

Barefoot Bride

Saturday

I'm watching the film *Muriel's Wedding*. It's about a woman who marries for money and then runs away with her wheelchair-bound best friend. "C'est la vie," I say. John just looks at me and raises his eyes to the ceiling. Well, he did fall asleep for most of it. I also watched it because me and John are getting married in a week's time - and I'm in a wheelchair. Talk about a lot to organise. It makes me tired just thinking about it. "Let's have a cup of tea and a nice sit down," my best friend Annabel said, looking at a list as long as my nose and me already sitting down. "What have you written this on anyway?" she said, twisting the paper back to front. "I hope it's nothing important?" I told her not really, only my last will and testament. "Really?" she said. "Lucky sod whoever gets your marmalade, toothpaste and toilet roll." Apart from John, Annabel's the only one I let push me around. Literally. She's not a bumper. Plus, she got married last year so I'm counting on her for good advice. The thing I'm most worried about is my shoes. I had some dyed to match my dress, a kind of silvery white. But whenever I try them on I think they're not me. They have fronts but no backs and they've got little heart shapes encrusted in diamante on the heel. When Annabel tried them on her feet flapped around like two wet fish.

Sunday

I've decided to wear football boots with my wedding dress. Talk about alternative. I got the idea from Annabel who wore some on her wedding day and her Tony went mad. Literally. Well, he wouldn't speak to her for the rest of the week. My John loves football and I'm imagining him on our wedding night, pulling them off by the laces clenched between his teeth. The thought is making me laugh out loud. Him trying to focus on my shoelaces after a few drinks.

Monday

Five days and counting. The football boots surprise is over. Annabel says John will find it just as much a turn off as her fella did and I'll look stupid. I hadn't thought of that. So I'm sitting here reading through some magazines for inspiration. I'm supposed to be at work but I've taken an extra long lunch break to go via the library and thumb through all the freebies. Turns out it was worth it. I've seen a pair of shoes that will be perfect. Not in a magazine, but on the girl sitting opposite me. She's got her legs crossed and I can see she's wearing a brilliant pair of red stilettos. Patent leather, so they have a shine on them and a heel as high as her busy bent fingers. The red is like nail varnish and Manchester United. I ask her where she got them.

Tuesday

I'm wearing my wedding shoes - well the silver ones I'm not going to wear anymore that is. It's a bit of a sensitive subject because I chose them with John. The place was so busy I thought the shop assistant was going to pass out when she saw me, but John

made himself at home and told me to take as long as I liked, which was just as well as I took about two hours. The shoes made me feel all Marbella: sequined t-shirt and coiffed hair. Well, not exactly coiffed as someone cut my hair after I passed out on my hen night. Annabel says I did it before I passed out. I just gave her one of my looks and said, "Who would have let me loose with a pair of scissors? I'm in a wheelchair - they already think I've lost my mind." She didn't have an answer, just a few stray blonde hairs on the arm of her jacket.

Wednesday

I can't actually be bothered to get out of bed today. John has gone to work and it's raining. I want to drink my tea but it's too hot. John bought it up for me in his slippers. I bought them for him. They've got MARRY and ME written across them: one word on each slipper. He was lingering which meant he had something on his mind. "What's up chuck?" I asked. Said he didn't like the idea of me in red shoes (I shouldn't have told him). So looks like we're back to square one. But I intend to sneak something passed him. I'm doing it right now. Red toenails.

Thursday

Two days to go. Annabel's taken me shoe shopping. She said she's sick of hearing me going on about it all the time. Normally brides are worrying about flowers, embarrassing relations, or their hair. "Seeing as I'm not going to have any of these at my wedding," I tell her, "I'm going to worry about my shoes." I'm wearing espadrilles

that tie up around my calves and a white dress. Annabel says I should have let her do my fake tan properly. The temperature has finally gone above twelve degrees, I say without turning round, so just keep pushing. She's wearing flats so I know she's in for the long haul. As we pass a shop window and I'm trying to ignore my reflection, I see a pair of shoes I have to have. Annabel has said she'll buy the ones I want as a wedding present, but these are really expensive. She says she doesn't care, but I'm not sure. She hasn't got two pence to rub together. It doesn't seem worth it. But these ones are a beautiful midnight blue and they have hearts in glitter on the toe *and* on the heel. She pushes me into the shop and I try them on. I look like Cinderella! Annabel says they're perfect and I should get them. She takes them off me and marches up to the till to pay. I think she's trying to hurry me up; she can see I've got my eye on a green snakeskin pair in the window.

Friday

Tomorrow's the BIG DAY. Not sure if I feel up to it to be honest. Annabel's helped me get everything together and says I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I say I hope she's getting her hair done and get told to calm down. John says we shouldn't sleep together tonight, but we had an argument about who would stay out. "Where am I going to go?" I said to him. "Annabel's," he said, knowing she lives in a first floor flat without a lift. Then he felt bad and asked me if I was excited about tomorrow to make up for it. So we agreed I'm going to sleep in our bed and he's going to sleep on the sofa downstairs. He's just ordered a takeaway so I don't have to cook. "No expense

spared,” he said. He’s kept a bottle of champagne in the fridge, which makes a celebration. Annabel phones to make sure I’m looking forward to tomorrow. I tell her we’re having champagne and she’s happy. When I start yawning, John carries me upstairs to bed, just like Richard Gere and Debra Winger, gives me a kiss on the cheek (aren’t we good) and goes back downstairs to watch Match of the Day. He’s seen my dress but not my shoes. He has to help me into it tomorrow so there’s no point hiding it. But the shoe bit I can do myself. As I lay in bed, the moonlight streams in through the curtains and onto my dress. The moon makes it shine like cut glass: a lovely cool grey-blue. Just for a second I let myself imagine that I can feel it soft against my legs as I walk, creating a rustle of netting and silk, falling in soft folds behind me as I glide up the aisle, the loose tresses of my perfectly curled hair bouncing on my back.

Saturday

I’m married! Can’t quite believe we actually made it. The doctor called by this morning and told me to take it easy. “On my wedding day?” I said. “You don’t want to overdo it or you’ll be back in hospital,” he said, taking my temperature. “Is that what marriage does to you?” I said. He smiled and upped the dose. You should have seen John’s face when I told him to come and carry me downstairs. “You’re not dressed,” he said. “Where’s your shoes?” I told him I wasn’t wearing any, that I wanted to be a barefoot bride like in California. He just looked at me. “You’re losing it,” he said. So there we were taking our vows with my bright red toenails sticking out from under my dress. The priest smiled at me and I winked back. “For better or for worse,” I said to

John afterwards. “Which one did you choose?” But he was off, shaking everyone’s hand and squeezing mine like I was about to run away. When Annabel came to take us home I gave her the box with the midnight blue shoes inside. “What’s this for?” she said. “Something to remember me by,” I said. “Make sure you wear them out like I’d never do.” She started to cry then and said she didn’t want them, but John told her to take them and I gave her one of my tissues, holding her hand all the way back to the house.

This Evening

Now we’re on our own, John’s made me go to bed. And not for what you might think on our wedding day. For my health, he says. I can hear him downstairs, washing-up after the party. It will take him ages, all the glasses and plates and cups. So he’s got the radio on, with the volume turned down lower than usual for my sake. I’m not tired as in sleepy, just worn out. My feet are cold so I roll over to John’s side of the bed to get his slippers. I can see his smart black lace-ups over by the bedroom door, one in front of the other as he stepped out of them. He’s moved into the hallway, on the phone to his sister. She’s doing all the talking because he’s saying: “I do know, Sandra,” over and over again. I slide the top half of my body off the bed and feel around in the darkness. My hands land on something hard and spiky. My old pair of wedding shoes - the first ones with no backs! I put them on and look down at myself. A married woman with nothing on but a pair of shoes. “They could lay me out like this,” I say aloud to no one. I think I fall asleep then, because when I wake up my husband is

sitting next to me on the edge of the bed. “Can’t leave you alone for five minutes,” he says, straightening me out and putting my water where I can reach it. “You should go and find yourself an exotic dancer,” I tell him. “Someone that could do a few high kicks for you on your wedding night.” But he’s not taking the bait. Instead he takes my floppy feet in his hands and massages the blood back into my toes, smiling at my bare feet and getting me to talk about tomorrow.

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