

RAINBOW ROWELL

Wedding talk bloats summer

"How old're you?" my 7-year-old brother said with his characteristic sneer.

Since birth, my littlest sibling has had a way of curling his lip much like Billy Idol used to back in the innocent "White Wedding" days before he started messing around with that Hollywood Madam character.

"You 18?" he pushed, not one to wait for me to finish introspecting.

"Nope, I'm older than that."

"You 19?"

"Older than that."

"You 20?"

"Yep, I'm 20."

He sat for a moment, processing.

"Why ain't you married yet?"

Couldn't he have just asked me about the facts of life or why God allows war? I took it with a grain of salt. This is the same kid who routinely tells me I must be "stupid" if I've been in school for 16 years.

"Well," I said, oozing diplomacy and fondness, "I haven't found anyone who I want to marry yet."

He just sneered, so I suggested that maybe he could find someone to marry me if he thought it was that important. I smiled a patronizing smile that virtually reached out and patted him on the head.

"I don't think so. You're pretty old."

Great. I can just see him sitting in his first-grade class trying to trade the overpriced Jurassic Park pencils I bought him to some snot-nose in return for my hand in marriage.

"You say she's 20? I don't know—that's pretty old. Throw in that No Rules Trapper Keeper and you've got yourself a deal."

Oh well, kids say the darndest things. Despite the venom from the mouth of babes, I'm not holding the old maid card yet.

But I can't blame my brother. My family has had marriage on the brain since June; my mother has had tentative plans to tie the knot.

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Yes, the summer was bloated with talk of vows and rice-throwing. This summer, the first of my high-school gang — Cathy — stalked down the aisle. It's hard to imagine anyone from my high school making that sort of commitment, but it's especially difficult to picture Cathy having and holding through sickness and health.

Back in the days, Cathy was our resident loon. She was wacky with three capital W's. We called her P-Sycho, and voted her Most Likely to Bomb-Threat the Airport. She wasn't clinically insane — just unpredictable.

During high school, my neighborhood was constantly under construction. It was always a pain in the heinie for my friends with cars to pick me up for football games and other important dates.

The easiest way to my house was a downhill, one-way street, which was fine on the way in, but you had to take a more complicated route involving spooky railroad tracks on the way out. Unless Cathy was driving.

When Cathy was driving, she left the same way she came in. Time after time, I remember sitting in the passenger seat of her nondescript Honda as she turned onto the one-way street.

I remember screaming her name and just plain screaming as we climbed the hill. "Cathy, Cathy, this isn't funny. It's insane." She'd just laugh this

high-pitched endorphin whine and speed on.

I'd close my eyes and picture myself being pulled from a head-on collision. Watching the home team beat the Benson Bunnies just wasn't worth getting personal with the jaws of life.

We'd reach the moment of reckoning just over the crest of the hill. Once again Cathy's luck had pulled through, and no cars were coming.

And now she's married. To a guy. A very normal guy. Not the bizarro bungee-jumping crack addict I always thought she'd bring home to meet Grandma.

They've rented a cute, newlywed-ish apartment where they keep all of their married belongings and watch married people television.

I know she's the same person, but she seems different. She believes in happily-ever-after now, and when I'm with her, I think I do, too.

But, I still can't believe she's for real. I keep waiting for her to call me, demon-giggling, to say, "PSYCH! Reeled you in, and you can't have your Rubbermaid set back either!"

I worry about her. What if this is one of her thrill-seeker pranks? It's much more dangerous than the time she went to the mall and dropped rubber balls from the balcony onto Jeans West shoppers.

Cathy's driving down another one-way street now. I just hope this time she's driving the right way.

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