

BILL STENSON

THE WEDDING

FELIX WAS AN ONLY CHILD, and his parents didn't like to be called mom or dad or mama or papa or any of the other words people used. They preferred to be called Marcella and Anthony.

A month before school began, Felix told Marcella that he wanted to be called Tobias. She said he could pretend to be Tobias if he wanted, but Felix was his name, so that was what they would call him.

Then he told her that he had decided not to attend school. She said of course he wanted to go to school. All kids go to school, and that is where they meet new friends. He tried Anthony next but was told he should think about it for a few days. This was a common tactic Anthony had used many times in the past, which was why he had tried Marcella first.

The kindergarten teacher, Miss Deerholme, held a parent meeting three days before school started. She wanted to meet the parents and explain her pedagogical stance on educating the young ones. Anthony had his bowling league that night, so Marcella went by herself. "You are going to absolutely love your teacher," she told Felix the next morning.

The school was less than three blocks from their house, which was an easy walk, but Marcella accompanied Felix the first morning and waved to him as he bravely walked up the steps. She didn't cry, but she came close.

After entering the building, Felix immediately asked an adult, who he assumed was a teacher, where the boys' washrooms were located. Then he went inside and locked himself in a cubicle. There was a buzz to the school, as if he were listening to a beehive far enough away that he could hear but not see it. When the buzz quieted to nothing, he walked out of the washroom and out of the school into the bright sunshine.

Around the corner sat a tiny house that always had smoke coming out of the chimney, no matter what the weather. An old couple lived there, and Felix had stopped by with some older boys on two occasions because the Smythes, Eleanor and Herb, kept candies they portioned out to young children

kind enough to pay a visit. On one occasion, they'd made tea for Felix and an older boy named Tony, and they'd allowed the boys to help themselves to the sugar cubes. Felix had found that four cubes made the tea too sweet, so Eleanor had poured his tea down the drain and given him a fresh cup to try again.

Felix liked it at the Smythes and considered it a much better option than going to kindergarten to study colours and letters, both of which he already knew. When he knocked on their door that morning, Eleanor was halfway through polishing the kitchen floor, and Herb had almost finished an episode of *Gunsmoke*. They always dropped everything the moment guests arrived, so Herb turned off the TV and invited him inside, and Eleanor threw her rag into the sink and lined up the kitchen chairs so she would know where to start again.

"How nice of you to visit," she said. "You usually stop by in the afternoon."

"School started today, but they didn't have room," Felix said. "I thought maybe I could visit you instead."

"What a wonderful idea," she said. "Find a comfy chair in the living room, and I'll make us some tea." After Felix finished his tea, Herb asked him if he would like to watch TV while Eleanor finished polishing the kitchen floor. Then they went for a walk, chopped some wood in the backyard, and gathered eggs from the chicken coop for lunch. There was more TV in the afternoon, and Herb played a game of Go Fish with him before it was time to head home.

Felix had such a lovely time that he maintained the same routine each weekday, visiting the Smythes in the morning, watching the same four or five shows, and helping with the chopping of wood and the collecting of eggs. After a week had gone by, Eleanor asked Felix if his mom minded him spending the day with them. Felix said with the school being too full, his mother was thankful, so long as nobody minded.

One day Marcella saw a woman at the corner store whom she'd met at the meet the teacher meeting with Miss Deerholme. The woman's daughter, Josephine, was in the same kindergarten class as Felix, and she asked whether Josephine had brought home any artwork from school, as she had expected to have seen some of Felix's artwork by now. Josephine's mother said she had so many pictures, mostly fingerpainted, that she had no more

room on the fridge. “That’s why I’m here,” she said. “We need more magnets.”

At supper time that night Marcella asked Felix if he was doing artwork at school.

“We do some.”

“Doesn’t your teacher let you take your pictures home?”

“I did a picture of Batman eating Cheerios for breakfast, but the teacher liked it so much she hung it up on the wall.”

Two days later, a letter from the school informed them that Felix had not yet shown up for class. Had they enrolled him in another school?

Marcella told her boss that she would be late for work and followed Felix to school in her car. Felix walked toward the school, but before he got there he turned left and knocked on the door of what had to be the smallest house in the neighbourhood. An old lady opened the door, and Felix went inside. A few minutes later, Marcella knocked on the door, but it took some time to get a response.

“My son Felix just came to your house.”

“Felix is such a fine boy. We love having him drop by. You must be his mother. We love having visitors. Please, come in. We’re just about to have some tea.”

The following day, both Marcella and Anthony walked Felix to school and right up to the principal’s office to clear the air. The three adults walked Felix down to his room to meet Miss Deerholme. Her class had seventeen students and now, with Felix, there would be an even number, which pleased her for some reason. Felix knew Josephine from the neighbourhood, and she waved him over to a desk beside her. “Can you play Go Fish?” he asked.

At the end of grade one, Felix asked Josephine to marry him, and she said yes. He had two rings from eating Cracker Jack, and she picked the red one. Felix asked his friend Tony, who attended church three times a week and told everyone he wanted to be a preacher, if he wanted to practise by marrying them on the first day of summer holiday, and he agreed.

Felix and Josephine decided to hold the ceremony at Whispers Waterfall, which still had cascading water in the early summer, and they agreed that it would be small—just a few neighbourhood kids. Tony took his duties seriously, and the ceremony lasted at least ten minutes. When it ended, he said, “You may now kiss the bride,” so Felix did. None of the kids had gifts to

offer, but each one said they would think of something and get back to them. The wedding took place at eleven in the morning, and Felix took Josephine fishing down at the creek for their honeymoon. They each caught a cutthroat trout for supper, and Marcella said she would cook them if Anthony cleaned them, which he did.

"Guess what, Marcella?"

"What, dear?"

"Josephine and I got married this morning. We were meant for each other."

"Isn't that sweet," Marcella said.

They agreed to take turns living at each other's houses until they were old enough to get jobs and buy their own house, and Felix said they could start by living at his house, as his bedroom had plenty of room. He'd had friends stay over a few times in the past, but he had never slept in his room with his wife, so this was going to be special. Marcella made them each a small butterscotch sundae and then read them *Princess Smartypants* at bedtime.

"So tell me, Felix," Marcella said. "What great feats did you have to accomplish before marrying Josephine?"

"None," he said, "but I caught two fish for supper."

"I caught one of the fish," Josephine said.

"That is quite an accomplishment," Marcella said. "No wonder you two are married."

Marcella left and got ready for bed herself. She had work in the morning.

"As soon as Marcella goes to bed, I'll join you," Felix said. "Sorry about the bunk beds. Do you like it down there or would you prefer it up top?"

"I think I'd better start at the bottom and work my way up."

"Do you wear pyjamas to bed?" Felix asked.

"No. I hate them. My mom made me bring them."

Anthony and Marcella shared some kind of joke out in the hallway before shutting their bedroom door. Then Felix climbed down from the top bunk, removed his spaceman pyjamas, and slid in beside Josephine, who had already removed her pyjamas.

"The bed is small," Felix said, "but we can cuddle. Some married people sleep with their pyjamas on. Can you believe it?"

"Some things just don't make sense," Josephine said.

Anthony had promised to make pancakes the next morning and waited until nine before he started cooking. He knocked and opened the door to Felix's bedroom and found Felix and Josephine in the bottom bunk, both fast asleep.

"Hey, you two. Time to get up. Pancakes don't stay warm for long."

Josephine took so long in the bathroom that Felix used his parents' bathroom.

Felix told Anthony that he appreciated having this special breakfast, since they were newlyweds, but that in the future they would make their own breakfast in the morning. They knew they had to learn to be independent.

"Marcella mentioned that you two were married now. That's really something."

"Lots of people get married," Felix said.

"True, but rarely as young as you two."

"We've known each other for almost three years," Josephine said. "We saw no reason to wait. When you find the right person, you need to grab them when you can."

"From my experience," Anthony said, "when couples spend a lot of time together, they occasionally fight with one another. They work things out most of the time, but it's not always easy."

"We had our first fight already," Felix said. "When Josephine hooked her fish, I wanted to land it, but she insisted she do it herself. It worked out in the end."

"It's good that everything worked out. I'm just saying that down the road there are always things to consider."

"You're right about that," Josephine said. "Felix thinks we should live here for six months and then at my place for six months. I think maybe we should move every week. I miss my mom already. What do you think, Anthony?"

Anthony spent time in the garden while Felix did some vacuuming and Josephine dusted. Then they had tea, and the doorbell rang. Tony, the preacher, arrived with a gift, which the couple opened in front of him. It was an extra teapot his mother didn't use anymore. He said it was something

they would need when they get their own place. Then Avril Knight arrived with a tablecloth meticulously wrapped with a fancy bow. Felix hadn't initially thought about people bringing them gifts, and he never imagined that they might get a teapot or a tablecloth. Anthony watched in awe at what was happening and texted Marcella. Just before noon, their friend Marty Simmons dropped by with another present—a used hot wheels racetrack. Josephine looked at it like it didn't exist, but Felix loved it.

After lunch, Anthony couldn't help overhear Felix and Josephine in the living room.

"I want to have kids, of course," Josephine said, "but not right away. I want to live a little first. My aunt says having kids is hard on a woman's body, so I think two would be plenty."

"If we have two, a boy and a girl would be good," Felix said. "You can teach our daughter how to braid her hair, and I can teach our son how to fish. Down the road, of course. I have a lot of fish to catch first."

As they began to imagine the shape of the life in front of them, they saw Marcella and Josephine's mother and father making their way up the sidewalk. Felix's first thought was that they were bringing more presents. He hadn't thought of it until now, but of course their parents would also want to give them gifts. It only made sense.

Two days later, Felix couldn't let it go. "But we promised the preacher," he said. "We promised to be husband and wife 'til death do us part."

"It's a fact of life," Marcella said, "that sometimes people make promises they can't keep. When two people get married, they are much older—at least sixteen—and you're not even seven yet."

"But when I told you I married Josephine, you said it was sweet. Why isn't it sweet anymore?"

"That was my mistake. I'm sorry. You have an active imagination, and I guess I thought you were playing a game. I shouldn't have said that."

"This means I have to get divorced, doesn't it? My friend Martin's parents got divorced, and it sucks. I'm far too young to get divorced. Josephine cried when her mom and dad took her away. You saw that. I can't imagine what her life will be like from now on."

"Josephine will be just fine. I talked to her mother today, and she understands that you two can get married for real when you graduate from high school. She thought it might be cute if you did. If you both feel the same

way, that is.”

“Does any of this change if we have a baby?”

“You won’t be having a baby with Josephine any time soon. You’re too young.”

“We slept together with no clothes on. That’s how it happens. You explained everything. Unless that’s a lie too.”

“What I told you is the truth, but only if you’re older. At least fourteen or fifteen, but hopefully much older than that. I was twenty-four when you were born, and Anthony was twenty-six.”

Felix looked up at the ceiling and thought about the number twenty-six. Twenty-six minus six equalled twenty years. He could be dead by then.

For the next three months, Felix walked part of the way home with Josephine every day after school, and they shared a kiss before going their separate ways. This, Josephine said, would keep the bond between them solid, despite what anyone said.

The first report card was due to come out the following Friday, and Marcella and Anthony said they would take the whole family out for supper when it arrived, and Felix could order waffles if he wanted. Felix heard their promise but didn’t believe it would come true.

He forgot about his report card on Friday, but Marcella emptied his lunch box and found it underneath some orange peels. She and Anthony sat down with trepidation at the kitchen table to read about how their son had performed of late. They both knew the aborted wedding had sent him to a different zone.

For every area of learning, the teacher had checked off the box labelled “MEETS OR SURPASSES EXPECTATIONS.” At the bottom, she also wrote a personal note:

Tobias is a curious and discerning child. He masters the curriculum quickly and is eager to move on to new things. He is a boy who comes to school armed with a lot of interesting questions.