

The Limo Driver

Louise Smith

Five years I've worked for Sullivan driving his late-model stretches and black Lincoln sedans. The stretches are a pain in the butt to corner on narrow neighborhood streets, but I never complain. Sullivan and I have a tacit agreement: He gives me weddings and funerals—no rock stars, no professional football players, and no Jacuzzi parties. For my part, I never say anything to Sullivan except, “Yes, sir.”

Aside from the job making me take seven years to graduate from college after a late start, things are working out. I sleep in my sister's basement in exchange for home maintenance repairs, \$400 cash a month, and occasional babysitting. I'm on the other side of forty, but I'm the only person I know in my senior class who won't be graduating with a whopping debt. In September, I'll be teaching high school English in Queens.

Weddings are the best. I'm tall and broad-shouldered, and I stand at the open car door, putting on my haughty servant face, so the bride can pretend she's on *Downton Abbey*. At funerals, no one cares what the chauffeur looks like as long as he's patient and helps Grandma into the car.

I've learned a lot about brides and grooms and how to sense if it's love radiating from the back of the car or something else. My second most surprising couple were in their eighties—and not the fit, tanned, stretched-flesh eighties either. Those two looked like my own grandparents—no white dress or tux, just their church clothes.

We were in the Lincoln, no glass or intercom between me and the passengers, so we were close enough for conversation and for me to catch in the rearview mirror the look of deep comfort between those two. As I pulled gently away from the curb, the old guy took a little box out of his vest pocket and said to her, “We're both late.” They took their pills and washed them down with water the guy had brought with him—not the brand we always have in the car. They settled back, her head on his shoulder, and I could see the look of bliss on her face.

“I guess you're wondering why bother at our age, huh?” The elderly groom was speaking to me. “I'll tell you why. Me and Estelle here been in love for a long time, but we're of one mind about the next big step in life.

We've got a few years left, but we're not going to leave a big decision until one of us is staring cockeyed at the ceiling with his mouth gapping open. You know what I mean?"

"I do, sir."

"Girlfriends don't qualify," he went on. "If you're in a hospital, it's got to be the wife. And a strong one at that. One who'll stand up to the doctors and have the grit to pull the plug, so the poor guy doesn't wind up having outlived his life, not even aware that he's lying there in diapers. Me and Estelle promised to be strong, right there, just now, in the church, we promised."

Other than thinking this was pretty grim talk for a wedding day, I didn't think much more about this until I was driving another wedding almost a year later. Big Catholic church. The bride was maybe seventeen, Hispanic, but the family weren't recent immigrants, I gathered from the extravagance of the wedding. The groom could have been late twenties, the kind of guy with a permanent sneer on his face.

It was the first really warm Sunday in April, a beautiful day for a wedding. We were in the longest of the stretches, a white one, of course; what the kids want, so they can get their whole posse in there. But this time it was just the bride and groom way back there in that cavernous interior. I always keep the intercom on softly so I can get any change of plans. I headed into the traffic on our way to the country club in Rye.

"Happy now?" the groom asked.

She murmured, "Sure."

"So you've got what you wanted, right?" He sounded pretty cool toward this little girl.

"You look very handsome, Chris. Didn't you think our wedding was beautiful?"

"I'm sure it was everything your mother wanted."

"You're going to learn to like her. And Daddy too. He paid for all this, Chris. Please thank him at the reception."

The guy didn't say anything more until he slid aside the glass behind my head and said, "Pull up at this corner." We were still in the crush of Saturday afternoon in the city. There was no place to slide over, but I stopped, thinking the jerk was going to run in for a beer. He climbed back to where his bride was sitting, made a little salute to her, and got out of the car.

"Wait, Chris. What are you doing?" She scrambled that voluminous dress out of the car and grabbed the guy's arm. "We have to go to the reception!"

"I don't have to do anything." He shook her off and her fancy little white bag went flying down the sidewalk.

"But my parents. All their friends." She began to cry and grabbed his lapels. By this time all the cars behind me were honking and cursing. He was

trying to drag his coat out of her grasp and gave her a push back against the car. She screamed.

I got out and pulled his arms behind him. “Let me go, asshole!” he said.

I just wanted her to get back in the car, but she took hold of him again. “Chris!” she sobbed. “What about the baby?”

“Who cares?”

“But you said—”

“You stupid—”

I grabbed his mouth and pulled him away from her and bent him over the front fender. I was very tempted to push him into the street and run over him a few times. But I just yelled to her over the honking and the cursing, “Get in the car!”

But she bent beside his face. I let go his mouth in order to press his cheek into the fender. “Chris, you promised!” Her face was a red mess. “Mama and Daddy. This will shame them. Don’t you want to go? Please, just for a little while. Daddy is going to get you a job.”

“No, you stupid c—” I mashed his head a little harder.

“Get in the car, dammit!” I said to her.

“Chris, why?”

“Your dad treats me like scum. Let’s see how he likes this. Now get in the car like the man says. You’ve got your ring.”

Not taking her eyes off him, she slowly backed away, pulled open the door to the front seat, and began to haul her dress inside. The honking had quieted down. The sidewalk was full of gawkers, people pouring out of the bars, and plenty of cabbies and their fares. Few people can resist a fight, but a screaming bride in an expensive wedding dress is a true crowd-pleaser. I gave the bastard one last push against the fender. He began to straighten up just before I gunned the car out from under him.

So what now? Sullivan was going to be rip shit when he heard about this—chauffeur beats up groom and takes off with bride. I kept driving. I always have lots of tissues for funerals, and I kept the bride supplied as she mopped up her tears and blew her nose and tried to repair the way her makeup was giving her a vampire look. I continued out of town, headed for the burbs. The bride told me her name was Lisa.

Finally the city gave way to strip malls and then patches of woods and houses with big lawns began to appear. Lisa looked around and said like I was a dummy, “We can’t go there.”

“Where to then, ma’am?” I asked in my impersonal chauffeur voice, dropping my bodyguard role.

“Anywhere! I’d rather everyone think I was dead than go to that reception.”

“Want to call someone?”

“No! I just want to die. I think I dropped my phone. Can’t we just drive?”

I had a full tank, of course. It was still a beautiful day. I’d have to call Sullivan sooner or later because Lisa’s daddy was going to be all over the agency. Under the guise of rerouting a GPS, I texted Sullivan that we’d had an emergency landing, bride fine, groom flown.

Sullivan texted WTF over and over for almost two hours as we drove around the countryside, Lisa talking about jumping off a bridge, slitting her wrists, buying a gun. She said her dad was going to kill her. She said he was going to kill Chris. She said her mother was going to kill herself. Finally she ran down, just hiccuping and letting out long sighs. I couldn’t say how much reality she was facing, but she was getting herself under control. Suddenly, she said, “Look, a park. Pull over there.”

We got out. I was sweating inside my wool uniform and was grateful for the breeze. We sat on the grass under an ancient tree whose limbs could have sheltered a whole village. I looked across the sunny valley before us and saw that we were sitting on the edge of a cemetery. The headstones curved in rows up and down the little grassy hills, and that’s when I thought about the old couple who’d gotten married to help each other die—a kind of eyes-wide-open unselfish devotion, the kind of sturdy long-distance-running love I planned on finding for myself. I wondered if Lisa, given her taste in men, would ever grow up enough to luck into a piece of that kind of love. Today’s wedding had been the huge cover-up, the old-fashioned, catered disguise of coercion and fear.

We were quiet, me enjoying the breeze, and Lisa finally not talking. She would probably have me take her home soon, so she could hole up in her childhood bedroom and tweet her agony to all her friends.

Finally she said, “I wish we’d brought some sandwiches.”

Hunger, a good sign that someone has decided to live. Lisa was young and, baby or not, would be out on the dance floor soon. Wiser, I hoped.

I, unfortunately, could look forward to an ambiguous fame. I bet there were a hundred cell phone cameras recording that sidewalk scene downtown. I can probably catch it tonight on YouTube, that indelible memory bank that holds all its weddings with no distinction between the awful and the rare.