

# The Fathers of the Bride

By

Lee Travis

*There had to be a way out of the trap--but what way? Kill him?*

I

Irving gritted his teeth. The son-of-a-bitch was driving everyone insane; Joy was going berserk. It was an impossible bind.

"I can't do that." Irving cried, and sank down into the slate-gray chair by the picture window, "I j-j-just can't. There's gotta be 'nother way."

Joan jumped up from her stuffed chair, and leaned against him. Her blond hair was an orange halo in the sunset, her face black-red and flush against his, and her hands were heavy on his shoulders. She glared at him, and shouted.

"Please. Just--just--for once throw him out on his goddamned pompous ass. I hate it when he walks in our front door and marches up to the girls' rooms like he still lived here."

Irving grimaced and sank deeper into his chair.

"I guess I just could throw 'im out, but it'd be pretty upsettin' for the girls ta see all that blood 'n guts, no? They seen enough, right? They seen what he did ta you, right?"

Joan looked down at her husband's broad shoulders and thick, muscular arms, and imagined him breaking Jared's stiff neck like a child snapping a dry twig.

"You're twice as strong as him, Irving, and this is your house now too, damnit. Hell, you've been living here for years now, after all . . ."

Irving shook his head.

"No-no-no. You want me ta beat him up? Bloody nose, black eyes, split lips n' all? Have the fuzz here, maybe get a lawsuit? You know how bullheaded Jared is--."

Joan stood back, folded her arms, and looked away.

"No . . . no . . . I'm just . . . I mean . . . "

It had gone on like this between them for the first five years of their marriage--virtually every weekend that Jared came to see Joy, the younger of his two daughters by his marriage to Joan.

Finally, Joan put her foot down and told Jared that her attorney had informed her that she had every right to exclude her ex-husband from her home. Jared would have to wait at the front door, or in the driveway for his youngest daughter to come outside. When Joan told Jared that in the front hall the next time he came, for a moment she feared he was going to hit her. But he left in a huff, and did as he was told.

"That's that," Irving said.

"I doubt it's over" Joan replied. She sighed and shook her head, her pale blue eyes cloudy with anxiety. "I doubt he's given up."

## II

Jared retaliated. He wrote Joy and Adriene long letters, belittling their "dumb blond" mother and her second husband for their "bullshit beatnik immaturity and childish manipulations." No matter what Joan or Irving did, or said, Jared seized on every opportunity to vilify them.

Joy's forthcoming wedding was one such opportunity.

Joy, like her mother, was a blue-eyed blond, sweet-tempered and voluptuous. She sat pleading with her father in the front seat of his new, snow-white Cadillac Eldorado, after his alternate Fridays visit with her--visits that were no longer court-ordered, but voluntary on her part. It had been a comfortable day with her dad, a quiet brunch with white wine at the club, a day at the museum, an afternoon of comfortable chit-chat. The mood seemed right.

Joy's wedding was in September, some eight months away, and she wanted that special day, her day, to be perfect. She looked over at her handsome father.

"Dad, I—I—just, I just want to tell, to let you know, it was be—I mean, I really want to make my wedding special by you and Irving walking me down the aisle together.."

Jared's jaw dropped, then set. He looked straight ahead.

"Who's putting this romantic rubbish in your head? Your mother? Irving? Your damned sister tried the same crap on me. Look what happened. Her wedding turned into a fiasco when she tried to get me to let Irving walk down the aisle with us--right in the church. No daughter dares do that to her own blood father, and I'm not going to let you get away with it, either. What do you think I'm am--a societal cretin?"

"No, I--I--don't. But it's because of what happened to Adriene that I really want to try again to get it right. I'm even going to wear Adriene's wedding dress, Daddy."

"I'll buy you another damned dress, if your mother can't afford one."

"No, no, no. It's not the money, it's the feeling of togetherness—of family. I want to wear Adriene's wedding dress--she wants me to wear it--and walk down the aisle with Irving and you."

Jared ran a hand through his closely-cropped, dark hair, and shrugged.

"Ok, then the silly dress business is between you two girls. The other matter is major and is between you and me, and I'm telling you it's not negotiable."

"But I—I--want to do it--I want to get things right."

Jared stared straight ahead.

"Not on a bet, you goddamned ingrate. The Bible says 'Honor thy father,' and that's the way it is, period. It's not negotiable."

"But Daddy, I love you both—I—want both my fathers to walk me down the aisle."

Jared audibly gritted his teeth.

"Jesus Christ, kid, grow up, deal with reality. I am your only father. I brought you into this world. I have paid for your clothing--your schooling--your medical care--your dental care. That cheap son-of-a-bitch stole my wife and my home, the goddamned Kike, and he's not getting a damned thing from me, much less such an honor. It's totally the improper form, you idiotic kid."

"But it's only fair." Joy cried.

"Fair? To give him that public honor after all he's done to me? He does not have even remotely equal status with me."

"Then I--I'll walk down the aisle alone."

Jared bashed the heel of his fist into the dashboard and glared straight ahead.

"Like hell you will--and humiliate me before the whole world? Like hell you will, you little ingrate bitch."

"Then walk down the aisle with Irving and me, for me, please--it's my wedding."

Jared glanced over at his daughter then returned his gaze straight ahead.

"Are you out of your mind? Adriene tried to pull the same dizzy 'two fathers' drivel on me, and look what happened. Can't you live and learn?"

Joy glanced over at her father.

"I have learned. Adriene is so stinking mad at you she won't even answer your letters anymore. That's why I—I--really want you to walk down the aisle with both Irving and me--can't you see?"

Jared's forehead furrowed into a plowed field.

"You're being insolent. The answer is the same for you as it was for Adriene. not on a bet. And let me remind you that I have power over you in the future as well as now, little girl."

Joy squirmed in her car seat, turned, faced her father, and shouted. "I--I'm twenty-two--I have a college degree--a good job--I don't need your Trust Fund money--and I'm no 'little girl,' damn you."

Jared looked straight ahead and ground his teeth.

"Not on a bet, not on a bet, you little ingrate bitch," Jared sneered as his knuckles went white on the steering wheel.

"Damn you," Joy shouted, threw open the car door, slammed it shut behind her, and stomped through the snow to the house.

"Not on a bet, ingrate," Jared yelled out his driver's window after her, "not on a bet, you little ungrateful bitch. Never."

### III

Irving had come home early that Friday and had just hung up his red plaid winter jacket when he heard the car door slam and Jared shouting.

"You Ok?" he asked Joy as she burst into the house.

She stamped her snow-covered boots angrily on the throw rug in the foyer.

"I hate him. I hate him. I hate him! He won't walk with us down the aisle."

Irving wrapped his long arm around her.

"Hate's a pretty strong word, honey," he said, lightly stroking her blond hair, "you're too sweet 'n loving a person ta say that--you don't really mean it. No matter what, after all, he's your father. He comes ta see you every other weekend, and he's paid for your private schooling, your cars, your college . . ."

She jumped back from him.

"And do you know what he does every time I see him?"

Irving reached out and took both of Joy's hands.

"No."

"He calls you 'dumbskull' and other horrible names, he calls Mother 'the myopic bitch,' and does nothing except complain about how dumb and unappreciative us kids are."

Irving shrugged and hugged her to him.

"Well, ta my mind, you kids ain't either 'dumb' or 'un'preciative'--he's off-base there. He's maybe mad 'bout something else, and's takin' it out on you."

Joy stood away from him and cocked her head.

"Like what?"

Irving shrugged, and held her hands.

"Oh, like his sister bein' put in control of the family fortune, 'stead of Jared. That musta hurt."

Joy stomped her foot.

"Don't make excuses for him."

"I'm tryin' ta be fair."

"Why? He calls you names. He really hates you, you know. He calls you a 'Kike'."

Irving's head jerked.

"Kike?"

"Kike."

He grimaced, and then laughed and pulled her towards him.

"You know what that makes 'im into. Anyway, he's your father, an' he loves you, in his own way."

Joy's head rested on his shoulder.

"He used to . . . he's changed."

Irving hugged her and patted and rubbed her back.

"We all change, honey. Look at me. I'm goin' bald--I have 'bout lost all the long, brown hippy hair you usta play with 'n pull over your little face when you was a little girl--'member?"

Joy stepped away from him, grabbed both of his rough, callused hands, and scowled.

"Irv. This is serious."

"Sorry. I love ya, honey--."

"It's very serious."

He nodded.

"I know it's serious--I been through this all afore with Adriene."

"Then do something about it."

Irving threw his hands up.

"What? I's, well, sorta stuck--I mean, it's up ta you 'n your father, ain't it?"

She stared at him, and shouted.

"Why can't you just talk with him."

Irving face froze.

"You gotta be kiddin', honey."

Joy peered directly into his eyes as if to chasten him.

"But I thought you were my father, too."

Irving's gut cramped and ached for her, just as it had when Adriene tried to force Jared to have Irving walk with them down the aisle, and failed. Irving felt trapped, again, this time in Joy's sadness, and felt wholly powerless to do anything about it.

"Look, honey," he said, and pulled Joy to him again, "I can do what I did for Adriene--not cause no trouble, n' back out."

She pulled away from him, and stood with both hands anchored on her hips. Her blue eyes glinted, and her nostrils flared.

"Back out? No. I want you to fight for me.--that's the curse you're talking about, Irv, for godsake, the stinking curse."

"Curse? What curse?"

"Adriene's curse. Your curse. This family's curse." Joy cried, and ran off up the stairs to her bedroom.

#### IV

Irving followed Joy slowly up the stairs and then went down the hall to his and Joan's bedroom, sat down, and listened to Joy's muffled tears. He was drowning in a flood of internal accusations: "coward." and "wimp." and worse. It was intolerable. *There has to be a way out of the trap*, he said to himself.

He then had totally uncharacteristic fantasies of personally killing Jared or of somehow having the fat, stuffy ass, conveniently--and permanently--disposed of. Irving had worked as a laborer and a remodeler in the construction business for 20 years and knew exactly who to contact. It was simple, as he understood it--a plain, straight forward, business deal. Just meet secretly with the guy, give him Jared's daily routine for the Board meetings at the estate, the MENSA meetings and dinners at the ritzy country club, and hand over the \$10,000 cash in small, untraceable, bills. Then, there would be an "accident" when Irving and Joan were miles away across the country on business with his or her associates at some sort of convention. Solid alibis. No guns, no knives, no poisons. No witnesses. Just an unfortunate, and professional, "accident" burning Jared to a cinder in an unfortunate car accident.

And it would be over, finished.

Irving's stomach went sour. How could he tell Joy that he'd had her father killed? Some day, he'd have to tell her. He had never once lied to her about anything. He adored and honored her, and had adored and honored her since he first met her, a dwarf little lady with white-blond hair, her eyes bright blue sapphires, and her little girl's bubbly giggle the serenade of a skylark's song. He had fallen in love with her, at first sight, as he had with her mother.

And that was only the beginning, he reminded himself.

After he and Joan married, he put Joy to bed every night, read her a bedtime story, and then rubbed her little pug nose with his considerable, hooked, snout, both of them giggling and saying "nose-nose-nose--goodnight." For years they did that--it was a treasured memory, among countless treasured memories.

For years they went to different local parks together, played "hide and go seek," swung on the swings, climbed on the monkey bars, and ran around playing "tag," the tall giant with the long, shoulder-length brown hair and the blond-haired pixie. They went swimming, boating, and fishing together; they went out for ice cream cones together; they went bicycle riding together; and they went ice skating and snow sledding together; on and on.

Of course, he had done the same things with Adriane, or with both Adriane and Joy, together. But somehow it felt different with Joy.

He started to pace around on the thick, brown pile rug, between the foot of the bed and the bathroom, from memory to memory.

He was there for Joy after she had her tonsils and adenoids removed. He was there when she graduated from elementary school. He was there when she came home, late, somewhat confused and giddy, her lipstick smudged, and her hair disheveled, from her first serious date at age 16. He was there at her graduation from high school. And he was there when she graduated, Magna Cum Laude, from Smith college.

He sat down on the bed, put his elbows on his knees, and massaged his throbbing temples.

Somehow, in ways he could only vaguely voice to himself, Joy was to him a replication of Joan as a little girl, a little girl he had never known. And while he never spoke of this to Joan or Joy or Adriane, or to anyone else for that matter, it was a strange, and beautiful experience, to be a husband and father to the same heavenly entity somehow magically apportioned in two separate forms.

The more he remembered, the more the anguish grew.

He felt ashamed of himself, and powerless to do anything about what Joy had called their "curse." He longed for fatherly counsel and guidance, but his father had died years ago when Irving was in his early 20's. And they had never really known each other very well, for his father, an immigrant from Israel, had worked long, hard hours on the early evening shift in a shoe factory, and was rarely home when Irving was awake.

"I was raised by my mother, my sister, an aunt and a female alley cat" he remembered he once said to Joan, "I have no idea of how to be a father--I have absolutely no model to work from."

"Bull-tucky" Joan said when he had pitied himself like that, "you're a wonderful father to the girls. You're loving. You're like me, a Flower Child, you're part of the hippy love generation. You're the best father in the world to them."

He went into the bathroom to splash cold water on his aching forehead, and looked at himself in the mirror.

"You're the best father in the world?" he asked the watery light-brown eyes staring back at him. "You've got a strong, gentle heart? Bullshit. You're a wimp, a yellow, chicken-shit peacenik. You have no right to do what Joy wants you to do, none."

The truth hurt.

He started to cry in despair, but then caught himself: behind the pain of the rising sobs, he sensed an unexpected, and terrifying, anger, a pure, fiery wrath burning at the very center of his overwhelming love for Joy. No matter what her bloodline, she had become his daughter, just as he had become Joy's father, bloodline be damned.

The father-daughter partnership they had created was natural, like the way a sapling grows alongside an older maturing tree and the elder tree slowly ages next to its youthful companion. They had become naturally father and daughter, in that pure way of the woods.

He then knew absolutely that he could not and would not allow their pure bond to be tainted, much less destroyed.

"There's gotta be another way," he said out loud. He went back to the bed, lay face-down on his stomach, closed his eyes, and tried to sort through his feelings.

*No, he wouldn't have Jared "accidentally" erased. Even if he got away with it, the fact of the "accident" would haunt him for the rest of his life and utterly contaminate the purity of his relationships with Joy.*

*My love for Joy is far stronger and purer than that of Jared, Irving thought to himself. Jared, brilliant, handsome and successful Jared, was more in love with his inherited wealth and social status than he was with his daughter. There was, simply, no comparison between Jared's love for Joy and the love Irving had for her. Jared was hopelessly self-centered and pompously dependent on what other rich people thought--what did Jared know about giving love and being naturally loving?*

*Then it came to Irving. that was how and why Jared was entirely vulnerable. Jared's greatest social strength--his childish dependency on "proper form" --was his greatest weakness.*

And Irving suddenly had a plan.

It was so ridiculously simple.

When Joan came home from work a few minutes later, she found her husband strangely animated, whistling, working at dusting the stained wooden bookshelves in their expansive living room, and looking happier than she'd seen him in days.

"What's up, Irv?" she asked.

"Nothin'. everythin's just hunky-dory." he answered, grinned to himself, and went on dusting.

V

Joy's wedding received much attention because of the social status of the main characters involved. The groom, Paul Saunders, was the strikingly handsome, tall, dark-haired and successful stockbroker son of the well-known financier, Arthur Saunders; Joy was the daughter of the wealthy Jared, the stepdaughter of Irving who was often mentioned in the papers for his innovative kitchen remodeling and woodwork; and Joy was the daughter of Joan, a woman much admired for her untiring work with crippled children.

Irving deliberately saw to it that the local press was sent invitations to cover the wedding, and as guests at the reception held at the exclusive Winston Country Club following. There were to be 500 guests from all around the country, a sumptuous feast, much champagne, and a twelve-piece dance band.

Jared stood his ground and demanded that and that he, and only he, walk Joy down the aisle and, with Joan, give Joy away to Paul.

Jared was unbending.

"It's obligatory, proper form," he insisted.

Irving had private talks with Joy and Adriene, but remained curiously silent about their content. He remained just as curiously happy as he had been since that night Joan had arrived home. For those eight months he had been smiling, whistling as he worked in his basement workshop making various kinds of furniture, or drawing what seemed to Joan to be an extraordinarily elaborate plan for a new project. The man was a puzzle, but Joan really couldn't complain about his buoyancy and good humor, although she did not in the slightest understand it,

and was at times darkly anxious that sweet Irving was somehow plotting something strangely too dreadful to discuss.

Irving bought himself a top-of-the-line Brooks Brothers black tuxedo for the wedding. He spent hours polishing his black leather shoes, and the morning of the wedding paid a small fortune for the styling of what remained of his sparse, graying, brown hair. He put the finishing touches on his silk bow tie, and checked his shiny, black tuxedo for the tiniest fleck of dust. Finally, convinced that everything was in order, he went downstairs, ready for the big day.

"You ready ta go?" he shouted up the stairs to Joan and the girls. "Come on. It's a bee-ootiful, sunny, day. The limo's waitin' outside."

Joy appeared at the top of the stairs in her wedding dress, a white sunrise beaming down at him.

"You look--super." he roared, and raised his arms up towards her.

"And you sir, look quite debonair," Joy radiated.

She walked slowly down the stairs, and took his outstretched hands at the bottom.

"That's enough, you lecher," Joan admonished from behind Joy, "she's marrying another, younger--and better--man today."

"Ouch," Irving laughed. He took Adriene and Joan's arms and walked them to the front door.

"Ok--will ya marry me instead, Joan?"

"Let me think about that, old man," she frowned, and puckered him a kiss.

Joan, Joy, and Adriene got in the white, stretch limousine and drove off.

Irving, Paul, and William Baker, Paul's best man, got into Irving's car and followed them.

"Where's Adriene's husband?" William asked.

"At the church, waitin' for us," Irving replied.

"Why can't the groom go to the church in the same vehicle with his bride, Irv?" Paul asked as they rode along, a wry smile on his dark, smooth-shaven face.

"Or spend the night with her before the wedding?" William snickered from the back seat.

"Bad luck," Irving replied, and grinned mischievously to himself, "fear of puttin' a whammy a some sorts on a marriage, they says."

"Who's 'they'?" Paul quipped.

"God knows," Irving answered as they pulled into the church parking lot, "maybe ghosts of past bungs--curses--comin' back and hauntin' us right up ta today?"

"Why don't we just change curses by fiat?" Paul asked, "particularly the one about the night before the wedding?"

"Curses? Ah," Irving replied, "there's only one way ta get rid of a curse."

"What's that?" Paul asked, and looked over at Irving.

Irving was silent for several moments, as if he had not heard the question. He parked the car, turned off the ignition, then turned to the two young men to his right, beside and behind him. His voice resonated from the depths of his being.

"You confront tha curse, head-on, 'n wreck it with a righteous action a 'onest-ta-God love--that's how."

The foyer of the church was a noisy, milling, array of glittering jewelry, shiny black tuxedos, corsages and high-fashion dresses. Joan, who had dropped Joy and Adriene off at the back of the Church to meet with the minister, kissed Irving when he arrived, then, at Irving's insistence, inched her way through the crowd down to the altar as the guests were being seated.

Joan fought a growing lump in her throat, and at the same time was haunted by a gnawing sense of foreboding. She had an menacing feeling that Joy's wedding was somehow going to be different from Adriene's, despite the fact that the forms of the two weddings had been planned to

be identical in almost every detail, including Adriene's wedding dress that had been tailored to fit Joy.

Jared smugly surveyed the important people in the pews at the back of the church near him, nodded decorously to them, smiled, waved, and looked down the aisle towards Joan with a triumphant, steely smirk. She saw the contempt in his eyes and cringed. At that moment she hated him fiercely for his childish dependency on public propriety, "proper form," as he had put it repeatedly during the preceding eight months.

The people were seated; church hushed.

The organist began the prelude to "The Wedding March;" Joy put her right forearm through Jared's left arm; the people in the church pews slowly turned their heads; the wedding photographer and the press cameramen aimed their cameras, poised, ready to capture the first dramatic step of the ritual journey down the aisle by the proud father and his resplendent daughter.

Just as their heels lifted to take their first step, and a split second before any flash bulb exploded, Irving stood, slipped swiftly out from a nearby pew, extended his right arm to Joy, who took it as if on cue, and the three of them began to walk slowly down the aisle together, arms joined, three abreast.

About four steps down the aisle, Jared turned to smile properly at Joy, saw Irving walking next to her, and realized, with a sickening lurch in his stomach, that his plan of "proper form" had been totally undone.

"Keep in step, Jared," Irving smiled triumphantly through clenched teeth. "Smile, Jared, smile--our public is a-watchin' us."

And Jared could do absolutely nothing but walk straight ahead, towards his ex-wife, towards Joy's wedding to Paul Sauders, he and Irving locked inextricably together with Joy, one slow step at a time, the fathers of the bride.



# **The Fathers of the Bride**

By

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Reader: couples in “mixed” second marriages”

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