

## Aunt Lizzie's Wedding: A Parable of Love

Paulette Lovelace

I'll never forget the date of June 12<sup>th</sup>. It was a day for which our family had been preparing and greatly anticipating for over a year. My Auntie Lizzie was getting married and my dad was officiating at the wedding. For an eight-year-old girl there was nothing that could top this day; a beautiful summer day and a fairy tale wedding right before my eyes. I could hardly contain my enthusiasm, in fact I could not, and that's when the trouble began.

After my bathing, dressing, and grooming, with detail to each hair ribbon firmly attached, I was placed on a couch to watch a Cinderella video. I was given firm instruction to "not move from this couch," while my parents got ready for the great event. As I sat I began to compare myself with the image of Cinderella that I knew was coming later in the movie. My dress was the most beautiful I'd ever worn, and I had matching gloves, hair ribbons, and lacey socks. Best of all were my shiny new white shoes.

As a little girl I was caught up in the thrill of the wedding and a deep love for my Aunt Lizzie but I knew from the way my parents were acting that this was somehow an extra special day. I knew they had prayed a lot for Aunt Lizzie and this day represented a celebration of God's goodness, and answered prayer as well as the wedding.

Suddenly I was bored with the movie. Although it had barely started I couldn't wait for the good parts, I couldn't wait to leave for the wedding, I just simply couldn't sit still a moment longer. Soon I was off the couch and twirling around the living room watching my dress fill with air and swirl around me. I imagined being Cinderella, who at the moment was my aunt Lizzie, as I twirled and twirled. I remembered the instruction to stay put on the couch but I knew my parents really just meant not to get dirty, so I kept dancing.

It seemed I really didn't need them to tell me to sit still. I knew how to behave and how not to get dirty before the wedding. As I glanced outside I realized that the pathway across the backyard would be a lovely aisle for this imagined bride to walk down. Within moments I was out in the yard and practicing my "walk" just as I had seen aunt Lizzie practice it at last night's rehearsal. "How silly I am," I thought, "a bride needs a bouquet"! As I was picking some flowers for my bouquet I noticed that the prettiest ones were way toward the back of the flowerbed, so I went in after them.

Heading back to the pathway with my beautiful bouquet I glanced down and saw dirt all over my shiny new white shoes! Reality hit and I realized suddenly that not only was I not sitting quietly on the couch, but that I had gotten dirty! I looked around in panic and saw the hose across the yard in the garden. Racing toward it I stopped by the spigot and turned it on full blast. When I got to the hose, the water was pouring into the garden creating a muddy

mess. I grabbed the hose and pointed it toward my shoes but in doing so the muddy hose scraped the side of my dress and left a horrible mark. While I stared aghast at my dress the mud continued to cover my shoes and the lace around my socks was now an awful brown.

I heard my father calling me, “Puddin’” (I loved it when he called me that) “Where are you?” “We’ve got to leave right now” My father was awesome and I loved him with childish enthusiasm. When I think about it now I realize that my love for him was grounded in the knowledge of just how much he loved me. I knew that I was the apple of his eye, his delight, and the joy of his life. I froze when I heard my father calling me. Looking down at my dirty self, the magnitude of my decision to play outside the boundaries my parents had given me, overwhelmed me with shame.

He couldn’t see me like this; I couldn’t go to the wedding like this either. I simultaneously began to cry and to try not to cry by wiping at my eyes with my muddy hands. I ran for the bushes, slipping and sliding in the mud as I ran. My father called me again. From my hiding place I saw him standing there waiting for me. Daddy was all dressed up. He had on the most beautiful clothes I had ever seen; a tuxedo with a white jacket and shiny black pants. He looked so handsome – and I was an awful mess.

I was tired and suddenly just wanted my daddy! The mud was beginning to dry on my skin and in my hair. It felt tight and was starting to hurt. I thought about the comfort of my daddy and I wanted to crawl into his lap, snuggle near his heart and have him tell me a story or tell me about loving me “now and forever” in that special way that he had. My mother had come out onto the patio now too, standing beside him and calling for me. I crept out of my hiding place and came slinking toward them.

At first Daddy was smiling at me but suddenly he had an awful look on his face. “Puddin’ you’re covered with mud.” He gasped. “Daddy,” I sobbed. “I was picking some flowers for aunt Lizzie and I fell and got muddy” I lied. I couldn’t look at him; instead I ran back to the hose and began trying to wash the mud off myself. Of course when the fresh water hit the drying mud it began to smear and I was in worse shape than before. I rubbed and wiped and scrubbed but only created a bigger mess.

I looked back at my father in hopeless desperation. The look on his face was equally desperate. “O Puddin’” he sobbed, “What have you done?” Daddy started toward me then glanced at his watch, down at his clothes, then back at me and then finally, over at my mother. She too looked so beautiful. She was wearing a new blue and white flowered dress that had lace on the front. She had on her special pearl necklace and earrings that daddy gave her when I was born. Mommy looked back and forth between daddy and me. Then daddy turned to her and in a soft voice he asked her “Will you help her honey?” “She’s crying and she’s all muddy.” Then his voice sounded kind of sad when he said, “you

look so beautiful and I know you're ready to go to the wedding, but will you help her?" He looked me in the eyes and said "I love you Puddin', I love you always and forever." Seeing the look of love in his eyes, I knew I was so wrong to have gotten off the couch. I realized he didn't want to restrict me but only to take care of me. There was nothing I wanted more than to run back into his arms and be his clean girl again.

My mother gave him an understanding look and then turned back to me. She didn't say a word but came over to me and picked me up. She wrapped her arms around me and carried me gently into the house and to the bathroom. I buried my face in her neck and sobbed. Her dress was now covered with my mud. My arms around her neck had soiled her pearls and gotten mud into her hair and my tear stained cheeks had turned her beautiful lace a faded shade of brown.

She set me down gently and stripped off my clothing. She began to talk softly to me and tell me everything was going to be all right. With loving hands I was bathed and my hair washed. My ears were cleaned of dirt and every fingernail was scrubbed clean. As she lifted me out of the bathtub I asked her if I was going to be punished. As she wrapped me in a big fluffy towel I heard her say, "We've missed the wedding Puddin' and we've ruined our beautiful new clothes." I remember the astonishment at realizing my mother's loss. "You've missed the wedding too mommy" I cried. "Yes, I have" she said, "and my clothes are stained too." "Now let's find something to wear and go to Aunt Lizzie's reception" she said.

When we got to the reception I was still feeling embarrassed but as soon as my daddy saw me he squatted down with his arms open to me. He scooped me up and twirled me around. "There's my clean girl," he said. Then he pulled me into a great hug and snuggled me into his chest. "You know Puddin', I always love you, even when you're covered in mud." "When I put you on the couch this morning, it was for your protection" he whispered to me. "I know daddy, I'm so sorry, and I'm so sorry Mommy missed the wedding." "Me too," said Daddy, "but Mommy was willing to miss the wedding so that to you could get cleaned up and come to the reception with me." "Mommy wanted to come to the wedding but because she loves you and because she loves me, she was willing to get muddy and miss it... for us.

I ran back to my mother with new understanding of her love for me. We walked into the reception together and I felt safe with her. As people approached and asked where we had been and why she, the pastor's wife, missed the wedding, she put her arm around me and smiled at them. "We were getting ready together and here we are now." She wasn't telling anyone about my day in the mud, my bad choice, her ruined dress, or anything. Mommy took all the shame and condemnation that was mine, on herself. I floated through the rest of day, feeling so loved. I felt so grateful that my mother would suffer such a loss

for me. I realized my daddy's love for me went beyond a muddy mess on an extra special day. This was a day for love, not just for Aunt Lizzie but for me too.

Thinking about Aunt Lizzie's wedding I cannot help but see a picture of Jesus. The love relationship between Puddin's mother and father reminds me of the love between God, and Jesus. Perhaps a loving look of understanding passed between them also as Jesus stepped in to rescue us. Just as Puddin's Father so kindly asked her mother to help her, God sent Jesus to save the world. Love was the foundation for the action; love for each other and love for her. Puddin's father did not act out of anger nor was he punishing her mother for her mess. In an act of compassion, 'Mother' was sent to bring Puddin back into a right relationship with her parents once again. It wasn't only the mud that needed to be fixed, but rather her attitude toward her parents. Humanity too was in an awful mess by refusing God's protective instructions and choosing to walk outside the boundaries he set for us.

It wasn't just the muddy clothing that separated Puddin from her daddy's embrace. The real problem was her rebellion against his directions to "stay on the couch." He already knew what her little mind could not grasp, that without protective boundaries she could get into such a mess as she did, and end up suffering for it. In a similar way it isn't only the mess of humanity's sin that needs fixing, but it is the rebellion within us that cries out in independence, "I know what's best for me," and "I'll make my own choices," thereby refusing God's reign over our lives, with his protective love.

That choice cost Puddin the opportunity to see Aunt Lizzie get married and the ruin of her beautiful new clothes. She was so ashamed of what a mess she made by trying to exercise her independence. It cost Puddin's mother and father much more than that. 'Father' lost the joy of having his family with him at the long awaited wedding, for which they had all prayed. He suffered by having to ask 'Mother' to set aside her beautiful adornments and her place by his side. Imagine how God must have suffered in sending Jesus and witnessing all his suffering for humanity. Imagine the love for us that could watch Jesus take on humanity even unto death.

As I think of the ways in which Puddin's mother represents Jesus I find I am overwhelmed with a bittersweet awareness of the price of loving selflessly. She deserved punishment and yet she received love. The humiliation of missing the wedding was all hers and yet her mother absorbed it all as she walked with her into the reception. Jesus deserved none of what he received on our behalf either. The pain he endured, the mockery, humiliation and ultimate death, was the wages of our rebellion; not his. Yet, he took it on, willingly, selflessly, in order to bring us back to God.

I guess Puddin could have kept hiding in the bushes, or maybe tried again to wash herself clean with the hose, but she probably knew it was useless. In our

humanity we sometimes choose either to continue to hide from God or to use religion to clean ourselves up for God. Neither work! It takes a Savior to come and rescue us; to pick us up and take our condition upon himself. As we give ourselves to that kind of love; allowing our total helplessness to be picked up and carried to the cross, we find salvation. As we cease striving and hiding and come in our muddy helplessness, we find love. It is the kind of love that sets aside one's own need and willingly becomes covered with mud – or blood – to make things right.

As you think of Puddin' all covered in mud, hiding in the bushes I invite you to think of your own relationship with God. Can you hear God and Jesus calling to you? Maybe it is new for you to think of them as seeking reconciliation instead of retaliation. If you're tired of hiding your muddy condition or unsatisfied with your own religious attempts to "clean up," I invite you to let yourself be picked up and carried to the cross – just as you are. Perhaps you have never understood God as giving protective boundaries rather than an oppressive set of rules. How does it feel to think of God as kindly and loving as Puddin's father? I encourage you to taste of a love that is so relentlessly *for* you, it will envelop and transform you. God *is* like that, and he wants to draw you into his protective love. Jesus, like 'Mother,' made a way back. You can choose to believe God loves you like this, and allow Jesus to carry you to the cross, wash you off and set you back under the protective reign of God's love. I invite you right now to see God with open arms waiting to receive you.

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