



PETE HAMILL

Writings on Men and Women, Fools and Heroes,
Lost Cities, Vanished Friends, Small Pleasures,
Large Calamities, and How the Weather Was

PIECE OF WORK

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SAVOR *the*
MOMENT

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For my brother Jim, the family baker

I sing of brooks, of blossoms, birds, and bowers;
Of April, May, of June, and July flowers.
I sing of Maypoles, Hock-carts, wassails, wakes,
Of bridegrooms, brides, and of their bridal cakes.

—ROBERT HERRICK

I wonder by my troth, what thou and I
Did, till we lov'd?

—DONNE

PROLOGUE



As THE CLOCK TICKED DOWN ON HER SENIOR YEAR IN HIGH school, Laurel McBane learned one indisputable fact.

Prom was hell.

For weeks all anyone wanted to talk about was who might ask whom, who did ask whom—and who asked some other whom, thereby inciting misery and hysteria.

Girls, to her mind, suffered an agony of suspense and an embarrassing passivity during prom season. The halls, classrooms, and quad throbbed with emotion running the gamut from giddy euphoria because some guy asked them to some overhyped dance, to bitter tears because some guy didn't.

The entire cycle revolved around "some guy," a condition she believed both stupid and demoralizing.

And after that, the hysteria continued, even escalated with the hunt for a dress, for shoes, the intense debate about up-dos versus

down-dos. Limos, after-parties, hotel suites—the yes, no, maybe of sex.

She'd have skipped the whole thing if her friends, especially Parker Right-of-Passage Brown, hadn't ganged up on her.

Now her savings account—all those hard-earned dollars and cents from countless hours waiting tables—reeled in shock at the withdrawals for a dress she'd probably never wear again, the shoes, the bag, and all the rest.

She could lay all that on her friends' heads, too. She'd gotten caught up shopping with Parker, Emmaline, and Mackensie, and spent more than she should have.

The idea, gently broached by Emma, of asking her parents to spring for the dress wasn't an option, not to Laurel's mind. A point of pride, maybe, but money in the McBane household had become a very sore subject since her father's dicey investments fiasco and the little matter of the IRS audit.

No way she'd ask either of them. She earned her own, and had for several years now.

She told herself it didn't matter. She didn't have close to enough saved for the tuition for the Culinary Institute, or the living expenses in New York, despite the hours she'd put in at the restaurant after school and on weekends. The cost of looking great for one night didn't change that one way or the other—and, what the hell, she did look great.

She fixed on her earrings while across the room—Parker's bedroom—Parker and Emma experimented with ways to prom-up the hair Mac had impulsively hacked off to what Laurel thought of as Julius Caesar takes the Rubicon. They tried various pins, sparkle dust, and jeweled clips in what was left of Mac's flame red hair while the three of them talked nonstop, and Aerosmith rocked out of the CD player.

She liked listening to them like this, when she was a little bit

apart. Maybe especially now, when she felt a little bit apart. They'd been friends all their lives, and now—rite of passage or not—things were changing. In the fall Parker and Emma would head off to college. Mac would be working, and squeezing in a few courses on photography.

And with the dream of the Culinary Institute poofed due to finances and her parents' most recent marital implosion, she'd settle for community college part-time. Business courses, she supposed. She'd have to be practical. Realistic.

And she wasn't going to think about it now. She might as well enjoy the moment, and this ritual that Parker, in her Parker way, had arranged.

Parker and Emma might be going to prom at the Academy while she and Mac went to theirs at the public high school, but they had this time together, getting dressed and made up. Downstairs Parker's and Emma's parents hung out, and there'd be dozens of pictures and "oh, look at our girls!" hugs and probably some shiny eyes.

Mac's mother was too self-involved to care about her daughter's senior prom, which, Linda being Linda, could only be a good thing. And Laurel's own parents? Well, they were too steeped in their own lives, their own problems, for it to matter where she was or what she did tonight.

She was used to it. Had even come to prefer it.

"Just the fairy dust sparkles," Mac decided, tipping her head side to side to judge. "It's kind of Tinker Bell-y. In a cool way."

"I think you're right." Parker, her straight-as-rain brown hair a glossy waterfall down her back, nodded. "It's waif with an edge. What do you think, Em?"

"I think we need to play up the eyes more, go drama." Emma's eyes, a deep, dreamy brown, narrowed in thought. "I can do this."

"Have at it." Mac shrugged. "But don't take forever, okay? I still have to set up for our group shot."

"We're on schedule." Parker checked her watch. "We've still got thirty minutes before . . ." She turned, caught sight of Laurel. "Hey. You look awesome!"

"Oh, you really do!" Emma clapped her hands together. "I *knew* that was the dress. The shimmery pink makes your eyes even bluer."

"I guess."

"Need one more thing." Parker hurried to her dresser, opened a drawer on her jewelry box. "This hair clip."

Laurel, a slim girl in shimmery pink, her sun-shot hair done—at Emma's insistence—in long, loose sausage curls, shrugged. "Whatever."

Parker held it against Laurel's hair at different angles. "Cheer up," she ordered. "You're going to have fun."

God, get over yourself, Laurel! "I know. Sorry. It'd be more fun if the four of us were going to the same dance, especially since we all look seriously awesome."

"Yeah, it would." Parker decided to draw some of the curls from the sides to clip them in the back. "But we'll meet up after and party. When we're done we'll come back here and tell each other everything. Here, take a look."

She turned Laurel to the mirror, and the girls studied themselves and each other.

"I do look great," Laurel said and made Parker laugh.

After the most perfunctory of knocks, the door opened. Mrs. Grady, the Browns' longtime housekeeper, put her hands on her hips to take a survey.

"You'll do," she said, "which you should after all this fuss. Finish up with it and get yourselves downstairs for pictures. You." She pointed a finger at Laurel. "I need a word with you, young lady."

"What did I do?" Laurel demanded, looking from friend to

friend as Mrs. Grady strode away. "I didn't do anything." But since Mrs. G's word was law, Laurel rushed after her.

In the family sitting room, Mrs. G turned, arms folded. Lecture mode, Laurel thought as her heart tripped. And she cast her mind back, looking for an infraction that might have earned her one from the woman who'd been more of a mother to her than her own through her teenage years.

"So," Mrs. Grady began as Laurel hurried in, "I guess you think you're all grown-up now."

"I—"

"Well, you're not. But you're getting there. The four of you've been running tame around here since you were in diapers. Some of that's going to change, with all of you going your own ways. At least for a time. Birds tell me your way's to New York and that fancy baking school."

Her heart took another trip, then suffered the pinprick of a deflated dream. "No, I'm, ah, keeping my job at the restaurant, and I'm going to try to take some courses at the—"

"No, you're not." Again, Mrs. G pointed a finger. "Now, a girl your age in New York City best be smart and best be careful. And from what I'm told, if you want to make it at that school you have to work hard. It's more than making pretty frostings and cookies."

"It's one of the best, but—"

"Then you'll be one of the best." Mrs. G reached in her pocket. She held out a check to Laurel. "That'll cover the first semester, the tuition, a decent place to live, and enough food to keep body and soul together. You make good use of it, girl, or you'll answer to me. If you do what I expect you're capable of, we'll talk about the next term when the time comes."

Stunned, Laurel stared at the check in her hand. "You can't—I can't—"

"I can and you will. That's that."

"But—"

"Didn't I just say that's that? If you let me down, there'll be hell to pay, I promise you. Parker and Emma are going off to college, and Mackensie's dead set on working full-time with her photography. You've got a different path, so you'll take it. It's what you want, isn't it?"

"More than anything." Tears stung her eyes, burned her throat. "Mrs. G, I don't know what to say. I'll pay you back. I'll—"

"Damn right, you will. You'll pay me back by making something of yourself. It's up to you now."

Laurel threw her arms around Mrs. Grady, clung. "You won't be sorry. I'll make you proud."

"I believe you will. There now. Go finish getting ready."

Laurel held on another moment. "I'll never forget this," she whispered. "Never. Thank you. Thank you, thank you!"

She rushed for the door, anxious to share the news with her friends, then turned, young, radiant. "I can't wait to start."

CHAPTER ONE



*A*LONE, WITH NORAH JONES WHISPERING THROUGH THE IPOD, Laurel transformed a panel of fondant into a swatch of elegant, edible lace. She didn't hear the music, used it more to fill the air than as entertainment while she painstakingly pieced the completed panel onto the second tier of four.

She stepped back to eye the results, to circle, to search for flaws. Vows' clients expected perfect, and that's exactly what she intended to deliver. Satisfied, she nodded, and picked up a bottle of water to sip while she stretched her back.

"Two down, two to go."

She glanced toward the board where she'd pinned various samples of antique lace, and the final sketched design for the cake Friday evening's bride had approved.

She had three more designs to complete: two for Saturday, one for Sunday—but that was nothing new. June at Vows, the wedding and event business she ran with her friends, was prime time.

In a handful of years, they'd turned an idea into a thriving enterprise. Sometimes just a little too thriving, she mused, which was why she was making fondant lace at nearly one in the morning.

It was a very good thing, she decided. She loved the work.

They all had their passions. Emma had the flowers, Mac the photography, Parker the details. And she had the cakes. And the pastries, she thought, and the chocolates. But the cakes stood as the crowning touch.

She got back to it, began to roll out the next panel. Following habit, she'd clipped her sunny blond hair up and back out of her way. Cornstarch dusted the baker's apron she wore over cotton pants and tee, and the slide-on kitchen shoes kept her feet as comfortable as possible after hours of standing. Her hands, strong from years of kneading, rolling, lifting, were capable and quick. As she began the next pattern, her sharp-featured, angular face set in serious lines.

Perfection wasn't simply a goal when it came to her art. For Icing at Vows it was a necessity. The wedding cake was more than baking and piping, sugar paste and filling. Just as the wedding photos Mac took were more than pictures, and the arrangements and bouquets Emma created more than flowers. The details and schedules and wishes Parker put together were, in the end, bigger than the sum of their parts.

Together, the elements became a once-in-a-lifetime event, and the celebration of the journey two people chose to make together.

Romantic, certainly, and Laurel believed in romance. In theory, anyway. More, she believed in symbols and celebrations. And in a really fabulous cake.

Her expression softened into pleasure as she completed the third tier, and her deep blue eyes warmed as she glanced over to see Parker hovering in the doorway.

"Why aren't you in bed?"

"Details." Parker circled a finger over her own head. "Couldn't settle. How long have you been at this tonight?"

"Awhile. I need to finish it so it can set overnight. Plus I have the two Saturday cakes to assemble and decorate tomorrow."

"Want company?"

They knew each other well enough that it was understood if Laurel said no, there'd be no offense. And often, when deep in work, no was the answer.

"Sure."

"I love the design." Parker, as Laurel had, circled the cake. "The delicacy of the white on white, the interest of the different heights of each tier—and the intricacy of each. They really do look like different panels of lace. Old-fashioned, vintage, that's our bride's theme. You've nailed it with this."

"We're going to do pale blue ribbon around the pedestal," Laurel said as she started on the next panel. "And Emma's going to scatter white rose petals at the base. It's going to be a winner."

"The bride's been good to work with."

Comfortable in her pajamas, her long brown hair loose rather than in its work mode of sleek tail or smooth chignon, Parker put on the kettle for tea. One of the perks of running the business out of her home, and of having Laurel living there—with Emma and Parker right on the estate as well—were these late-night visits.

"She knows her mind," Laurel commented, choosing a tool to scallop the edges of the panel. "But she's open to suggestion, and so far hasn't been insane. If she makes it through the next twenty-four that way, she'll definitely earn Vows' coveted Good Bride status."

"They looked happy and relaxed tonight at rehearsal, and that's a good sign."

"Mmm-hmm." Laurel continued the pattern with precisely placed eyelets and dots. "So, again, why aren't you in bed?"

Parker sighed as she heated a little teapot. "I think I was having

a moment. I was unwinding with a glass of wine out on my terrace. I could see Mac's place, and Emma's. The lights were on in both houses, and I could smell the gardens. It was so quiet, so pretty. The lights went off—Emma's first, and a little while after, Mac's. I thought how we're planning Mac's wedding, and that Emma just got engaged. And all the times we played Wedding Day, the four of us, when we were kids. Now it's real. I sat there in the quiet and the dark, and found myself wishing my parents could be here to see it. To see what we've done here, and who we are now. I got stuck." She paused to measure out tea. "Between being sad they're gone and being happy because I know they'd be proud of me. Of us."

"I think about them a lot. We all do." Laurel continued to work. "Because they were such an essential part of our lives, and because there are so many memories of them here. So I know what you mean by being stuck."

"They'd get a kick out of Mac and Carter, out of Emma and Jack, wouldn't they?"

"Yeah, they would. And what we've done here, Parker? It rocks. They'd get a kick out of that, too."

"I'm lucky you were up working." Parker poured hot water into the pot. "You've settled me down."

"Here to serve. I'll tell you who else is lucky, and that's Friday's bride. Because this cake?" She blew stray hair out of her eyes as she nodded smugly. "It kicks major ass. And when I do the crown, angels will weep with joy."

Parker set the pot aside to steep. "Really, Laurel, you need to take more pride in your work."

Laurel grinned. "Screw the tea. I'm nearly done here. Pour me a glass of wine."

