

The Second Husband of the Fourth Wife  
*A Cautionary Tale of the 20th Century*

For the most part, I consider myself “normal” (whatever that is.) The first meaning in the dictionary is: conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected.

To me, I really am a normal, relatively sane American woman of a certain age—we won’t go there, okay? I had two parents and lived in medium sized cities all my life. Fairly typical. After high school, I went to work as a stenographer. Somewhat typical. And within a year, my mother became obsessed with getting me married off. Because of that, I married a guy when I was too young to know better. It will come as no surprise to you when I say we were married for fourteen and a half years before I finally decided to end it.

Enter, stage left, husband number two. Highly educated, with a Ph.D., he was an actor—although not a fulltime one. He had a regular, very responsible and lucrative job. He considered the acting more of a hobby which often brought in extra money. As member of the Screen Actors Guild, he appeared in a dozen or so movies over a span of years. He was also involved in local theater productions.

As a child, I daydreamed about the future. I saw Margaret O’Brien and Natalie Wood in movies and thought I could do that too. I started singing by the time I reached four. In my Thirties, I found myself in a position to try out for a local production of an old Broadway musical. Although I tried out for the lead, I was cast instead in the chorus as one of the townspeople. One of the secondary leads was a man I’d seen perform in other local theater productions. For the sake of this story we’ll call him “Hugo.”

Hugo was an older man—seventeen years older than I—and only two years younger than my father. Yes, I know what you’re thinking. But that wasn’t it. He was such a brilliant guy, had so much life experience, was a talented actor and writer, and he had an air of mystery about him. How was that not intriguing?

Although he’d been married three times, his explanation of each breakup seemed completely understandable. So we married. The first couple of years were intense. We both performed in shows—sometimes six different productions in a year. And we both worked full time. Sometimes he got cast in a show, while I performed in a different one. Other times we were cast in the same play. Occasionally he took time off to be in a movie. One year he insisted on us taking a trip to Europe for six weeks. He’d been to Europe twice before, and I had the benefit of his previous experience there. I felt I’d found the perfect husband for me.

If this were a movie, you’d already see what was coming. I didn’t.

He decided after four and a half years to leave, and move on to Wife Number Five.

I went on to other relationships, eventually marrying a podiatrist. I dated him on and on for three years before we married. That one lasted only a year, then he, too, was out the door. I swore off marriage for good

My redemption arrived in the form of my high school sweetheart. The one that got away, I used to think. When we met again, he wanted to get back together. I told him I'd had enough marriages to know it wasn't my best thing. After two years—during which time I thought he'd give up—he convinced me we were meant to be together. The year 1986 brought forth his 30<sup>th</sup> High School Reunion. We married on the day of the banquet for that event and made a grand entrance that night to the cheers of our friends.

One day in 1998 when Don and I had been married almost exactly twelve years, I opened the newspaper and discovered an article about Hugo, complete with photograph. He had died, it turned out, and they were accounting all his accomplishments. I was stunned.

The day of the funeral my mom and dad wanted to attend, and I agreed to meet them there. I noticed Wife Number Three sitting in a pew by herself a few rows up, and I went to greet her. She asked me to accompany her to the gravesite services. I felt awkward enough just attending the funeral. But she felt strongly about going to the gravesite and didn't want to be alone. I reluctantly agreed, and she said she'd drive.

A the conclusion of the memorial, Wife Number Five greeted my parents warmly in the receiving line at the funeral home. She had a raised brow and limp smile for me and Wife Number Three. But we stuck to our plan to be at the graveside services.

It was July and a typical summer morning in New Mexico. The brilliant sun bathed the cemetery with its warmth. I had selected a red suit and high heels for the occasion—Wife Three was similarly dressed. We arrived at the gravesite where the canopy shielded the mourners. They sat uncomfortably in their metal folding chairs, on top of the thin carpeting that's supposed to disguise the fact everyone is sitting on top of someone else's grave next to the newly opened one. The only chairs left were two up front beside Wife Number Five. Those chairs were reserved for her daughter and the daughter's boyfriend, who were apparently running late. Hugo's actual daughter from Wife Number One was also seated in the front row. Number Three and I went to stand at the back of the seated attendees. Our fronts were in the shade of the canopy, but our backsides were baking in the sun.

I admire folks who work in the funeral industry. I cannot see myself doing that as an occupation. They deal with the dead, and the grief of those left behind. Almost all of the men are solicitous to everyone attending the events—and sometimes, it can be a problem.

Although a bit uncomfortable, Number Three and I are happy to be standing behind the last row of people. None of the attendees can see us. But the Funeral Men don't want two women standing in the hot sun. So they motion us to come inside, under the canopy. We shake our heads, declining the offer.

Problem. There are no more chairs, and the only standing room would be at the head of the coffin. Not a good idea.

But Funeral Men are determined to “solve” a perceived issue. They approach us, grab Number Three by the arm, and pull her (with me attached) inside under the canopy. He stands us at the foot of the coffin, where the clods of dirt under the thin carpet make balancing difficult. We stand there, clutching each other to avoid falling over, with the entire “audience” of attendees staring at us curiously.

In my mind, I’m hearing, *“Who are these strange women, and why are they standing at the foot of Hugo’s coffin?”*

Wife Number Five is definitely not happy. We know this because we can see her face and the rest of the group cannot. The glare she bestows is hotter than the sun we just escaped. Hell hath no fury, and all that. Finally, the delinquent daughter and boyfriend arrive, seat themselves, and the minister commences.

A couple of people in the audience were acquainted with me, Wife Number Three, and obviously Wife Number Five. After all, they’ve been friends of the deceased all through the years he’s been changing wives. I caught a grin or two when my eyes happened to meet theirs. I couldn’t help wondering what they thought of the picture we presented.

As soon as the minister finished, he approached us to shake our hands. I’m positive he had no clue who we were, and he couldn’t have known that our look of pain and discomfort was not a sign of sadness. I only knew we’d better leave as quickly as possible.

We hurried back to the car, our high heels making us stumble as we waded through the thick lawn turf. We got in the car and burst into laughter. If Hugo had a sense of humor, and we both knew he did, all we could think of was him watching this fiasco from wherever his departed soul went.

It served him right.