

A Ring, a Pair of Shoes, a Wedding: the Ties that Bind, and Unbind, When a Daughter Marries



I'm sitting across from my daughter at a table in a trendy Toronto restaurant, our first meetup since her wedding two months earlier.

The catalyst for this whirlwind trip is a Bata Shoe Museum exhibition, *Manolo Blahnik: The Art of Shoes*. Such a perfect pairing—a daughter with a thing for Manolos and a mother with a deep curiosity about a museum devoted to the evolution of footwear in all its cultural significance.

We lift our wine glasses, a toast to our time together, more and more like stolen moments. The glint of her engagement ring, now paired with a wedding band, catches my eye. Unlike family jewels more often passed down when someone dies, the simple round solitaire on my daughter's hand became hers very much in the spirit it became mine. "Why wait till I'm dead for you to you wear it?" my mother had said when she spontaneously took

the diamond pendant from her neck years ago and clasped it around mine. I was in a period of distress. I think she saw it as a talisman. I wore it as a dainty pendant for years, repurposed it into an elegant domed ring.

“Are you sure?” my daughter had asked when I offered her the diamond. She knew how much significance this beautiful stone held. She needed reassurance that I really was ready to give it up, let it be recast into then the engagement ring I believe it was meant to be. I can’t help thinking that my mother, were she alive, would take pleasure at what she set in motion.

Memory is a bit of a trickster. She plays with our hearts and minds, wreaks havoc on our sense of passing time. Two months ago, in a setting as spectacular as it gets, I danced the night away at my daughter’s wedding. Too many years ago to count, I read bedtime stories to her. In the interim, I straddled the fence between giving her what I thought she needed versus what she asked of me as she traversed that knotty path from girlhood to womanhood. Not quite a helicopter mom, a far cry from a tiger mom, more in *The Runaway Bunny* mode. Smack in the middle of the Margaret Wise Brown children’s classic, the mother says to the bunny who tests her with his scenarios for running away:

If you become a bird and fly away from me, I will be a tree that you come home to.

All the scenarios in the story have their charm and logic and delightful artwork. Each one reminds the little bunny that he’ll only get so far without his mother at his heels. But the bird and tree motif takes the mother-child bond to figurative heights. I may not be able to protect my daughter from every bit of harm and heartbreak, and the better part of me knows that’s a healthy thing. Still, for better or for worse, I can’t help myself. The impulse to nurture does not necessarily end when the bird leaves the nest.

On the surface marriage changes very little, and our pilgrimage to Toronto takes its place in a string of mother-daughter escapades over the years,

many of them spurred by music: Blink 182 at Roseland. U2 at Madison Square Garden. Lady Gaga at Staples Center. Bruce Springsteen at the Meadowlands. The mother of all intergenerational rock concerts, Desert Trip 2016: Bob Dylan and the Rolling Stones, Neil Young and Paul McCartney, The Who and Roger Waters. Her fiancé and a high school friend of mine were with us. My daughter has friends who think I'm cool. I have friends who remind me how lucky I am to have this kind of bond with my daughter.

On a deeper level, something changes profoundly. In the months leading up to the wedding day, I found myself weepy. I listened endlessly to Leonard Cohen, *Dance Me to the End of Love*. Sentimentality certainly played its part. Marriage is an affirmation of love, a binding of two individuals and two families. Weddings ritualize the love with ceremony and celebration. They touch us with longing and loss. My mother and father, long gone, would not be there.

But this weepiness seemed less about everyone I loved whose faces would not be in the wedding album and more about the one person at the heart of it all. The bride. My daughter. It seemed more about letting her go in a way I had not yet done and maybe didn't really want to, letting myself feel the mix of joy and sorrow this life marker brings. The joy, unmitigated, finds me basking at the way my daughter has learned to negotiate the skills it takes to manage her life as an adult and what brought her to share her life with a loving, giving, dependable man. I love my son-in-law. I sleep better knowing he sleeps at my daughter's side.

The sorrow would wash over like an all-knowing presence asking the unanswerable: where did the time go? Buddhist wisdom tries to keep us from clinging to thoughts about what's lost to us, hopes about what may or may never be. But cycle-of-life markers, with their constancy, have a way of settling in our hearts. As family rituals go, weddings are especially riddled with assumption and expectation. The day-of would find me just where I

needed to be, taking my place in the chain of mothers leading daughters down a path to a moment and place as familiar as it is unknown.

My daughter would not wear a veil, though she would be married by a rabbi. The vows she and her fiancé wrote would bring more than one person, including the bride herself, to tears. Yes, everything changes. Moments dissolve into days and weeks, months and years. Coming home has a different ring to it when a daughter is making a home of her own.

That home may, or may not, include children though it's likely always to have dogs. This was not something we ever talked about before marriage but now it's on her mind. Her married friends are having babies. She's not so sure she can bring children into a world more apocalyptic by the year. She surprises me with a question: "Are you okay with not being a grandmother?" She assumes it's something all mothers look forward to. "You have to do what's right for you," I say. And I mean it.

Another mother, more invested in the assumption that a child's marriage holds the promise and joy of becoming a grandmother, might simply say you don't have to decide now. Better to be hopeful than pushy. Another mother, who thinks she knows her daughter better than she knows herself, might say you're just not ready. Maybe it's a little too soon after the wedding to be thinking about crossing the threshold to parenthood.

I love babies, really I do. I love the way their feet curl and kick, body language at its purest. I love the way they check you out, more than a glance, not quite a stare. I especially love the way toddlers let you know that every little discovery is a major one and the way they can look into your eyes with no expectation of a response. Don't even get me started on five-year-olds, with their storybook voices and the tiny tea sets they lay out, offering up a cup of imaginary brew. My own daughter, at five, loved to engage me in a game she called 'jewelry store.' She would spread her trinkets on a blanket, invite me to make a pretend purchase. An evolving sense of value played its part in her deeming one item "too expensive" for

me, another “too special” to her. “You get what you get,” she’d say, holding up the necklace “just perfect” for me.

And yet, for all my love of children, and all those Facebook likes on the walls of friends posting photos of newborn grandchildren and toddlers doing the delightfully silly things we expect of them, to be or not be to a grandmother remains little more than a passing thought. If one day I get that phone call, a baby is on the way, I’ll look forward to being as doting as a long-distance grandmother can be. Or if I get asked that question again—are you okay with not being a grandmother?—I’ll turn it around, with the wisdom of all the grandmothers before me: are you okay with not becoming a mother?

Every hello eventually becomes a good-bye. My daughter and I take our leave, head to our corresponding departure gates at the airport. My flight, scheduled to take off before hers, is canceled. Air traffic congestion, weather—who knows the real reason—but there’s no way out of Toronto for me until tomorrow. I text her to let her know. “Should I cancel my flight?” she asks. The shoe is on the other foot, a daughter concerned about her mother. “Not to worry,” I reassure her. “It won’t be the first time I’ve spent a night alone in a hotel.” Besides, she has a husband, and two dogs, waiting for her to come home.

Deborah Batterman is the author of *Just Like February* (SparkPress 2018), a finalist in the 2019 Next Generation Indie Book Awards, 2018 Best Book Awards, International Fiction Awards, and American Fiction Awards. A story from her collection, *Shoes Hair Nails* (Uccelli Press, 2006), was nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and her work appears in anthologies and literary journals, including *The Dr. T. J. Eckleburg Review*, *The Fem*, *Women Writers/Women’s Books*, *Writer Unboxed*, *Akashic Books’ Terrible Twosdays*, *Mom Egg Review*, and *Every Mother Has a Story, Vol. 2* (Shebooks/Good Housekeeping). In 2012 she published *Because My Name Is Mother*, a digital collection of essays linked by the reminder that every mother is a daughter. too. A native New Yorker, she has worked over

the years as a writer, editor, and teaching artist. Her blog is an exploration of all the small things, and the big ones, that impact our day-to-day lives.