

An excerpt from The Bachelorette Party

There was no one in the state of California, on the planet, or in the ozone who wanted to watch *Days of Our Lives* less than Zadie Roberts. But there she was, stuck in the waiting room of a Jiffy Lube on Ventura Boulevard, forced to stare at Jack Cavanaugh as he portrayed "Nate Forrester," bad boy with a heart of gold. She watched him take off his motorcycle helmet and shake out his shaggy black hair, smoldering all the while, before she got up to change the channel, only to be met with severe opposition from a middle-aged black woman who was painting her nails in two different, alternating shades-pink on one finger, red on the next. "Don't you even think about it. That man's the only thing that gets me through the day."

Zadie sighed and sat back down. She had no desire whatsoever to explain to this woman that she was once engaged to Jack Cavanaugh. That she once stood in the foyer of a church in a big white wedding dress waiting for Jack Cavanaugh to show up. That she once had to hear Jack Cavanaugh's pill-popping mother say, "Well, dear. I guess he's not coming."

Zadie fucking hated Jack Cavanaugh.

She'd met Jack before he was a soap star, back when he was a lowly waiter at Chin Chin. A waiter with the kind of eyes that said, "It'll be a mere matter of seconds before I get your panties off and pleasure you like you've only dreamed of." Those eyes got him his job on *Days*. And his job on *Days* got him a big fat ego. And Zadie was no longer being pleased.

Two years were wasted with Jack. Two years and many thousands of dollars. She paid for the wedding that wasn't. She paid for the acting classes that taught him to smolder. She, who made forty-seven thousand dollars a year in a city where most of the people driving down Sunset in their Escalades and SL500s made that much in a month. At least. So Jack was really the last person she wanted to watch as she waited for her Camry to get lubed. Unless, perhaps, his character was scheduled to die a horrible death.

She sighed and looked at her watch. She still had plenty of time to kill before meeting Grey. He never left the office until seven, because he was in The Industry. And for some odd reason, people in The Industry-the industry being entertainment-worked from ten until seven every day. Although if you called Grey's office at nine, his assistant would answer and pretend he was in a meeting. Entertainment lawyers are always in a meeting or on a call or eating lunch at some overpriced restaurant with their overpaid clients.

For a guy in The Industry, Grey was surprisingly decent. When Jack had pulled his lame-ass disappearance, Grey was the one who sat up with her all night, feeding her tequila shots and Cheez Doodles. Grey was the one who let her vomit on his seagrass carpet. And now, Grey was the one meeting her for their Thursday night ritual of potato skins and Coors Light at Barney's Beanery on Santa Monica Boulevard. The food was cheap and the jukebox had Rick Springfield songs. What more could a girl want? Aside from a husband and a nice house in the Hills.

Zadie looked down at the stack of essays in her lap, wishing they were written on a more interesting topic than the rhetorical strategies used in the work of Frederick Douglass, but such is the nature of twelfth-grade English at Yale-Eastlake, a private school for very smart and very rich teenagers. When she was engaged to Jack, her students had bought her a La Perla nightgown for the honeymoon. When she came back to work on the Monday after the wedding-unmarriedthey felt so bad for her they had her car detailed and bought her a spa day at Burke Williams. Her students loved her. Jack, for some reason, clearly did not.

Before Jack, she'd had the normal number of boyfriends that an attractive thirty-one-year-old woman should have had. She'd done her share of dating. And fornicating. And kissing strangers at the valet stand. But she didn't want to kiss strangers anymore. She didn't want to kiss anyone at the moment. She wanted a fucking beer and a plate of potato skins loaded with bacon bits and melted Swiss.

Right at the moment that Jack (as Nate Forrester) was about to make out

with an anorexic redhead sporting severely overplucked eyebrows, the mechanic came in to tell Zadie she needed a new gasket of some sort. Her car always needed something new. As soon as she had paid it off, the exact amount of money that used to make up her car payment was now needed to repair some random defect each month. The car gods hated her.

"Do I have to replace it right this second?"

"No. But you should do it in the next couple weeks." He could care less if her car broke down. She could sense it. He had that steroidfueled "I wanna get to the gym" look. But she couldn't sit in that waiting room for a second longer, so she left it to fate. She'd rather break down on Mulholland than watch Jack pretend to emote.

She got to Barney's Beanery early and sat down in one of the red Naugahyde booths. The kitschy license-plate and assorted-hangingcrap decor never changed. Neither did the graffiti. For as long as she'd been coming here, the words "I licked Vince Vaughn's testicles" had been inked onto the door of the ladies' room stall.

Grey was going to be at least another half hour. She ordered a pitcher of Coors Light and wandered over to the jukebox. Def Leppard was playing. She stuck a dollar in and dialed up "Summer Nights." Then "Jessie's Girl." When John Travolta's sweet voice came booming out of the speakers, she looked over at the bikers sitting at the bar.

"Sorry, guys, I've had a shit day." They scowled and went back to their beers. Zadie didn't care. She needed solace. She'd been forced to watch Jack, and every memory of her Day of Humiliation came rushing back at her: explaining to her parents that the wedding was off because Jack was "missing." Seeing the pity on her cousins' faces. Watching Jack's parents stammer and look at the ground as they tried to make excuses for him. Realizing that none of Jack's groomsmen had shown up, which meant he'd made the decision early enough to tell them, but not her. Realizing that the man she loved valued her feelings so little that he couldn't be bothered to

spare her this agony.

Zadie downed her beer and poured herself another. She didn't care if she was drunk by the time Grey showed up. Grey had seen her in far worse condition-snot flowing down her face, mascara streaked to her chin, and in the midst of the aforementioned puking episode. Grey had seen every ugly, petty, disgusting part of her and that's why he was her best friend. Any guy who can watch you hurl Cheez Doodles is a keeper. And when they drove to Tijuana for a night of mindless drunken fun, he let her play the entire Grease soundtrack and even did the "Greased Lightning" moves along with her, through the sunroof. You don't just find friends like that on the street corner.

She'd met Grey at the eighteenth-birthday party of one of her students. It was one of those overblown Hollywood affairs where a Protestant parent felt the need to equal the bat mitzvah of his best friend's daughter, so he hired KC and the Sunshine Band to perform in his Bel Air backyard and invited everyone his daughter knew and everyone he knew and wanted to impress. Grey was his lawyer. And Zadie was the daughter's favorite teacher. Since neither one of them knew anyone else there, they ended up together in the gazebo, doing shots of Jägermeister and making up bios for everyone. The wife was an arms dealer, masquerading as a San Marino debutante. The business partner was a porn star, trying to pretend he had an MBA. None of it was true, but it made them all more interesting.

After the party, they'd ended up at Mel's Diner, devouring cheeseburgers. At two in the morning, they drove up and down Sunset pointing out the hookers. She hadn't had a night that fun in ages. At the time, she'd been engaged to Jack, and Grey had been in a live-in relationship with Angela, an agent at William Morris. Two weeks later, he caught Angela making out with an Asian hip-hop singer at the Viper Room and eight weeks later, Jack left Zadie at the altar.

If they had been really pathetic, they would've ended up sleeping with each other. But since they were only semipathetic, they ended up drinking and eating with each other. A lot. And bitching and moaning. A lot. Pursuits

at which they were highly skilled. Besides, Grey had issues. He was a freak about pronunciation. For a surfer, his car was immaculate; if you dared to drop your empty water bottle on the floor, he would pull over. He once broke up with a girl because she drank too much coffee. Issues. She no longer slept with "issues." She was out of the issues business.

When Grey walked in, he looked as if he were ready to kill. As much as, say, Richie Cunningham could look ready to kill. He was far too wholesome looking to convey any actual sense of malice. He plopped down in the booth, dropped his briefcase on the floor, and reached for Zadio's beer, downing it in one gulp and slamming the glass back onto the table.

"Why do I do what I do?" His blue eyes narrowed, as if he'd been pondering this question the entire drive over.

"Because it pays well."

"It doesn't pay well enough for me to have to listen to an actor tell me he should get a million-five when he only got three-fifty on his last project, which bombed and he should've been shot for. I hate actors." He signaled to the waitress for another pitcher. "Yet I am their slave. There is something very wrong with my life."

"If you're looking for an argument from me as to why actors are decent people, you're talking to the wrong girl."

"It's my own fault. I could've been an environmental lawyer. But then I wouldn't have a house. Or a car. I'd have a nice studio apartment and a bus pass. Why does the choice between good and evil have to involve personal comfort? I like my TiVo. I need my pool. Yet to pay for these things, I'm forced to listen to high school dropouts who can't pronounce the word `sorbet' tell me why they should be making twenty million a movie."

When the pitcher arrived, Zadio asked for a double order of potato skins and filled their glasses. It was obviously going to be a late night. She had

enough to bitch about, but if Grey had his own agenda, they'd be there until closing. Which was actually quite a happy thought. It beat going back to her apartment and watching ER.

"I fantasized about one of my students today." She liked opening with a shocker.

"What?!"

"He's eighteen. It's legal. He's also an Abercrombie and Fitch model. I've actually masturbated to the thought of him."

Grey just stared at her, then hoisted his beer in her direction. They clinked glasses and he took off his suit jacket and loosened his tie. "I want details."

"His name is Trevor. He's on the cover of the catalog without a shirt and with khakis so low you can see those little V-shaped muscles that frame his crotch. How am I not supposed to look at that?"

Grey seemed highly amused by this. "Do you get all twitchy when you talk to him in class?"

"No, I'm a professional. Today I handed him back his essay and suggested that he read *Dharma Bums* if he liked *On the Road*. Then I watched his ass as he walked away." She took a sip of her beer. Cold Coors Light and salacious gossip. A perfect combo.

"Where did said masturbation take place?"

"Where do you think? In my car. On the way home."

Grey grinned. "I worship you. Have I ever told you that? You are the only woman I know who would admit to masturbating as she drove down Coldwater Canyon."

She rolled her eyes. "Save your praise. I watched *Days of Our Lives* today. By accident."

"And?" He looked worried. Zadie liked it when he looked worried about her. His worry was merely friendly concern, as opposed to her parents' worry, which was a burden that occasionally sapped her will to live.

"I watched Jack kiss another woman with the same cheesy look on his face that he used to have when he kissed me, which means he acted during our entire relationship-not that I didn't know this." Jack had acted even after their relationship. When he finally called two weeks after the aborted wedding, he pretended he'd been in a Mexican jail. Eventually he admitted that he'd got cold feet and stayed in Vegas with his bachelor party buddies. He felt that he deserved recognition for admitting his flaws, but all Zadie thought he deserved was her foot up his ass. She hadn't talked to him since. She and Grey had driven past his condo once and thrown a beer bottle at his door, but she wasn't proud of it. Or of the time she used a Web site that sends dog-doo to people in the mail. Raging anger and profound aching grief tend to make one act out of sorts.

Grey dug into the potato skins as soon as they hit the table. She respected a man who would eat carbs after five o'clock. Very hard to find in L.A.

"At least you never caught him." He was referring to the Viper Room incident, which he still carried like a vial of mental poison.

"You're dating the most perfect girl in the world. Why do you even care that Angela cheated? You're so beyond her." She spooned some ranch dressing onto her potato skins. Everything's better with ranch dressing. Her life was shit, but as long as it was shit with ranch dressing, she could survive.

"The ones that screw you are burned into your brain. Like I have to tell you." Very true. But Zadie didn't like to admit that Jack still had any power over her. In effect, he didn't. Not over her heart. Only over her ego. Which had begun to erode since the day she took off her veil and put on her "I'm

okay" face.

"Have you talked to Helen, by the way?" He said it casually, but his face got all tense, like he was either constipated or concerned about telling her something.

"Don't even tell me you two broke up." Helen was her cousin. When Helen's sister Denise got married last fall, Zadie had dragged Grey along with her to the happy occasion. It was a mere month after her own nonwedding. Zadie had needed him around to ease the pain. However, the pain was not eased by the fact that Grey ended up sucking face with Helen on the dance floor during the reception. People were not supposed to be getting married when she couldn't and people were not supposed to be hooking up when she wasn't. But it wasn't just a hookup. Grey and Helen had actually started dating. And fallen in love. And taken a trip to Napa. You don't take a girl to Napa unless you have intentions.

"Although getting dumped at a wine tasting isn't the worst place I can think of," Zadie said. "At least you can drown your sorrows in a nice merlot." She was joking, but then realized this was actually a possibility and felt bad for saying it. Grey was smitten and she wouldn't wish a broken heart on anyone, despite the fact that Helen wasn't exactly her favorite relative. There were several reasons for this distinction, the most prominent one being that Helen had never done a single bad thing and she never let anyone forget it.

"We're engaged." He said it as he shoved a forkful of melted Swiss into his mouth. As if he were announcing that he just traded in his Saab for a Volvo.

Zadie stared at him. "I'm sorry, it sounded like you just said that you and Helen got engaged. But I know that can't be true, because you would've called me the second it happened, not waited four days to tell me while we're listening to 'Hurts So Good' on the fucking jukebox."

"I couldn't call you from Napa, it would've been too weird. She would've

heard, and I can't talk to you in front of her. She's always grabbing the phone and looking at me weird whenever she hears me call you `Loser.'"

"You're engaged. You and Helen. Are getting married."

"Yes."

There was a buzzing noise in Zadie's head. It was most likely all the blood in her body rushing to protect her brain from this news. "And when is this blessed event taking place?"

"Soon. She told me she booked the hotel the day I told her I loved her. She already bought her dress."

"Helen? I'm sure she bought her dress when she was eighteen. She's had a wedding scrapbook waiting to be filled since her twelfth birthday."

Grey frowned. "You sound angry"

"How could I be angry? My best friend is marrying my cousin and my only semblance of a love life is touching myself while lusting after a teenage boy that I'm supposed to be educating. Why would this upset me?" Zadie rubbed her temples.

Grey refilled her glass. "You're overreacting. Besides, I want you to meet my friend Mike. I'm going to ask him to be one of my groomsmen. I think you'll like him."

Now Zadie was really pissed. "If you mention Mike to me one more time ..."

"What? He's a great guy."

"So you've told me," she said. "So why won't you meet him?"

"Because I don't want a pity setup. I'm not going to go out with your lame-ass friends just because you don't think I'll ever find anyone on my own.

She motioned to the waitress for another pitcher. The night just went from really long to really short. She might just drink enough to pass out in the booth by ten o'clock. She pictured Grey having to carry her to his car. And then carrying her up the stairs to her apartment in Sherman Oaks. And dropping her because she was too heavy. Then picking her back up and shoving her through the door, placing her face down on her couch with her little wicker trash basket from Bed Bath & Beyond next to her head. You can't puke in wicker. It leaks. She couldn't stand the thought of half-digested potato skins leaking onto her floor while Grey and Helen were nuzzling in front of the fire back at his place. Helen was so fucking judgmental. She could just hear it. "Why does Zadie have to be so self-destructive? Jack left her six months ago. She should be over it. He's only a soap actor. With a backburner story line. What's the big deal?"

"I'm not setting you up out of pity. I'm setting you up because I want you to be happy."

"If you want me to be happy, then spare me the blind dates."

"Glory Days" came on the jukebox and she started to tear up. She was no longer young. She was no longer a size six. She was no longer a girl who could bear the thought of dating a man she feared would leave her. And she was no longer a girl who had a best friend to take care of her. Now he'd have a wife to keep him occupied. A perfect wife. A twenty-eight-year-old wife whose hair didn't even need to be highlighted.

"I'm never going to see you again, am I?"

Grey squinted at her. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You'll be off buying furniture at IKEA and preregistering at nursery schools and ovulating. We're never gonna come here again, are we? This is

my last potato skin. This is my last pitcher. This is my last glory day."

"Okay, you're drunk. Which is normally not a bad thing, but considering the mood you're in, I have to question if it's the best choice."

"Fuck you, Grey. I am not drunk." With that, Zadie got up, grabbed her purse, and headed toward the door. Not that she wasn't drunk, she just didn't want to be told she was. At least, not by her best friend who had just betrayed her by getting engaged when she wasn't. She walked past the bikers. "Happy? I'm leaving." They gave her a blank look as she slammed her beer glass down on the bar.

Once she was outside, the valet called her a cab. She'd phone Triple A in the morning, claim gasket problems, and get them to tow it back to Sherman Oaks. Maybe it was a blessing that Jack had been on TV in the Jiffy Lube waiting room, forcing her to flee. And maybe it was a blessing that she was still single. And maybe the girl who'd licked Vince Vaughn's testicles was still in town so she'd have someone to hang out with while everyone else she fucking knew got married.



Chapter Two

When Zadie woke up, she popped two Excedrin, made arrangements to have her car picked up, and started a pot of coffee. The fact that school started so ridiculously early was something she cursed every time she was hungover. Her students weren't exactly bright-eyed at 8 a.m.. either. What would be so wrong about having school start at noon?

Her apartment was already hot from the sun streaming in through her sliding glass door. She opened it to let whatever breeze there might be blow in across the seven potted cacti she kept on her balcony next to a faded canvas beach chair and a rusted hibachi that she'd never used. Her mother had insisted that she'd want to grill something someday, but that day had yet to come. Zadie mostly ordered take-out Thai food or bought prepared salads from the grocery store. Why cook when there are trained professionals who have already done it for you?

The neighbor's mange-ridden cat jumped onto her beach chair from the top of the wall that divided their balconies. He then proceeded to run inside her apartment and take a quick tour. Zadie flicked a dish towel at him.

"Shoo. Get out. There's nothing here for you."

Once the cat was satisfied that he'd seen all six hundred square feet, he went back out onto the balcony and climbed back over the wall. Zadie shut the door behind him. It wasn't that she disliked cats, but this particular cat had shat on her beach chair at least twice and she wasn't eager for him to decorate her off-white couch in the same way. She'd bought it with the money she got from pawning her engagement ring. Which meant that every time she sat down on it, she got pissed off all over again. But at least her anger was empowering. Not that it actually empowered her to do anything, but it was more energizing than despair.

The fact that her emotional range of late consisted of fury, depression, or numbness was something she wanted to rectify, but she wasn't quite sure how to go about it. People told her it would take time. *The How to Survive a Breakup* book her mother gave her told her to keep a journal and express her feelings on paper. Why the fuck she would want to document what she was currently feeling was beyond her. She wished there was a way to take one of those Native American smudge sticks that her hippie roommate at UCLA used to get rid of negative energy and wave it around inside her head until all her feelings were gone. She didn't want to "work through it" or "let time heal it." She wanted to hit delete.

Before Jack, she'd been optimistic about romance. No matter how many badass poon hounds or neurotic momma's boys she'd dated. She'd always been sure her one big love was out there. Until she found him and he turned into a giant wad of ass. Now the idea of trying to find another big love held little appeal. What would she do with two couches?

Luckily, Jack had never moved in. Her place didn't allow dogs and he had a yellow lab he'd rescued from the pound that he loved more than his mother. And clearly Zadie, in hindsight. Zadie had never moved into his place because it was a shithole. They'd planned on finding an apartment together, but a month after they'd got engaged, Jack got the role on *Days* and bought a condo. Zadie was going to move in after the honeymoon. Good thing she'd kept her lease.

When Zadie got to school, she parked in the teachers' lot and walked across the quad, passing the Zen garden with its requisite waterfall. Her classroom was in the I. M. Pei-designed main building that had reportedly been feng-shuied by a French guy with a tiny monkey that sat on his shoulder the entire time. They probably paid him more than Zadie made in five years.

The windows in her classroom looked out onto a hummingbird feeder that was attended by the greediest bastards in the ornithology kingdom. Beyond that was a canyon filled with an assortment of nonindigenous trees and the occasional mansion. She took solace in the fact that if her students

were bored by her lecture, they at least had a nice view.

When Trevor arrived for sixth period, Zadie tried especially hard to avert her eyes from him, but he was wearing a skintight T-shirt and one of those cute little bucket hats over his shoulder-length surferblond hair. She was in hell. How could life get worse than wanting to fuck an eighteen-year-old? It must be hormonal. She had never been attracted to her students in the past. Was there a pill she could take to make it stop?

"Grapes of Wrath. What'd you think?" She looked out among the sea of well-groomed teenage faces.

Danielle raised her hand. "It was a little depressing." Danielle was the daughter of the man who ran a television network. The thought of a dust bowl was surely beyond her comprehension.

"What about it depressed you?" She liked Danielle and was secretly hoping she wouldn't say anything that would cause her to repeat it over margaritas with the other teachers.

"They were homeless. They couldn't find work. They didn't have any food. What about it wasn't depressing?"

Thank God she hadn't said, "They didn't have Prada luggage." You never could tell with rich kids. Some of them had parents who made sure they knew how the rest of the world worked, and some of them had parents who kept them in Malibu until they were sixteen and old enough to drive into the 'hood on their own.

After a discussion of poverty and its effect on the human spirit, Zadie let the class go with instructions to read five more chapters over the weekend so she could quiz them on Monday. Jorge approached her as the bell rang.

"My dad's premiere is tonight and we're going skiing in Mammoth all weekend to celebrate. I won't have time to read."

Zadie was used to excuses, some creative, some just plain lame, but Jorge's father was an A-list director who'd left his mother when Jorge was five and moved on to three other wives since. The fact that Jorge was going to the premiere was important. How often does a teenager get to be proud of his parent? And the fact that he was spending a ski weekend with his father was huge. The man was quite frankly a prick who doted on his three younger children with his three younger wives.

"*Grapes of Wrath* can wait," Zadie said. "Go have fun with your dad."

Jorge grinned. "Thanks. I promise I'll read it on Monday." He hurried out behind the rest of the class. All except for Trevor.

As he walked up to Zadie's desk, she ran her hand through her hair, smoothing it down. Teenage boys shouldn't be allowed to be six feet tall.

"Thanks for making us read this. It made me realize that I pretty much don't have anything to complain about," he said.

"Perspective is always helpful," Zadie answered. Wow That was deep. She tried desperately to think of something else to say, but he was grinning at her and all thoughts left her.

"Is it okay if I change my term paper topic to Steinbeck instead of Kerouac?"

"Absolutely," Zadie said.

"Cool. Thanks." He walked out, allowing Zadie to notice that his T-shirt clung to his lat muscles in a most appealing manner. She forced herself to look away.

After school, Zadie walked to her car and sat inside for ten minutes before she drove away. The thought of masturbating during her drive yesterday shamed her. And the fact that she'd told Grey about it as if it were a

prelude to one of their usual nights of fun enraged her. How could he let her go on about her Mrs. Robinson fantasy life when he was holding back the news that he was engaged? Not that she didn't want him to be happy. Not that she didn't know he was in love with Helen. Not that she hoped they would break up. She just hadn't counted on them getting engaged so soon. What did Helen even see in him? He was the worst dancer on the planet. He couldn't change a tire. He had a bed skirt that matched his comforter. Zadie didn't even have a bed skirt. Who the fuck had a bed skirt?

When she got back to her apartment, she called Helen. "Hi! Congratulations!"

Helen was equally effusive. "Isn't it amazing?! He proposed while we were in a hot air balloon, soaring over the vineyards."

Barf. Did he really? So cliché. Jack had proposed to her while they were sixty-pining. She couldn't even see his face-obviously. She just took his dick out of her mouth and said, "Yes." Looking back on it now, it wasn't quite as romantic as she'd previously thought.

"That's so great!" No, it wasn't. It was repulsive. It was incomprehensible. It was so John Tesh. A hot air balloon?

"Obviously, you'll be a bridesmaid." Phew. Zadie was tortured over the thought that she might not get to put on an ugly taffeta dress and stand at the altar next to Helen pretending she was happy. "And don't worry, I promise the dress won't have a bow on the butt." Yeah, right. She wished she had a tape recording of this conversation to play back when she was inevitably standing in a church wearing a limegreen hoop skirt.

"Have you set the date?" Of course she had. She was Helen. Helen had her menstrual cycle charted for the next ten years.

"Memorial Day. It was either that or November twelfth, according to my numerologist, but I have to be tan. Otherwise, how could I wear white?" So

Orange County of her. Not that Zadie had anything against the sun, she just didn't plan her wardrobe around it. And not that Helen shouldn't wear white. As far as Zadie knew, Helen had never seen a penis. And she certainly hadn't sucked one. Helen was a virgin. God knows why, but it was clearly something Helen had strong feelings about. Although holding out may not be such a bad tactic after all. How else would you get a guy to propose to you after five months of dating? Poor Grey was probably dying of sperm congestion.

"Wow. Memorial Day. That's soon." In one month, her best friend would be married to her most annoying cousin. What fun! So much to celebrate! "So I guess you're really sure about this."

There was a pause on Helen's end. Then, "Why wouldn't I be?" Helen said it in that really bitchy tone people use when they want to tell you to fuck off, but are too polite.

"Of course you're sure. That's not what I meant at all. It's all just happened so fast, I can't believe it's real. But I do. Believe it's real." Zadie was digging herself into a sizable hole and needed to get out. "I think it's great! I can't wait till the wedding! Whoops-I have another call. I'll talk to you later, okay?" The fake call-waiting ploy. So transparent. So immature. Worked every goddamn time.

After Zadie hung up, she went to the fridge. There was half a Wolfgang Puck Chinese Chicken Salad, but it had been in there since last week and all the dressing was gone. They never put enough dressing in that little cup. And cabbage is not something that can be consumed without proper lubricant. Note to Wolfgang.

She drove down to Ralph's and picked up some supermarket sushi. If she had any money, she'd go get some real sushi. But alas, she had spent her entire last paycheck finishing off her wedding dress payments. Saks doesn't care if you get left at the altar. Saks wants their money.

When she got home with her plastic carton filled with day-old California rolls, she flipped on the TV to watch *The Bachelor*, viable proof that there were still some women left in the country who were more pathetic than she was. Watching these women tremble as they waited to get a rose from some dimwitted yet smug dork who actually used the word "vino" in a sentence—without ironic intent—was the only thing she could think of that could make her feel superior at the moment.

During the commercial, Zadie tried to take stock of everything in her life that was going right. Her job. Things were fine there. She liked her students and at least two-thirds of the books she had to teach. Teaching would never make her rich, but that wasn't something she necessarily aspired to be. Her apartment was clean. There was that. It had taken three months of clutter to finally motivate her to tidy up, and even then it was only because she'd worried that Jack might someday stop by to beg her forgiveness and she didn't want him to see how she'd let things go in the midst of her grief. Not that he ever actually would stop by; it was just distracting to have old magazines and pizza boxes in her fantasy that he might. Her hair. She liked her hair. It was long and dark and shiny on most days. And that was pretty much it. Her job, her temporarily clean apartment, and her hair.

This was what she had to live for.



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