

FIRST PERSON

Finally, a Wedding. It Was About Time.

The author learned that loving is just as much about holding on as it is letting go.

By **Amanda McCracken**

June 13, 2020 Updated 9:35 a.m. ET

When I was 6, I had an imaginary husband I named Dave the Watchmaker. We had a wedding ceremony in the living room where my grandma sat as the lone guest while my mother played the organ. I carried a giant baby doll with me down the aisle to meet Dave.

I would get married for the first time at age 41 at my grandmother's bedside, three days before she left us forever. It would take Dave the Watchmaker 34 years to actually show up, and before he did, I pined for men who might as well have been imaginary.

"Oh honey don't cry, there will be many more," Grandma Velda said to me from the kitchen where she was fixing our dinner. I laid on the couch crying over a crush in my fifth-grade class who liked my friend. I had no idea how right my 70-year-old grandma was. I would spend 30 more years dating more than 100 men before I'd meet "him."

My grandma, though, was my faithful cheerleader. "He's out there," she'd tell me. "I pray for him every night." And if anyone knew how to wait for love to show up, she did. For more than two years she waited for her new husband to return from the South Pacific during World War II.

No doubt I inherited her willpower to wait. For years I remained a virgin waiting for love and commitment. I feared losing my virginity to someone who would leave me. There had always been an inextricable connection between my virginity and my grandma's mortality. My irrational subconscious thought if I preserved my virginity I could hang on to my youth and in turn preserve her life.

[Sign up for Love Letter and always get the latest in Modern Love, weddings, and relationships in the news by email.]

"Are you in love with him?" she asked me last spring.

"I'm not really sure," I replied.

“Well, you ought to know by now. Would you love him if he left you?” she asked.

“Maybe he should,” I told her, “and then I’d know.”

But deep down I already knew.

At 41 years old, after a year of dating, I lost my virginity last summer to my real-life Dave on a tiny island in the South Pacific. It had taken Dave the Watchmaker plenty of time to fully show up as the trustworthy, loving, committed David Butler, not a watchmaker but a drummer from Long Island (turned Colorado mountain runner). But he finally did. And on July 2, I called my 100-year-old grandma to tell her I was engaged. “Well, it’s about time!” she declared. She was right. It is all about time.

We planned a small wedding in October 2019 in Cincinnati for my two grandmothers and my fiancé’s elderly mother to attend since it was unlikely they would be able to travel to Colorado for the July 2020 wedding. Grandma Velda had planned to deliver the prayer at the October ceremony.

But, in late August, Grandma Velda was hospitalized with pneumonia. When we discussed possible outcomes with her, she rolled her eyes and told my mother she wasn’t “leaving” until after the wedding.

“Feel it.” She placed my hand on her heart during her echocardiogram. Having had both breasts removed from cancer, the barrier between her heart and my hand was so thin her heart beat practically leapt into my palm. One and two and three four five. I felt her heart skip and race as she lie still and exposed under the chill of the ultrasound wand.

“How does it look?” I asked the technician. “He won’t tell you,” my grandmother replied for him. She knew in her gut what I could feel in my constricted throat. No matter how fast her heart pumped, we’d later learn it simply couldn’t fulfill its job anymore.

She recovered enough from the pneumonia to make it to a rehab facility where she progressed for a week, until congestive heart failure took over. On Sept. 18, she was rushed back to the hospital. Her heart rate was spiking 160 beats per minute, but it couldn’t flush out the fluid increasingly filling her cavity, like an hourglass filling with sand.

I had always dreaded that moment when I would say goodbye to her every time I left my family in Ohio to fly back to Colorado. “I hate to see you leave, honey,” she’d say, head drooping and arms outreached. Often I’d do what men had done to me when I attached too quickly. I’d throw up a wall in response to her clinginess and tell her firmly, “I’ll be back soon.” But sometimes I’d crumble into tears, hold her shrinking body against mine, and tell her I didn’t want her to die. “Oh sweetheart, don’t cry. I’m not going anywhere,” she would tell me as she

reached up and held her hand to my cheek.

I was at Machu Picchu, Peru, for a short work trip when my mother called me from the rehab center in tears. “Grandma is not doing well,” she said, pausing to catch her breath. “How quickly can you get home?” She put grandma on the phone briefly, “Sweetheart, I love you with all my heart,” she told me in a distressed voice. “Grandma, I love you too, but I am coming home! I am coming home,” I said. I stood weak-kneed in the doorway of my hotel staring up at the morning fog rolling over the mountains 4,000 miles away from her. Then I started my trek back to her.

My grandmother, an Illinois-raised farm girl, who was born during the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, had escaped death multiple times and fought her way through a number of struggles including: a car crash (while pregnant with my mother) that resulted in her broken jaw being wired shut; a cancerous tumor that resulted in the removal of a kidney; another car crash that sent her head through the windshield (from which she pulled herself out); a broken heart that landed her in a small town Illinois hospital twice for a “mental breakdown” after watching her 54-year-old husband die of a heart attack; breast cancer that took both breasts in her 90s, a broken pelvis (twice) and ribs from falls; and a few mini-strokes. To say she was resilient is an understatement. But even a strong heart can fail.

Less than seven weeks before her 101st birthday, it became obvious she would not be able to beat death this time. When I arrived from Peru, she stretched out her arms, “There’s my girl!” she said and hugged me tightly. She pressed her pearly pink cheek against the palm of my hand and squinted at the clock on the wall. “Do you have to go back tomorrow?” she asked. “No, I’m not leaving until you get out of here,” I replied.



Ms. McCracken and her husband, David Butler, were able to celebrate with a long-anticipated wedding ceremony before Grandma Velda died last September.

A day later my fiancé, Dave, flew in from Colorado. Two hours later, with the help of hospital staff, we created a bedside ceremony.

In a hospital office I changed into my mother's wedding dress — the only wedding dress we had on hand. Just the weekend before, my mom brought it back from my other grandma's attic in Illinois. Until that Friday afternoon, it had been sealed in a dry cleaning box for 46 years. It fit.

The chaplain delivered a modest bouquet of daisies for me to carry. One nurse took a video and pictures while the other played the processional Pachelbel's "Cannon in D Major" from her phone.

At 4:30 p.m., when I walked into her room and took her hand at her bedside, Grandma Velda immediately began delivering her prayer, unprompted and unscripted. I watched the familiar choreography of her facial features in prayer. I listened intently to her chapped red lips wrap around the words that were drowned out by the whiz of oxygen. It was possibly the most precious 25 seconds of my life.

The minister from our family's church continued the ceremony with our vows and the exchange of rings. We used the ring my grandmother had given me in early August when I was back for a visit — a dainty worn gold ring with a tiny diamond in the middle flanked by an

etching of an orange blossom on either side — a traditional engagement ring of the 1930s. When I realized I didn't have a ring for Dave, my father pulled off his ring and handed it to us. It fit Dave. "Temporarily on loan," he said with a smile.

I kept my eyes on my grandma throughout the ceremony when I wasn't called to look at my husband. My left hand gripped hers and my right rested in his. When her head wasn't drooping, she gazed up at me two or three times and whispered, "You look beautiful."

We celebrated at the end with vanilla cupcakes and sparkling grape juice — the last liquid she voluntarily took. After the ceremony, Dave leaned in close to her. "I told her I knew how easy it is to worry about loved ones but that she need not worry because I'd take good care of you for the rest of my days," Dave later told me.

She was bright and present for us during that brief ceremony, but she was slipping away. Only 12 hours later, after painstakingly analyzing every possible direction, we decided to let her go and put her on hospice. I had always imagined her passing away peacefully and willingly, asleep in her recliner while "Bonanza" played in the background. But another 24 hours later, my family labored through hymns and tears at her bedside. Her heart stopped beating from under my palm at 5:40 p.m. on Sept. 23 — the first day of fall.

We are all on temporary loan to one another. And loving is just as much about holding on as it is letting go.

The illusion of perfect timing permeates our lives all too often. Like her death, our wedding day is not how I imagined it as a 6 year old, but the most beautiful moments in life never are. Now instead of imagining my husband into life, I imagine my grandma's spirit actively at work to nurture my pregnancy. At only seven weeks I heard her in the heartbeat — 160 beats per minute blossoming into life.

Amanda McCracken, a freelance journalist, lives in Boulder, Colo. She is currently eight-months pregnant and writing a book titled, "How Longing Became My Lover." Her legal wedding has now been rescheduled to Sept. 20, on the one-year anniversary of her bedside wedding with her grandmother.

Continue following our fashion and lifestyle coverage on Facebook (Styles and Modern Love), Twitter (Styles, Fashion and Weddings) and Instagram.