piece of clothing I had ever owned. It had no taffeta, sequins, or lace, and I wasn't wearing a veil, but there was no mistaking this for just another pretty dress: This was a full-on wedding dress. Yet I had no illusion that it would admit me into the castle of heterosexual privilege, even if I had wanted to go there. Instead, this gown would simply escort me into a new kind of public relationship with Shari, with my family, and with the social world.

As our wedding day arrived, I knew I would be facing my entire living pantheon (now in their seventies), many of whom I had not seen in years. While thrilled and surprised that they were attending, I was emotionally overwhelmed by the significance of their presence.

A few hours before the ceremony, Shari and I donned our

wedding gear and hopped in a car with our photographer. It was a sunny afternoon on Labor Day weekend, so thousands of people were out enjoying the last days of summer. We were on another wedding mission: posing for photos in public parks, on the streets, and in Seattle's famous public market. As our photographer clicked away, so did dozens of onlookers. Knowing that others were watching emboldened us to widen our smiles. We felt like celebrities.

Our pre-wedding antics succeeded in breaking our anxiety, and I made it through the wedding ceremony without any embarrassing sobs or fainting spells. My friend Gabriella Gutierrez y Muhs officiated; besides being a women's studies professor, she had officiated weddings for undocumented migrant workers, and saw ours as an extension of helping people who otherwise could not get legally married. Our daughter, then age ten, was my "maid of honor." We had three "flower children," including my three-year-old nephew, who wore a traditional Norwegian outfit. To recognize Shari's cultural background, we included a selection of traditional Jewish music and rituals.

After the ceremony, several people gave prepared toasts and others sang, including Shari's brother, who performed "Love Me Tender." Our parents, who had just met each other for the first time, smiled and exchanged stories about being the descendants of immigrant farmers.

So what, if anything, has changed for us as a result of this? Absolutely nothing in terms of financial or legal benefits. As of this writing, gay marriage is still not recognized in either Washington or California. Domestic partnership is available in both states, but because we keep separate finances and insurance policies, we are not registered as partners. I also never bothered to follow through with the *Seattle Bride*

campaign. Compared to the euphoria of our wedding, it just didn't matter to me anymore.

But something profound happened that night, and over the entire wedding weekend. A transformation occurred in us, in our families, and in our friends. Several guests told us it was the most meaningful wedding they had ever attended. Straight people said their kids should have come to see it, as it was a historic event demonstrating the power of true love. Our daughter gave a spontaneous and loving toast to her "moms." One of my aunts said, while dancing next to me at the reception, "Now I have to treat you differently, since you are a married lady."

But perhaps the transformation was best expressed two days later, at a party at my parents' home. After dinner, ceremoniously, my father asked Shari and me to sit in chairs facing the party guests. Then, as if we were being initiated into a secret society, my mother solemnly announced that there was a song that she and my three aunts would sing. Even before they began, my tears flowed. And they cried, too, as they sang to Shari: "Welcome to the family, we're glad that you have come to share your life with us."

It was a song that had apparently been sung, unbeknownst to me, to others who had married into the family. The song felt ancient, surreal, haunting; it also felt familiar and comforting.

And so, as gay marriage continues to be publicly debated, perhaps the private resolution of our deepest conflicts around queer life and marriage can be best resolved in small family gatherings like this. One pantheon at a time.

**PHOTO:**

Kari Lerum (in dress) kisses her bride Shari at Seattle's Public Market. *Photo by TK.*