

Anniversary

It's night. He's sitting in his armchair reading the newspaper. Sees the date; the 18th. Oh my goodness, he thinks, I missed our wedding anniversary. He knew it was coming up. Their thirtieth, so a big one. Knew it a few weeks ago, and thought about it for a while just a few days ago. Wasn't going to do anything about it. I'll remember it, he thought. Sit back, put aside whatever I'm doing or thinking, maybe pour myself an Irish whiskey over a cube or two of ice and just remember the day. Wouldn't even tell the kids on the phone that night; wouldn't want to make them sad, thinking about it. Then yesterday came and went and now it's the day after. He has photographs of the wedding taken by his younger sister and a friend, but won't go for them, though they're easy to get. They're in a regular letter envelope in the top dresser drawer on the left with other photos. He'll sit. It was in their apartment. Her apartment until he got rid of his and moved in. No more than thirty people at the ceremony in their dining room-living room. Then another twenty people or so came to the reception, about ten of them people they'd become friends with in the building, she with most of them before he met her. She chose the wine, a Spanish red and a Washington State white. They got most of the food from Zabar's: a whole sliced turkey, roast beef, cheeses, salads, several kinds of smoked fish. Champagne. She chose that too: the one Churchill always drank, she said, and she once helped harvest the grapes of it in France for three days, in which she got room and board and four bottles of champagne as payment. A Black Forest

wedding cake from the same bakery—Grossinger’s—that made his bar mitzvah cake. Her mother brought over a pot roast she made and a meat slicer and sliced it in the kitchen with the help of her housekeeper, who during the reception did most of the dishwashing and cleaning up. Someone brought over thirty-six champagne glasses and thirty-six wine glasses and a week later picked them up. Maybe he’s wrong about that. He now thinks they rented the glasses from the same company they rented the dishes and silver and cloth napkins and two buffet tables and tablecloths. After the ceremony was over someone said “Hey, what happened to the traditional breaking of glass?” The rabbi said “We talked about it beforehand and the groom seems to have some objection to it.” “The bride too,” he said, and several people laughed. “Well, it’s supposed to also, besides the destruction of the first or second temple in Jerusalem, I think it is and where it was, represent the breaking of the you-know-what.” There was one child there, a friend’s young son who because his sitter didn’t show she couldn’t leave him home alone, and he said “What’s Phil mean?” and he said “Oy, what have I started?” Abby’s dissertation advisor played Bach on the piano in the living room before the ceremony began. From *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, or maybe it was one of the Partitas or French Suites. “Kiss the bride,” the rabbi said, “you’re allowed to now,” and he kissed her and she kissed him back. A few people shouted “Mazel tov.” Then he hugged her and she hugged him and he started crying. His mother said “Look at you; you’re dripping wet, and you don’t see the bride crying.” She wiped his eyes with a tissue and said “Those are tears of happiness.” “What else could they be?” and he burst out crying again. In a story he started a few weeks before the wedding he had the mother in it say that tears-of-happiness line. He couldn’t really explain, not so much that he knew he’d burst out crying soon after the rabbi pronounced

them husband and wife, but the exact words his mother would say to it. The story, a long one, which he finished a few days before the wedding, became the title story of a collection of his that came out three years later. A week before the wedding Abby told him she thinks their lovemaking a month ago to get her pregnant worked, and they bought a pregnancy kit to use on the first day of their honeymoon. A couple of weeks before the wedding they took his nieces and nephews, or the ones that could make it, and the spouses of two of them and the daughter of a woman he lived with for four years before he knew Abby, to dinner at their favorite Chinese restaurant, Empire Szechuan, on Broadway and Ninety-ninth Street. Or maybe it was One Hundredth, and Hunan Balcony, a restaurant they liked almost as much, was on Ninety-ninth. They did it to cut down on the number of guests at the wedding. His two older brothers were his best men. His third older brother, whom he was closest in age to and who would have been his only best man, died in late November or early December twenty-two years before when the freighter he was on disappeared in a period of violent storms in the North Atlantic. He wrote a story and also part of a novel about it too. He thinks it was his oldest brother who gave him the ring at the ceremony to put on Abby's finger. He has no idea who handed Abby the ring to put on his finger. They'd picked up the pre-fitted rings at a jewelry store in the Diamond Exchange on West Forty-seventh Street a few days before. Then they had lunch at the restaurant overlooking the skating rink at Rockefeller Center. "The only other time I was here," she said, "was when my mother took me to Radio City Music Hall for the Christmas extravaganza. I don't remember, but should have expected, the restaurant being so gaudy and touristy and the food being this bad, though all I had that one time was a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and an ice cream soda. Why'd we choose this place?" and he said "Since

I was sixteen I always wanted to have lunch here and then go ice skating, or the reverse, with a girl I was infatuated with and who seemed to have the same feelings for me.” “So here we are, then,” she said, “but no skating. I wouldn’t want to fall in front of hundreds of onlookers.” The rings are now in a heart-shaped jewelry box on his dresser. Her parent’s rings, much wider and thicker than their thin ones, are in the same box. He once found her ring in the basement dryer of the building they had their first apartment in Baltimore in. It’s a mystery how it got there, she said, since she never takes it off her finger and didn’t feel it missing and he does all their laundry. It was the coldest January 17th on record in New York. Four to five degrees below zero and maybe five to ten degrees colder than that on Riverside Drive where their apartment building was and which their apartment faced. The windows had been cleaned outside and in by a window washer the day before the wedding. Next day all the windows except the bedroom’s—the bathroom window was made of frosted glass, so you couldn’t see out of it anyway—were completely frosted over from the radiators and oven going and so many people breathing in the apartment. Two of the cars of guests wouldn’t start after the wedding. One was his oldest brother’s, so they pushed it for about half an hour, with his brother’s wife at the wheel, till it got started. The other car the couple had to call AAA and they waited in the lobby for two hours before a service truck came. He drove the last guests to their apartment buildings in Manhattan when they couldn’t get a cab or car service to take them. When he got back, Abby was washing a stack of dishes the housekeeper had to leave if she was to get her ride to Brooklyn. “Leave it till the morning,” he said, and she said “Can’t; they attract vermin.” “Please, don’t mention that word on our wedding day. Okay. We’ll do them together,” and he washed and she dried and they then switched places. Then he folded up the buffet

tables, put the napkins and tablecloths in a plastic trash bag, put the dishes, glasses and silver in the boxes they came in, took several boxes of empty bottles and bags of garbage to the service elevator and made sure the boxes were closed and the bags tied up tight. “I don’t see how we’ll ever be able to start our honeymoon,” he said. “Look at the time. Would you mind very much if I call the inn in the morning to say we’ll be a day late? Since we’ll be doing this in such short notice, I think we should probably pay for the missed day, don’t you?” “I’m sure they won’t ask us to. I’ll take care of it, but I won’t use the excuse of the wedding and all our work. I don’t want them to know we just got married and feel they have to make a special fuss over us.” In bed, he said “I never would have believed I’d be saying this on my one and only wedding day, but would you feel even slightly rejected if we skipped the consummation-of-marriage part tonight? I know I’m bushed and probably shouldn’t even try.” “I would have suggested the same thing if I saw signs of it in you. And now that we’re delaying our honeymoon by a day, we’ll have all of tomorrow to rest up. Go to sleep, my darling,” and she kissed him and turned off her light. “You’re not going to read, are you?” and he said no and she said “Good.” Of course it only went something like that, not exactly that. His younger sister, who came in from L.A. for the wedding, put together without telling them a whole tray of crudités for the reception. He wished she hadn’t but still didn’t say anything. They had plenty of vegetables already and the arrangement of hers was ugly and the tray took up too much space on the table. Morning of the wedding he drove down to his mother’s apartment and got the tray of crudités and a large coffee urn his mother had—she only took it out of his box for the Christmas-day party she gave every year. He also picked up the wedding cake at the bakery, which was right down the block from his mother’s place, and then stopped at Zabar’s for everything they

ordered there. “Sliced raw zucchini and yellow squash just doesn’t work for the kind of reception we planned,” Abby said, “but what can we do? If we don’t put the tray out, your sister will be hurt.” “We can get rid of the squashes at least,” he said, “or cut the number of them down by half, and also the scallions and radishes.” His Uncle Norm and Aunt Sylvie gave him an envelope before the ceremony began. “So we don’t forget later,” Norm said. “I wish you hadn’t,” he said, “because you really didn’t need to. Abby told me not to say that, and certainly not to write it on the wedding invitation, which I wanted to do, and to just say thanks, so thanks.” “A little something to help get you started,” Sylvie said. “I know. That’s very thoughtful of you. But you have to know I do okay as a college teacher. Pay increase every year. A much bigger one if I become an associate professor. Pension, good medical insurance and now for Abby. And a little even comes in from my writing and more than that from her visiting teaching jobs. But it’s much appreciated, don’t think it isn’t.” They got two more envelopes from Abby’s side of the family and didn’t open any of them till they came back from the honeymoon. “You want to write the thank-you notes,” he said to Abby, “because I’m no good at it. And it’s just money. I don’t want money.” The rabbi told him on the phone the day before the wedding that he had a funeral in Westchester to preside over soon after the wedding ceremony, so they had to start on the dot. He was attracted to one of Abby’s friends from the moment he got there, stayed about an hour longer than he said he would so he could talk to her, and a year later they got engaged, but soon broke it off. The friend he’s known the longest but hasn’t seen much of the last two years, drew him aside at the reception and said “There’s something I think you should know. Marilyn and I came here together because we’ve known you since college and love you and wanted to celebrate this great day with you and Abby. But we’ve

separated after more than twenty years and are getting a divorce.” “I’m sorry to hear it, and wouldn’t have thought it by the way you act together. Maybe something can be worked out.” “Nothing can, and I’m not sorry and neither is she. We’ve both already found ideal partners for the next thirty years, knock on wood, but of course couldn’t bring them.” Their friend who volunteered to take pictures at the wedding told him “I don’t think many I took will be good. The flash only worked one time out of five. Maybe, if we’re lucky, some of the non-flash ones will come out, but dark.” “Well, we have my sister as a back up with her camera.” His sister told him a short time later “I could only take eight shots, four of them of Abby cutting the cake with you standing behind her and two of that cute little boy, before the film ran out. I can run up the block to a store to get more film or one of those throwaway cameras, but it’s so cold and icy out.” “That’s all right,” he said, “so long as we have a few photos, yours and Mark’s. I’m sure if I had been delegated to be the photographer at someone’s wedding the same thing would have happened, or worse, though the weather street conditions might not have been so bad.” “You’re just saying that to be kind.” His older sister said to him “You’ve married the most beautiful and remarkable and personable and intelligent woman I’ve ever met. How’d you do it? What did she see in you?” “Thanks a lot.” “I’m only kidding, my sweet brother.” “No, it’s true,” he said. “What did she see in me, I don’t know. Maybe that we both love Chekhov and think he’s the greatest writer who ever lived.” “Who?” “Chekhov, the Russian writer.” “That makes sense,” she said. “Now I understand. I should read him if you two think so highly of him.” He got up around five the next morning and made himself an Alka-Seltzer, got back in bed and burped. “What’s that?” Abby said, and he said “Alka-Seltzer,” and she said “Loud.” She’d turned over in bed during the night and was now facing him. It was still dark out

and he felt around for her head. He kissed her forehead, nose, lips, cheek and neck. She said "Please, dear, let me sleep. I'm so tired. We'll do everything later on." "Don't worry about it," he said. "We already cleaned up the place and put away everything we rented. I can even call the party company later to come pick it all up today." "I meant the other thing." "I see," he said. "I can be so stupid. Yes, you're right. Can I hug you, at least?" "You can hug me but it's best if you do it while I'm on my other side." She turned over and he hugged her from behind and soon fell asleep. There were other things. The wedding cake was a big hit. "What a great idea," someone said to him, "Black Forest. Almost everyone's favorite, so you won't have to throw half of it away. There'll be no shortage of people who'll want to take a piece home." The car skidded on a patch of ice on Riverside Drive and Ninety-seventh Street when he was on his way to his mother's apartment to pick up the coffee urn, spun around a hundred eighty degrees and narrowly missed hitting a parked car. He sat in the car for a minute, motor running, thinking how lucky or unlucky can a guy get in the same day, and then turned the car around to face downtown again when the driver in the car behind him honked. The wind on Riverside Drive blew the urn out of his hands when he was carrying it to his building and he had to cross the Drive to retrieve the lid. When he got back to the apartment Abby said she saw him through the window crossing the street and climbing into a snowdrift and wondered what he was doing. He told her and said "I think the box the urn was in is gone forever. Wind just picked it up and carried it away. And you know what? I realize now the one thing we don't have enough of is coffee. I'll have to get a pound or two at University Market." "I don't want you going out again," she said. "It's too cold out and you've done enough this morning." "I gotta. Some people might drink too much at the reception and want some strong coffee before

they drive home.” “Then call your mother or one of your brothers and ask them to bring a can of coffee if they can spare it.” “No, I want this wedding to be perfect, and I know just what blend to get. Kona. The best University has, and finely ground,” and she said “Then put your Duck boots on and a change of socks, because your shoes must be soaked.” “See what an idiot I am? These are my only shoes and I need them for the wedding. I’ll have to put them under the radiator to dry and then shine them, so I’ll have to get shoe polish at the market.” Lois, Abby’s best friend, came an hour before the first guests showed up and took her into the bedroom to fix her hair and help her get dressed and have a long chat. “Don’t try to talk her out of the marriage,” he said before they closed the door to the main room. “It’s too late. The rabbi’s on his way.” That was the last he saw them till a minute or two before the ceremony began. When they came out from the back and the rabbi told Abby where to stand in front of him, people oohed and ahed and he thought Oh, gosh, I’ve never seen her look so beautiful. Her hair, her outfit, just enough makeup, and no eyeshadow or lipstick, which she knows he doesn’t like. Did her father meet her at the door to the back and walked her over to the rabbi? He doesn’t think so. He thinks she told him that morning “He did it my first marriage, and we know how that one ended up, so I don’t want him to be reminded of that day.” Did she carry a bridal bouquet? He thinks she did, a very small one, or maybe they’re always that small, but he can’t picture it. He knows she brought a lot of flowers for the wedding—for the main room, maybe for herself too. Or Lois brought the bridal bouquet—that’s it—and the flowers for the apartment were delivered while he was out getting the coffee urn and food. Now it’s coming back. A small bouquet in her hand when the two women left the bedroom or bathroom or wherever they were in back after the rabbi asked for the guests to assemble in the living

room and the bride to come in. Lois took the bouquet from her before the rabbi started the ceremony and handed it to her husband to put in a vase. “Where my going to find one?” he said, and she said “Then just an ordinary glass of water, but we don’t want it to wilt.” He also doesn’t remember if he stood in front of the rabbi first and then she came out from in back and stood beside him. How is it usually done, because that’s how they probably did it, but he doesn’t know. He probably stood there first, because he does remember someone—Ben, he thinks, Lois’s husband—knocking on the door to the back and then opening it and saying “The rabbi’s ready.” “Who has the rings?” the rabbi said, just before he began reading from a notebook or several sheets of paper he was holding. “I want to be prepared for when the moment comes.” After they were married, the rabbi gave Abby a ketubah, he thinks it’s called—he could always look it up—and briefly explained to her and the guests what it was and that it had no legal binding and told her to put it away for safekeeping—that was the traditional thing for the bride to do. She thanked him, said “It’s quite beautiful, the design and lettering,” and gave the envelope with the ketubah in it to Lois to hold. And his friend Manny? He came to the reception dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt and old jeans and sneakers. “Why didn’t you tell me it was going to be such a formal affair? I thought a marriage ceremony at City Hall sometime this past week, which nobody was invited to but your mother and her parents, and today a few friends over for drinks and hors d’oeuvres.” He brought his wedding gift with him, wrapped in newspaper and a ribbon, and insisted he open it now. A meat cleaver. “It’s a very good one, made in Germany, so the best. And since, like me, you both like to do a lot of cooking and you’re now back to eating meats, you could use one.” They never used it. It scared her to even have it in the house, so about a year later they gave it to Goodwill. And her two Siamese

cats? What did they do with them? They must have stayed on one of the shelves in the linen closet, which is where they usually disappeared to when there were even only a few guests. They were lucky, with the front door being opened so much, the cats didn't run out of the apartment and up or down the stairs to one of the other floors. No, he now remembers bringing them to her parents' apartment the day before the wedding and picking them up the day they came back from their short honeymoon. Anything he leave out? Plenty. He thought that wedding day the happiest in his life. That is, till about eight months later when, after a long and difficult delivery, their first baby came out without her obstetrician using forceps or performing a cesarean section, which she said she might have to use or do if it goes on another hour. He cried right after the baby was born. Cried again when the nurse gave him the baby to hold and then took her from him to place beside Abby. He wrote about that too, several times.