

The Photographer

by Neil Gaiman

Inspired by *The Whitsun Weddings* by Philip Larkin

What follows is a brief account of a warm day in June, 1964. The wedding was being held at St John's church in the quiet Lincolnshire village of Westershott, and, since the photographer had counted the bridegroom amongst his friends since boyhood, the betrothed pair happily hired him to compose the pictorial record of the occasion.

He had arrived at the church early, pacing the grounds, searching for the best background and camera angles. The churchyard was peaceful, and at lunchtime he perched on an old headstone to eat the egg and cress sandwiches he had packed that morning. The stillness was soothing; even the light seemed to dawdle patiently in the air, pregnant in slow-moving streams as it filtered through the hanging willow. Yes, he thought to himself, the group photo will be in front of that willow.

The guests began arriving at about two o'clock. With professional satisfaction he noted the usual suspects; women parading their summery dresses with their husbands in tow, itching and suited; new mummies and daddies with babies in arms or enthusiastic little people with too much energy; pre-teens on the cusp of rebellion squeezed into smartness for the day; proud old ladies saturated with perfume. The photographer, already mentally arranging the photograph, was rushed inside by the chattering throng. He greeted the flustered groom momentarily. Just enough time to urge, "Good Luck!" before the craning of necks for that vision of radiant white. Then the vows. The kiss. The blushes, tears, the smiles from ear to ear. Now, *now* for the photographs.

Outside, the early summer sunbeams were slanted so as to dust the grave-tops with shimmering gold. The photographer hurriedly directed the glowing pair to the foot of the tree before taking up his place behind the camera. Snap. Now for the parents, bursting with pride and exclamations – stop talking! Snap. Next the bridesmaids in pink, grinning loftily. Snap. By the time he was ready for the group photograph, the assembly had grown restless. The heat had finally permeated the cotton collars and a stronger-than-average afternoon breeze was having off with the hats. Those youngsters who had not wandered away looked on the verge of tears. The oldies hunched ever more over their walking sticks.

But the photographer was too expert to take anything less than an excellent wedding snapshot – after all, this was the crowning glory of the album, for which he had been preparing all day. Swiftly and methodically, the company was arranged. Fathers silenced their children with a telling look, old ladies in flower print straightened their backs. One hundred pairs of eyes fixed positively on the humble box. The air in the churchyard became suddenly focused; the moment positively sparkled with history not yet made.

At the instant when the shutter clicked, the flowing air appeared to lift the drooping willow on an invisible cushion, taking with it the hearts and minds and faces of the assembled beings, as though powered by a boundless source of security and love. The result, as the photographer would remark to himself later in the solace of the darkroom, was a set of smiles elated by the weight of a moment that will never die.

The vital second passed, the crowd now fragmented. As discussions erupted about the beauty of the bridal gown and the excellent choice of hymns, the photographer ran his fingers contentedly across the lens of his camera. When the self-absorbed procession had made its noisy way towards the reception at the village hall, he stood alone in the churchyard for a private minute. The wind whipped at the grass beneath his feet, and he turned his gaze to the sky, savouring the electric warmth of a new dusk.

The Bride

by **Alison Ashman**

As she stood in the gloom surrounded by piles of gaily wrapped presents she tried not to think of how her life would contain this hour.

Her father was in his element, surrounded by a laughing, hearty crowd. All the worse for drink, faces red with heat and intoxication. The speech had been a roaring success, packed with crude one liners, many of them at hers and Alex's expense it had to be said. Everyone was too busy laughing to note that some of what was said was inappropriate, could easily be hurtful. 'Oh take everything the wrong way' her Dad would have said, if she'd bothered to challenge him. 'Oooh I nearly died' was her Mother's slightly embarrassed response.

Even from this side of the room you could see his shiny suit stretched over his swelling girth. 'Oh I don't need a new suit' he had asserted, 'this one'll do fine.' He couldn't be persuaded, he was parting with enough money already as far as he was concerned.

Still, the rest of the family hadn't adopted the same approach. For most of them it was a big occasion, money had been scrimped and saved from everywhere to buy the finery with which they were now be-decked. Auntie Mary shimmered in sapphire blue nylon, her cousins Julia and Clare sashayed around aiming for an air of sophistication which was beyond their years and their fake jewellery to bestow.

The men were relaxed, collars unbuttoned, ties pulled askew in deference to the heat, jackets mostly relegated to the backs of chairs. She couldn't see Alex. Perhaps he had gone outside to get some air.

The dress clung to her now, crumpled, slightly damp at the hem from the dew on the grass in the churchyard. The bridesmaids had looked lovely though, the pale rose silk she had chosen had suited them both beautifully. Angela in particular, her dark hair tumbling softly against the sheen of the fabric.

Everything had looked so beautiful this morning, pristine outfits, flowers dewy, their petals luminescent, hair sleek as though they had stepped from the pages of a glossy magazine. Now the room was a mess. The detritus of the meal strewn across the table; congealed gravy, course breadcrumbs hardened to the consistency of concrete, cold peas, melted ice-cream, round stains from coffee cups not returned to saucers.

The last few days flashed across her mind, too late now to wonder 'had she done the right thing?' Alex was a catch, everyone agreed. Dad approved, of course. 'Handsome lad, good career ahead of him.' Suddenly her life seemed to stretch out in front of her like a string of beads, today was the first, but each bead was connected inexorably to the next, and the next and the next, each leading inevitably on, to the final bead. Just like the pearls she wore around her neck today, encircling her throat, completing the 'perfect wedding ensemble'.

'Nearly time for the first dance, love. We'll be needing you and Alex to tread the boards and get the whole thing started.'

Alex still wasn't in sight, the heat must have really got to him, he had looked a little flushed earlier. She rose, anxious now, the thought crossing her mind that it was some time since she had seen him weaving his way among the guests, where could he have got to?

She passed through the groups, as quickly as possible in the heavy dress, forced to stop and acknowledge the smiles and compliments as she passed.

Stepping outside into the glare of the sun, she shielded her eyes. There was no sign of him. She slipped down the side of the building. Here there was more shade. Her breath escaped in a sign of relief as the cool air penetrated through to her skin.

At first, as she stepped into the small back room where the presents were being stored, her mind did not take in the scene playing itself out before her. The scuffling noises did not fit with the loud music, bursts of laughter and buzz of chatter that had marked this day off from the ordinary. She was aware that she had found Alex and that he did indeed look flushed. Almost involuntarily she noticed that Angela's rose silk was even more crumpled than her own. Angela was trying to smooth it down and restore her hair to respectability. They were both so absorbed that for an instant they did not see her.

When they did, there was a moment of total silence when the world around her seemed to move away as though she were in a lift whose cables had been cut. Or as though this moment were not a bead, but a bullet: whistling through time to strike at the heart of everything she had held most precious.

Her hand moved involuntarily to her throat and touched the pearls placed there by her mother that morning, the final finishing touch. And as Alex opened his mouth to begin to protest, and she felt as though she would burst if she had to listen to even one word, she grasped the beads and tore them from her neck.

The chain broke, surprisingly easily, and one by one, the beads cascaded down around her and rolled away to the furthest areas of the room.