



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 sea-grass 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 – unmarried – they 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 steroid-fueled '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-hanging-crap 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 Zadie’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, Zadie 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 & 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 LA.

'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 back-burner 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.



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 surfer-blond 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-nining. 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 lime-green 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.’ Zadio 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 Zadio 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, Zadio 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.



Tuesday at school, Zadie ate lunch in the teachers' lounge with Nancy, the biology teacher with giant collagen lips and the misguided opinion that Lycra tops were flattering on her.

'I met this guy at the carwash? While we were waiting? He asks me to dinner and I say yes. Nothing special. Casa Vega. I ordered the fajita taco. But *he* didn't.' Nancy said it with a pointed look. As if this were supposed to mean something, Zadie bit.

'So, what's the problem? You can't kiss a guy after he's eaten an enchilada?' Zadie never understood Nancy's dating criteria. She went out with imbeciles and always offered up a play-by-play analysis the next day. Zadie secretly wondered if she went on these dates just to have something to talk about.

'No, he didn't order anything. He just picked off my plate.'

'Okay, that's a little weird. I'll give you that,' Zadie said.

'Then he asked if he could wipe my face with his napkin.'

'Did you have food on it?'

'No.'

‘A booger?’

Nancy gave her a look that indicated that Zadie was perhaps retarded. ‘I did not have a booger, my lipstick wasn’t smeared, and I wasn’t drooling – he was just a sick fuck.’

Zadie wrinkled her brow, considering this theory. ‘Sick fucks generally want you to shit on their chest or some such thing. I don’t know if I would qualify face-wiping as being in the sick fuck category.’

Nancy gave her the look again. Zadie started to worry. Was she getting so pathetic that she could no longer pick out sick fuck behavior?

‘Well, put it this way: he’s not getting a second date,’ Nancy said.

Most of Nancy’s dates never made it past the first one. Nancy was close to forty and still believed she was going to find The One. Anything less than The One didn’t get a second date. Why would they? She didn’t inject her lips full of toxins to attract one-night stands. Those babies were reserved for husband material. Whoever convinced these women that their upper lip was supposed to be bigger than their bottom lip had pulled off the biggest practical joke of all time.

‘So did you let him wipe? Was it as good for you as it was for him?’ Zadie had no sympathy whatsoever for Nancy’s plight.

‘Trust me. You won’t be making jokes when you get back out there,’ Nancy said.

Zadie hadn’t dated at all since her ‘wedding’ and she wasn’t looking forward to the prospect. ‘Who says I’m going to? You’ve dated every guy in the city and thrown them all back in. I don’t want to fish from your pool of losers.’

Right as Nancy worked up ‘the look’ again, Dolores sat down. ‘Is Nancy trying to set you up again?’

Dolores was what most people would call a spinster. Mid-fifties, dishwater-brown hair, no makeup, never married, all of

her waistbands elastic. Dolores was what Nancy was trying not to become. And Nancy was what Zadie was trying not to become. In an age when women were supposed to be supportive of one another, it was amazing how many of them just wanted to avoid turning into each other.

What Nancy didn't know was that Dolores had it wired. She was no fool. After a few sour apple martinis at last year's end-of-school party, Dolores confided in Zadie that she often went on those singles cruises and all-inclusive Hedonism weeks and 'got some'. She wasn't waiting around for The One. She didn't even want The One. She wanted hot, kinky sex with strangers when she was on vacation, and a condo to herself and flannel nighties when she wasn't. Who wants a husband around to make you watch hockey games when *Dirty Dancing* is on TBS? Dolores had a superintendent to fix the toilet when it broke, she had restaurants that delivered, and she had a satellite dish. She was a happy woman indeed. She told Zadie, 'When you release your expectations, you can find an amazing peace with yourself.' As long as you drive out to Pomona every couple of months for a swingers' party and screw a carpet salesman from Bakersfield.

'There's nothing wrong with being set up.' Nancy went on at least four blind dates a month. She had a mother who would hang out at the dry cleaners and accost any man dropping off a suit who wasn't wearing a ring.

'Let Zadie find her own guys.' Dolores was always one to stick up for you.

'Yeah, but look who she finds.' Nancy rolled her eyes, as if Zadie were just the dumbest bitch on the planet for having ever gone out with Jack. She probably was, but still, it was a little rude for people to infer it to her face.

'I love that you've just sat here and told me how you had dinner with a sick fuck, yet it's me who finds the losers.' Zadie wasn't putting up with any shit today.

Heading off what was sure to be an argument, Dolores chimed in with, ‘Have you seen Trevor Larkin in that T-shirt today?’

Zadie and Nancy both turned to stare at her.

Dolores remained unfazed. ‘How long do you think it would take to lick him from head to toe?’

And with that image in her head, Zadie excused herself.



Saturday night arrived amid its usual fanfare – Zadie’s clock chimed, her microwave beeped, and her car alarm went off. But this Saturday night was special. She was going to Grey and Helen’s engagement party.

She made two stops along the way – one on Hollywood Boulevard to buy an eight-by-ten picture of Steven Seagal from one of the souvenir shops, and one at Aaron Brothers to buy a pewter picture frame to put it in. That was their engagement present. She was sure Helen would take out the picture of Steven as soon as she saw it and probably put in a picture of their hot-air balloon, taken postproposal, but that was fine with her. Grey would get the joke. On the first night they met, Zadie and Grey had seen Steven Seagal, by himself, at Mel’s Diner. He was eating a plate of waffles and a grilled cheese sandwich. With a milk shake. Grey had secretly paid his tab.

When she got to Newport Beach, she drove around forever trying to find the goddamn restaurant. Normally, she could’ve made the hour-long drive with Grey. But not when Grey was the groom. No, sir, Grey was down there at ten that

morning helping to ‘prepare’. At least she wouldn’t have to worry about being flooded with memories of her own engagement party with Jack. They hadn’t had one. Never even occurred to them. Isn’t the wedding enough? How many times can you expect people to congregate in order to honor your love?

When she finally got there, she was already starting to chafe. Literally. She was wearing a new bra that was supposed to make her look perky in her red sundress, but all it did was dig into her shoulders and let her boobs leak out the bottom. She stopped and stuck a hand in each cup, lifting them back in before she walked inside. The valet gave her a look that straddled between desire and fear.

The restaurant was on the water, overlooking a marina filled with zillion-dollar yachts. A seagull had relieved himself on the potted palm near the door. Never a good sign.

Inside, the normally understated Italian restaurant had been transformed into an explosion of light pink roses. Anyone who knew Helen knew that pink was her favorite color. And roses her favorite flower. And smiley her favorite expression.

‘Zadie!’ Helen held out her arms and gave Zadie a hug like she’d recently been lost at sea. ‘My God, you look great!’ As if the last time Helen had seen Zadie, she’d looked like fried shit. Which was certainly not out of the realm of possibility, given her post-left-at-the-altar penchant for going out in public in pajama bottoms and a T-shirt.

Helen, of course, looked spectacular. Boob-length blond hair. Brite-Smile teeth. Three-hundred-crunches-a-day belly. Turquoise-blue eyes. Little black dress. Diamond stud earrings. Diamond engagement ring. Holy crap. Grey had spent some bucks. It was huge. At least a couple carats. Zadie’s ring from Jack had been amoeba-like.

Zadie hugged her back. ‘And you’re a glowing bride-to-be!’ Why was it that wedding-speak was so riddled with

clichés? Someone should really break out some new adjectives. Like ‘fetid’ or ‘moldy’.

Grey was across the room, looking dapper in a charcoal suit with a pink rose in the lapel, schmoozing with all of Helen’s relatives. Who were actually Zadie’s relatives, as well. She could only spot one whom she felt like talking to – Denise. Helen’s sister. Zadie had always felt closer to Denise because they were the same age and because Denise was a raging party girl. Which came to a raging stop when she got pregnant. She was now sitting in a booth scarfing down a plate of calamari at an alarming rate. It was at Denise’s wedding that Helen and Grey met. No one realized then that Denise was pregnant, but it was pretty hard to disguise at this point. Her stomach was as big as a VW Bug.

Zadie sat down with her and dipped a squid ring into the marinara sauce. ‘So. Who knocked you up?’

‘Funny.’ Denise looked over at the bar where her husband, Jeff, who possessed a beer belly that rivaled Denise’s, was happily imbibing. ‘He gets to have a Corona and I’m stuck with seltzer. He better be waiting in the delivery room with a pitcher of sangria in his hand when I squirt this thing out.’

‘Sounds like you two are blissfully happy.’ Okay, that was a little bitchy, but Zadie was in a mood.

‘I’m a bloated seacow. Happiness is not an option at this moment. My only option is food or more food.’ She moved on to the mozzarella sticks, actually dipping them in sour cream.

‘So, what do you think of the pending nuptials?’ Zadie looked over at Grey as he slid up behind Helen, wrapping his arms around her waist and smiling at their grandma. ‘Do you think they’ll be happy?’

Denise shrugged and kept eating. ‘Helen’s always happy. And Grey’s awesome. Why? Don’t you think it’ll work out?’

Zadie kept watching them. Smiling. Hugging. Oozing love from every pore. She had to admit that they looked more than

happy. Grey was so beatific that most people would've thought he was overmedicated. Helen was levitating. They were perfect together. Helen radiated purity and light and Grey was aglow in her reflection, thrilled to have found a woman who would never do him wrong. Even through her bitter mood and the flying shrapnel from the plate of a ravenous pregnant woman, Zadie couldn't help but be glad that Grey was so happy. She would still be able to hang out with him after he and Helen were married, right? Helen must have someplace to go a couple nights a week. Tupperware parties? Book club? Home for the Criminally Perky?

Grandma Davis spotted her and came wobbling over in a cloud of peach-colored chiffon. 'Zadie, you look so pretty.' Grandma Davis was legally blind. A compliment from her was always questionable. 'Denise, my goodness, you've put on weight.' Maybe not so blind.

'I'm six months pregnant, Grandma.'

'But you just got married – one, two' – she counted it out on her fingers – 'five months ago.'

Zadie whisked Grandma over to the buffet before she had time to hear Denise's response. 'Grandma, how're you feeling?' Grandma had taken a mighty spill last year and was still in physical therapy. She'd been watching a Ginger Rogers movie and insisted on following along in her living room. Ginger was thirty in the movie. Grandma was eighty. And a little drunk at the time, quite frankly.

'I'm fine. It was no big deal.'

'It was a broken hip, Grandma. That's a big deal.'

'If Chester had been there, I'd never have fallen.'

'Well, I'm sure Grampa Chester would've been there if he wasn't – you know – dead.'

Grandma Davis took Zadie's face in her hands. 'See what happens to women who're alone, Zadie? This is why you have to find a man.'

Right at the moment that Zadie was ready to clock Grandma Davis in the jaw, Grey swooped over, saving the day. ‘Grandma, look at you!’ He gave her a twirl, letting her skirt billow. ‘Are you sure you’re not here to steal me away from Helen?’ Grandma Davis squealed with laughter as Grey steered her toward the meat tray, giving Zadie an I’ll-be-back-as-soon-as-I-get-some-prosciutto-in-this-woman look.

As Zadie waited, she saw her parents walk in the door. Now the night was complete. She’d been unsuccessfully avoiding them since her ‘wedding’ day. All they wanted to do was smother her with compassion, but their own disappointment seeped through so abundantly that it made Zadie want to cry each time she looked at them. Like she’d let them down somehow by being the girl that Jack didn’t want to marry.

Her parents lived in Ventura, where Zadie had grown up. A two-hour drive from this fine restaurant. Dad was a balding CPA who watched NASCAR on the weekends. Mom was an insurance adjuster who did at least fifteen cross-word puzzles a day and never missed a manicure. A stable, steady life for a stable, steady couple. Married for thirty-seven years. No concept whatsoever of what it was like for a single girl in LA trying to find a man who doesn’t want to fuck actresses.

If you took a survey among those in the know, Los Angeles would surely be voted the worst place in the world to be a single woman, Zadie felt. Every prom queen and head cheerleader from every shit town in America comes to LA to be discovered. Talented or not. And when they instead discover that every other girl with a fast metabolism and clear skin has moved to said locale for the same reason, they are forced to take jobs making soy lattes or folding sweaters at the Beverly Center while they wait for The Man. The Man can come in many forms – a casting director, a modeling scout, Hugh Hefner, or a short, squat Persian dude with lots of money to

blow. The girls without morals are easily corrupted – doing porn in the Valley, spending six months with the Sultan of Brunei as a ‘hostess’, or simply sitting around a West LA apartment, waiting for The Man who pays the rent to come have sex with them once a week while his wife is getting her bikini wax. Sometimes dreams of stardom are easily traded in for a steady flow of cash.

The ambitious beauties are harder to nail. Unless you’re in The Industry. The men in The Industry are able to entice the young lovelies with promises of connections. ‘Hey, baby, I can introduce you to my friend Dave. He’s directing a movie for New Line next month.’ Connections are hard to get, so if Balding Bob knows Director Dave and Pretty Polly wants to be a star, Balding Bob is gonna get some tail. Broken down into its simplest terms – men who would kill to fuck you in Topeka are able to fuck the hottest girls in Los Angeles. So any normal girl at a bar is now competing with Grade-A snatch to hump a guy who’s a ‘four’ at most.

The single men in Los Angeles are different. Especially the actors. The male actor ego needs constant encouragement so if you are a comely lass with encouragement to give, it will fall on handsome, receptive ears. Jack needed Zadie’s kind words when he was a nobody. Once he became a somebody, he had fans to give it to him. And an agent. And a manager. And a lawyer. And a publicist. And a producer. And a costar. And any random bimbo who happened to recognize him at the Sky Bar. Who needs a wife when you have all that? Who needs a wife when you are now in line to get the Grade-A snatch?

Of course there were the men who claimed they were tired of all the beautiful brainless girls and just wanted a nice, smart, wholesome teacher to settle down with. These men were full of shit.

Grey returned to her side right as her parents made their

way over. ‘Mr and Mrs Roberts – thanks for coming!’ Zadie stared at him. Did he just speak with an exclamation point? Was it contagious?

Zadie’s parents had met Grey at the Get-Zadie-Out-of-Her-Apartment intervention Helen had organized last winter. It was successful. They all went to Jerry’s Deli. Woo fucking hoo.

‘How are you, kiddo?’ Her father looked around the room as he asked it, hoping she wouldn’t answer honestly.

‘I’m fine, Dad. How are you?’

‘Recovering from tax time.’ He looked over at the bar, spotting Grandma Davis swigging down a Bellini. ‘Mavis, your mother is drinking.’

Mavis Roberts (formerly Mavis Davis) pushed her husband toward her mother.

‘Go stop her, Sam.’ As if it were his duty as her husband to keep her mother from getting hammered.

‘Let me help.’ Grey led Sam over to the bar, where they proceeded to force-feed Grandma some canapés. Oh, God. Zadie was alone with her mother. Mayday.

‘You look sick.’ Always pleasant to hear. But Zadie knew Mavis wasn’t done yet. ‘Are you not getting enough sun?’ To the rest of the world, a tan was a deadly thing. To Californians, it was a badge of health. Unless you lived in Beverly Hills, where you would actually see women with parasols, sheltering the new skin they just bought from a baby seal away from the blistering sun.

‘I’m fine, Mom. I’ve just been working a lot.’

‘You get off at four. The sun’s still out.’

‘Not on my balcony.’

‘You can’t go to the beach?’ Mavis and Sam had met at the beach during a pig roast in the late sixties. Very Gidget. Mavis was convinced that Zadie’s destiny was lying in the sand near the Santa Monica pier. All Zadie could find in Santa Monica

were homeless men who wanted her change. She recently gave a bum a dollar because he told her she was pretty.

‘Mom, stop. I’ll get some sun when school ends.’ Oh, God, it was almost summer. What was she going to do for three months? Maybe she could pick up a summer school class. Or teach a creative writing elective. Maybe Trevor would sign up and come without his shirt on. She downed her glass of wine, trying to block out the thought. Thank God he was graduating.

‘There’re some handsome men at this party. Have you noticed?’ Mavis asked.

Zadie looked over her mother’s head, which wasn’t hard to do given that Mavis was barely five two, and saw a guy with dark hair and a green shirt standing by the bar. He had the shape Zadie liked. Tall and broad-shouldered. Some women preferred the skinny, androgynous rock-star type, but Zadie wasn’t one of them. If women were expected to uphold the Betty Boop body ideal, then goddammit, men owed them some muscles. She watched as Green Shirt took a sip of his beer and made her Aunt Josephine laugh. Three years ago, Zadie would’ve had no problem sidling up to him and making clever conversation, but now there seemed to be little point.

She looked back at her mother. ‘No. I hadn’t noticed.’

Before Mavis could protest, Zadie’s father and Grey came back, having safely sequestered Grandma Davis with Helen and Denise’s parents in a booth. ‘She’s only got one real hip left. You’d think the woman would know not to tango in heels.’ Sam sat down in a chair and hefted his Guinness.

Grey put his arm around Zadie’s shoulders and looked at Mavis. ‘Do you mind if I borrow Zadie for a few minutes?’

‘Go right ahead.’ Mavis thought Zadie was crazy for not looking at Grey as a potential husband. When Mavis and Sam met Grey on Intervention Day, Mavis had pulled Zadie aside

and said, 'He has a full benefits package and you just *gave* him to Helen?' Zadie wanted to explain to her mother that Grey once sent back a cheeseburger three times, but what was the point?

Grey dragged her outside to the deck overlooking the marina. Zadie willingly followed. She would have driven to Detroit just to get away from her family at the moment.

Grey looked at her, worried. 'How are you?' Wow, the question of the night. Couldn't anyone ask her the time? Or what she thought of the Iraqi situation? Or how many times she'd burped after eating the salmon?

'For the ninety-fifth time tonight, I'm fine. How are you, groom-to-be?' She said it with the proper ironic inflection, so as not to be cheesy.

'I'm great. Ready to shit myself, but great.'

'You look like you're having fun.' She meant it. He did. No need for ironic inflection here.

'I am. I can't imagine why, but I really like your family.'

'Well, don't sign up for the fan club. You're the only one.'

'I'd introduce you to Mike, but something tells me you're not in the mood.'

For a brief moment, Zadie wondered if Mike was the guy in the green shirt, but it didn't matter. She had no interest in meeting him.

'You're a wise man,' Zadie said. 'Besides, this is *your* night. You're not supposed to be worried about pairing off your friends. You're supposed to be attending to your bride.'

'Helen can't stop smiling.' He looked proud of this fact.

'Helen has never stopped smiling. She smiled the day I shot her in the knee with a BB gun.' That was a good day. Fourth grade. Summer picnic. The savage beauty of childhood.

'Is that what that mark is?' Grey honestly looked concerned.

Zadie rolled her eyes. 'Christ, you've actually memorized her skin?'

'That makes me sound pathetic, doesn't it?'

'You are pathetic.'

Grey smiled at her. They clinked beer bottles and looked out at the marina. 'Helen's dad? Drug dealer. Colombian. Fifty kilos a day.'

Zadie smiled at him, picking up the thread. 'My Aunt Josephine? Call girl. Runs a few handguns on the side.'

'Your Grandma Davis? Man in drag.' Zadie spit her beer over the railing of the deck and into the harbor. Grey started laughing. And all was right with the world again.

'I'm happy for you, you know. I really am. Helen will never cheat on you, she'll always stay beautiful and happy and you'll have smiley little babies that will never need braces.'

'You think she'll put up with me that long?'

'I guarantee you she'll choose her own bed skirt, but aside from that, I think you'll survive.'

He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze as they continued to look out at the marina. At the end of the dock, a fisherman pissed onto the side of a yacht. It was a beautiful night.