

## THE IDES OF LOVE

by Noelle Elizabeth

The first time Naomi got married, it was to a dog.

Naomi was only 9 years old – so young and so in love. She truly loved Roger, and – it was clear to everyone who saw them together – he truly loved her.

The ceremony was a small one, elegant in its childlike simplicity. In addition to the happy couple, there were Rob Dolzanski, 9-year-old neighbour and officiator, Naomie's younger brother, Alex, the Fisch sisters, Lisa and Jenny, two butterflies, one wasp, and an indeterminate number of other uninvited insects buzzing in attendance.

The preparations had taken all morning. They had started out early, Naomi luring a wobbly Alex from his muted cartoons with the promise of pop-tarts as she struggled with the zipper of her faded rainbow backpack. Roger had bounded joyously to meet them at the door, letting out a muted yip accentuated by wagging tail.

Roger had to sleep outside when Jerry stayed over, instead of in Naomi's bed where he so clearly belonged. Jerry thought Roger was dirty, that he was hairy, that he was a useless animal that shouldn't be allowed in the house, never mind a little girl's bed.

The feelings were mutual.

It was a warm spring day. The crocuses were out, blooming purple against the burnt green grass. Naomi crafted a crown of dandelions, its golden glory soon wilted in tangled communion with her unbrushed hair.

The Fisch sisters chanted "Here Comes the Bride", in a marriage of shared melodies, both known and homemade. Naomi took a deep breath, took hold of Alex's hand and took her first barefoot step down an aisle of gravel, dust and dreams.

She wasn't going to make the same mistakes as her mother. Her future daughter would have a father – a loving, caring, married, handsome one – instead of a brother, to walk her down the aisle.

After 12 steps marched in near ceremonial unison, she gently shook her young brother's left arm, leading his right hand to drop wetly from his nose and rub a sliver of gold onto grimy jeans. Beside him, Naomi was gowned in a befitting white t-shirt, turned inside out to mask its glittery logo, floating above a pair of khakis so faded with experience as to appear the unbroken eggshell-white of innocence.

Roger, of course, looked ravishing, with his golden coat gleaming in the sunlight, his deep chest a shining patchwork of ores. If you looked closely enough, you might see a few white hairs invading his black muzzle and floppy ears. Yet he had only been six months old when Naomi came home and he found a purpose, a playmate, a partner, a puppy love.

Roger whined with high-pitched excitement at their approach, the frosted dreadlocks of his ass rising to greet them, despite the leash holding him back from below the celebrant's left running shoe.

"Dearly beloved," Rob Dolzanski pronounced with suitable and practised solemnity. He had watched a lot of movies. He had officiated at three successful recess weddings this spring. He knew what he was doing.

Nonetheless, Rob Dolzanski had been nervous. He took his role seriously; he took weddings seriously; he took life seriously. Besides, he had never presided over an inter-species wedding before. And Naomi herself somehow made him feel nervous, as if his best and worst selves were having a fist fight in his stomach.

"We are gathered here today," he had continued, holding before him the open, onion-skin pages of a Bible he would never read yet already assumed to believe, "To witness and celebrate..."

So it was that Naomi and Roger were wed. In lieu of honeymoon, they left skipping home, aglow with love toward marital bed, a somewhat sunburnt and cranky Alex in tow.

"Where in Christ have you been?" their mother yelled at Naomi in greeting. "I've been worried sick... Jesus, you're filthy."

"Get that god-damned dog outta here," Jerry had growled from the couch as he lifted himself to an elbow to grab his beer.

It was their wedding night. But Roger was thrown outside while Naomi took a bath, and later, while Roger slept alone in the cold, Jerry made her feel as though she might never get clean again.

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The day that Rob Dolzanski finally asks Naomi out appears auspicious, the air full of the sticky promise of a million poplar budding green overnight.

Her no pops out in instinctual surprise. Only after she joins the slow sleepy shuffle off the bus, toward the dim, dismal light of another school day, does she actually ponder the question.

Rob Dolzanski stays behind in his seat as long as possible. Despite the purposefully casual fling of hand-me-down scarf, Naomi's neck misses the comforting warmth of his 11-year-old minty-fresh breath behind her. She wonders why she said no, if she should have, why he had to ask her in the first place.

By the end of the day, she knows she made the right decision.

By the end of the day, everyone is laughing at her, the girl who married a dog.

An innocent love crushed under the heels of a budding adolescence.

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When Roger dies, Naomi is 15 years old: too old to believe in marrying dogs and too young to be a widow.

Her mother tells her and Alex when they get off the bus. Her eyes are red and swollen, her lips the bruised purple of mourning wine. When she reaches out to hug them, Alex automatically moves toward a mother's comfort, while Naomi backs away, her eyes darting wildly – pupils unconsciously scanning, silently screaming, for a flash of Roger's fur to brighten this bitter mid-November day.

"Where is he?" Naomi's cold voice cuts through, half-pulling Alex from his mother's embrace. A cold breeze lifts the semi-decomposed remains of aspen leaves into a whispered dance of the dead.

"Oh, honey," her mother coos at her as she bends down to swipe a soft kiss on her son's crown. "You know Roger was getting old. And then, well... I mean he was suffering. And Ron said..."

Ron is Naomi's mother's current boyfriend. Jerry is long gone. As is Frank, Fred and Gerry-with-a-G. Ron doesn't seem like a complete dick, but Naomi has stopped really noticing. And in their new house, she shares a room with Alex. She doesn't mind. At all.

"Why didn't you get us? We didn't..."

Although their marriage was never consummated, Naomi and Roger had known true love. And now, he's gone, it's gone, love's gone. And she never even got to say goodbye.

Alex's right toe kicks hard at the earth, unlodging a rock that rolls by, cold, hard and unnoticed.

"We'll get another dog," her mother placates into the infinitely growing space between them

Some things – like men – are replaceable; others – like dogs – are not.

"I loved him too," their mother assures them as Naomi marches by. Alex turns to follow close at her heels. He looks back, but only once. "I love you," her mother tells their backs, voice raising. "So so much," she adds to their head to their room, leaving her alone in a silence as sharp as a pugio's blade.

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Naomi never marries again, but she does fall in love: with a bouncy border collie cross when she is 24, with a dusty-grey bear dog with a heart as big as its appetite when she is 41, and with a skittery patchwork mutt who cannot wake her up one winter morning at the age of 68.

As for Alex, he will turn out to be more of a cat-person.