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Always the Schizophrenic Bridesmaid...

by **Chrystine Webb Shearouse**

I wait in traffic behind a bumper-sticker with a car attached to it that proclaims, "Happiness is yelling BINGO!" I wonder how old the biddy in the Buick is, steering the giant green wreck with the drooping muffler like she was playing a videogame. When she nudges up, I stay put. I want no part of her. She looks like the type of person who spends her free time with groups of old ladies going to Atlantic City on Greyhound bus lines, stopping at every single rest stop to annoy people on purpose by cutting the line and acting like she doesn't know what everyone is hissing about behind her.

Or maybe I am just cranky. Yes, that is probably it. Big Head Cranky because if I glance over, I confirm that on the passenger seat from today's mail is another one of those annoying invitations for a friend's engagement party. Yay. I will go dressed in my finest orange muumuu and drink from the bottomless cup of self-pity, lacing it periodically with some homemade Bitter Envy from the flask I keep in my garter at all times.

I received an email from her a few months ago. I wasn't sure Pamelina was serious when she told me that she was "in a serious relationship heading toward marriage." Come on. Really? Pamelina? The last of the Red Hots? The mighty have fallen. "Despite my fears about marriage and commitment, I look forward to doing both with Nicolas. He is the right person for me and as the cliché goes, yep, *You just know.*" She no doubt said this last phrase with a smile on her face, chucking herself on the arm. Where does she come up with this stuff? And so soon? How perfect. They will be married a week before Christmas next year.

This is what I call the Poodle Report. When my friends start talking like that, whether married for years or just recently, they sound just like little yipping dogs with stupid grooming. Here's one of my favorites, and from a girl who went to Wesleyan, no less: "I truly like who I've become and I wouldn't be the person I am now but for this marriage." Eew. If they heard that out of someone else's mouth, what would they think? And yet, I stay friends because I like her Christmas parties, and her hubby is always promising to hook me up with one of his buddies from the advertising firm he just started with his Bar Mitzvah money.

Always the Schizophrenic Bridesmaid . . . by Chrystine Webb Shearouse. Permission granted by the author.

The last time I went to a wedding, my friend Natalia begged me to be her bridesmaid. It was one of the bigger mistakes of my life. I had to sit in on all 15 of the fittings. The dress she insisted I purchase and wear was a draw. No, I will never be able to wear it again. Squished-pea colored organdy is not a versatile fabric. But the merciful sleeves hid my upper arms, and the neckline drew attention away from my double chin.

She also wanted me to go with her to the mall—to each of her favorite stores to register. William Sonoma, Nordstrom, Michael C. Fina, prolonged by three phone calls to her fiancé while she deliberated on which color blender to ask for, since it comes in navy AND hunter green. And another call to find out how many medium sized ramekins he thought they would need when his family came over for her “famous” crème caramel. Then I had to do her “the favor” of getting her ring appraised because she thought it would be gauche if she did it herself.

A week before the event, when she finally asked me how I was doing with all of the preparations for the wedding, she was astonished that I had not invited anyone. She insisted I had to have a date, and he couldn't be my gay best friend Paul. She said it was too cliché, and she didn't want her friends from prep school thinking I was a “fag-hag.” When I refused to invite my mother's friends' son, whom I had known since kindergarten, and who was getting his MBA at Columbia, she took it personally, and she would have begun to cry if I had not told her I was going to bring my handsome Italian co-worker who spent an hour each morning leaning over my desk making me laugh with jokes about our boss. I did not tell her he was probably gay too.

The night before the event, we went to dinner with her friends from “school” as nature abhors a vacuum, and I abhorred them as best I could. Her friends from “school” were each married and severely happy with 2.5 children, a lawyer/banker/CEO husband, a vacation house on the Sound, and a Labrador retriever who just HAD to go to the groomer. These women insisted we go to a dive bar to get Natalia as drunk as possible, so that we could make her humiliate herself. When they asked me what dive bar in the area we should go to, I had to tell them I didn't know because I don't like to drink. That put a pall on the group, and when they picked their chins up off the floor, I had to deflect the questions, ignore the whispers and pretend not to mind the rather abrupt loss of credibility. The best part of the evening was that due to my unwillingness to play nice with others, I got to beg out early. The next morning, I felt excited and happy to be at the hotel's breakfast on time, drinking orange juice and calling everyone's rooms to cheerily irritate them from their hung-over stupors.

Natalia has been back from her honeymoon for three weeks now. I haven't heard from her. She hasn't returned my calls. I can't imagine what is keeping her from calling me. Guilt over not having been a better bridesmaid brings that to mind as something I should consider.

I can hear my mother's voice in my head as I think these thoughts, all the way from the lazy-boy recliner she keeps in the garage so she can take naps in peace and quiet. She tells me not to be such a trollop and that someday I am going to get the flashes and wish I had been more kind to my Demon Lovers who used to come a-calling.

Ah, the Demon Lovers. My friends are used to them by now. Who is going to be the next Demon Lover? What strange maladies will this one have? Addiction to cold medicine? (Sinus tabs, preferably.) Maybe a well-dressed professor with suicidal tendencies? Simultaneous girlfriends he tries to pass off as *friends*? I am really sorry things didn't work out with the guy who had the phobia against using the same toothbrush twice. I doubt anyone wants to know about the one who wanted to...or the other one that wanted me to do that to him. I love them despite their peccadilloes. Actually, I usually love them with the belief that after having the benefit of knowing me for long enough, they will change their strange ways and become the Ward Cleaver to my June, the Ricky Martin to my Christina Aguilera. But it never happens, and I end up disillusioned and crying to the son of a Catholic, working as a Communist (or was it Columnist?) whose uncle had patented the length of Q-tips, and *isn't it all so sad*? The next day, I've forgotten which paper the guy writes for, so I really can't call him and ask him if I left my Gameboy on the bar.

I drive my blue economy car through the yellow cones, the reason for the traffic, the regimentation that enables us to all drive by the workmen slowly to check out their asses in their dirty green workpants. I turn the corner and park behind an orange car that has another precious gem stuck to its rear: "I love candles. Do you love candles?" I want to consider the devastating social ramifications of that bumper-sticker, but I don't want to be late for a party at my friend Malissa's house. Malissa is another of my Poodle friends, and six months pregnant.

On a regular basis, Malissa spouts items like "My husband was everything I had prayed for, and then some..." giggling like a schoolgirl as she says it. She refers to her pregnant belly as "Daddy's widdle gurl." She never talks about her last marriage anymore (which I went to even though I was not asked to be in the wedding party, which at the time was an insult). But when she was single, she used to wear her *last marriage* like a gold plated charm bracelet made of tin that you notice from across the room because of the cacophonous jangle it makes. That marriage only lasted a week, but the divorce proceedings made the Hundred Years War look like a coffee break.

I walk up to Malissa's ugly brown split level that she has lived in with her new "luv-bunny" for a year and a half now. She is so proud of this house, and has no intention of painting, apparently. I ring the bell. I open the door, and although I know better, I bound up the stairs to the living room, announcing, "I'm here, and I've brought my cellulite with me!" and realize I am the last guest to show. I look around at the bland Midwestern-transplant faces. A light bulb goes on in my head, linking the adhesive message on the car outside to the proceedings within, as I note the array of folksy candles set up around the room. I know I have made a huge mistake. I will now spend the evening with inane, insipid "gals" who are dedicated to asking the "candle lady" earnest, heartfelt questions about...what else, candles. For each question, they receive a small peach colored votive candle *as a reward*. As for me, there is nothing I need to ask the "Candle Lady." Hence, I receive nothing, but I busy myself pretending that it is the most yummy hummus and vegetable dip I have *ever tasted*. I feel impolite having such disrespectful, murderous feelings about the candle lady, so I do penance by forcing myself to order the only two items in the catalogue

I can stomach. I write the code numbers for two round candles in the new “sport” scent, the only one that does not smell like baby powder, lilacs or lavender. I hand the candle-lady her order form so that she can tally my \$40 order and leave as quickly as possible. Another intellectually homicidal evening.

Nauseous with a fear which does not speak of sanity, I come home to my dark apartment. I turn on every light as I go around my small studio home, peppered with paintings from one dead relative and dusty books from another. I fear that the spirits of the owners are contained in the objects, and if I let onto my panic, their ghosts will visit me when I fall asleep. Specters from relationships past, present and future, showing me how I went wrong, what I should have done better and where I will end up (unmarried with nine cats), if I don’t learn to have a little quality control in choosing more suitable male friends. At every dark corner, I hesitate. I expect to see a dead body slumped over, leaking blood. Even in the bathroom, I pull back the shower curtain, expecting the imaginary worst. Nothing is there, and I consider being calm again.

I fill my time before bed pretending that I am in a house with the man of my dreams. I imagine my big Tudor in a better part of town, white granite gravel driveway, and a big, green backyard. We commiserate about the taxes to neighbors at dinner parties we give, serving crème caramel for desert in our twelve medium-sized white ceramic ramekins. We will never tell the neighbors about our bumper sticker collection.

I imagine we have just put the boys to bed in their blue plaid flannel pajamas. I am exhausted from carpool to and from soccer practice. I pretend that I twist my ring, which is ten years old now, whenever I get stressed out. We are enjoying the quiet in the absence of sound in the house, which is still, and without the children’s voices. I pretend to notice that we are low on milk and put it on my list for a trip to the grocery store tomorrow morning after I drop the kids off at school.

At 11 p.m., I set my alarm clock and settle into the sheets on my futon. Turning off the light, I notice the sound of the sirens outside my window. Then I hear my deep breaths as I try to relax each part of my body into a dreamless sleep.