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I Take This Man

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Extract

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Penny Bracket, twenty-three, looked ghostly in white. She might as well have cut eyeholes in a sheet and thrown that over her head instead of wearing the gown.

'I'm the corpse bride,' she said, staring at her ashen pallor in the vanity's mirror. 'As soon as the ceremony's over, I'm stripping.'

'You could take it off now,' suggested Esther Bracket, forty-five, Penny's mother. 'Skip the ceremony entirely.'

Penny frowned at her mom's face in the mirror. Esther was seated across the jewel box bridal prep room on a damask-covered settee, wearing a smart pearl-gray suit with three-inch heels that disappeared in the carpeting. Around her wrists, neck, and fingers, Esther sparkled in diamonds, expensive and plentiful, five pieces more than she needed. But in New Jersey, excessiveness was the rule, be it big hair, loud clothes, garish decorating, large personality, violent crime, government corruption, or political scandal.

Penny was a Jersey girl. She was born a few exits up the Garden State Parkway. Sinatra was also a native. Like Frank, residents did things Their Way. The state song:

'Born to Run' (which, ironically, was about escaping NJ). The state's motto: 'Come see for yourself,' since no one who lived here could be trusted to speak the truth. The state's role model: Tony Soprano. One of the nation's smallest states, geographically, it had the densest population. In more ways than one.

Some Jerseyites set themselves apart with decorum, dignity, and discretion. Penny just didn't happen to know any. Despite Penny's stated preference for a modest wedding, Esther insisted on a lavish Short Hares Plaza affair. Although she'd never admit it, Esther had shelled out $75,000 for her daughter to marry a man she despised just to impress the neighbors.

'Full house?' asked Penny, sweeping her cheeks with blush, doing what she could to look like a living person.

'Packed,' said Vita Trivoli, twenty-three, the third person in the tight room, Penny's best friend and maiden of honor. 'Two hundred of the fanciest white people I've ever seen. Why don't you go check it out, Mrs Bracket? You probably need to talk to the wedding planner. Or greet guests. Or do something that takes you out of this room.' The maiden of honor, a redhead, was not subtle. Today, she wore a magenta skintight backless, strapless, gown along with every piece of jewelry she owned.

'Your makeup becomes you, Vita,' returned Esther, of the razor-plucked Garbo brows and flawless nude foundation. 'I've never had the courage to go garish.'

'But your base coat of bitterness gives you a perfect *je ne sais quoi*,' said Vita faux-admiringly.

'It's a very thin layer,' said Esther, patting her chiseled cheekbone.

'By thin,' asked Vita, 'do you mean brittle?'

'I'm so glad you two have finally found something to talk about,' said Penny, trying to defuse the tension between her mom and best friend.

'You realize you're the first person from college to get married,' Vita said to her. 'That means you win.'

When Vita said the word 'married,' Esther flinched.

'I win?' asked Penny. 'Getting married is like a game show to you?'

'You get fabulous prizes,' said Vita, gesturing toward the heavily laden gift table, its carved legs trembling under the tonnage of wrapped boxes from Tiffany's. 'You get a dream vacation – to Hawaii. You stand in the winner's circle and kiss your dreamy husband while everyone applauds. It's just like *Wheel of Fortune*.'

'The wheel of fortune turns,' said Esther grimly.

'You really have to shut up, Mom,' said Penny.

'If you hate the gown so much, why did you buy it?' asked Esther anyway.

'Bram wanted traditional,' said Penny.

'For Bram's sake, you spend $15,000 on a dress you despise. What else will you do for his sake?' asked Esther. 'What other compromises and sacrifices will you make over the years? How's your wrist today? And your jaw?'

Penny instinctively reached to touch her jaw, but she caught herself and redirected her hand to fiddle with her veil.

Esther growled and started pacing the small room. Penny watched her mom move in and out of the mirror's frame. Esther's calves were identical to her own. Long.

Strong. Physically, Penny was the brunette version of blond Esther – minus the ravages of twenty years of bitterness. Penny had often wondered what her mother would look like without the black cloud over her head.

'I love Bram,' said Penny serenely. 'He loves me. Our relationship is based on honesty and respect. We're devoted to each other now, as we will be forever.'

'Okay, even I thought that sounded canned,' said Vita.

'Walk away,' pleaded Esther.

'Never,' said Penny, slamming down her blush brush, pink powder dusting the vanity. She swiveled to face her mom. 'Leaving someone at the altar is a deplorable, cowardly, inexcusable act, punishable by death. The lowest of the low. That's the opposite of who I am.'

'Does that make you the highest of the high?' asked Vita. 'Wish I were.'

'Sacrifice,' said Esther. 'Compromise.'

'I'm getting married,' declared Penny. 'End of conversation.'

She swiveled back to the mirror. The tension was getting to her. Her head swam suddenly (just a few strokes). She looked at the mirror, and the glass seemed to ripple, like a pebble dropped into a still pond.

A knock at the door. Had to be Ms Wistlestop, the Short Hares Plaza's wedding planner, coming to tell her it was time to walk the walk. Penny's heart beat its wings. She stood up and arranged her voluminous skirts, the ten layers of tulle and crinoline.

Vita said, 'That's your cue,' and opened the door.

Oddly, Ms Wistlestop was not standing on the other side of it.

Penny said, 'Morris? What are you doing here? You're supposed to be waiting at the altar with Bram.'

Morris Nova, twenty-five, Bram's best man, wore a rented tux. Most men looked sophisticated in the penguin suit, James Bondish. Morris could wear a king's raiment, though, and still telegraph the same rugby-on-the-weekends never-quite-clean masculinity. He could've brushed his hair on my wedding day, thought Penny. He could've shaved.

'I have a note,' said Morris. He choked it out, actually, each word a frog squirming in his tight throat.

'I'll take that,' said Esther, snatching the envelope from Morris's outstretched hand.

While her mom liberated the single sheet of hotel stationery from its sheath, Penny watched nervously, a cold prickle climbing her back.

'I *will* kill him,' said Esther simply after reading the note.

Vita took the sheet from Esther and handed it to Penny without looking at it.

Penny turned her brown eyes to the china white paper and read the succinct, economical, to-the-point, late breaking news flash from her beloved.

Dear Penny,

I can't go through with it.

Sorry,
Bram

'What does it say?' asked Vita, reading the note over

Penny's shoulder. The redhead gasped like she'd been stabbed in the lung and said, 'This is the cruelest, most cowardly, despicable act, punishable by—'

'By death,' said Esther flatly.

'Are you okay?' Vita asked Penny.

Morris said, 'She hasn't blinked.'

'Stop staring at my daughter,' said Esther, swatting at the once and former best man.

Penny examined the terse message again. Bram hadn't wasted a word to throw away two years of her life. She looked at her mother, a woman who'd also been abandoned by a man. Esther scowled, apparently furious, but Penny knew her mom had to be relieved.

'This is beautiful stationery,' said Penny, fingering the sheet. 'Feel the bond. The embossed leaf. We should order a box.'

Then her legs – her livelihood, her strength – trembled and weakened. She slid to the floor, the yards of crinoline and tulle of her gown billowing and burying her, providing a safe tent where she could have some privacy.

'She fainted!' Vita screamed in perfect pitch, well trained by her job as a (basic cable) soap actress. 'Call an ambulance!'

'She's just crying,' said Esther coolly.

'She's hysterical!' boomed Vita.

But Penny wasn't crying. She was laughing (hysterically) at the comedy of it all. The Bridal Barbie gown. Two hundred fancy white people waiting in the ballroom. The $75,000 of her mom's money gone to a wedding that wouldn't happen. It *was* funny, she thought. In a tragic, soul-annihilating kind of way.

Penny slowly gathered her wits and skirts. 'As soon as my legs start working again, I'm going to get off the floor and sit on that couch,' she said. 'I'd like a cocktail. After that, I'm open to suggestions.'



'Penny, stay right where you are,' said Esther. To Morris, she said, 'You. Come with me.'

Esther yanked Morris out of the charmless bridal prep room. Shutting the door behind her, she pulled the disheveled young man a few yards down the hallway so Penny couldn't overhear their conversation.

'Where is he?' she asked.

'I don't know,' replied Morris.

Up to her diamond earrings with lividity, Esther would have liked to spit (but just couldn't). 'You do his dirty work,' she said, disgusted.

Morris said, 'I'm just the messenger.'

'Is your mother living?'

'My mother?' he asked.

'I'm going to call her, and tell her how you lowered yourself today,' said Esther. Although Morris outweighed her by forty pounds (all of it male muscle), Esther matched his height. She bore into his blue eyes, as only a mother could, telegraphing the maternal manipulation trifecta: 'Guilt . . . shame . . . disappointment . . . guilt . . . shame . . .'

'Stop,' said Morris, blocking his eyes with his arm. 'Okay, okay, he's in his room upstairs. I left him five minutes ago.'

'Get out of my way,' said Esther, maneuvering around the big lug in the narrow hallway.

'You're not really going to call my mother are you?'

Esther left him to wonder. She plowed down the corridor, hurried passed the open ballroom doors, and clicked across the marble lobby floor to the main elevator banks of New Jersey's swankiest hotel. An express car swished open and she punched the button for the twelfth floor. The wedding party had secured several suites there for the weekend.

Esther was alone in the elevator. In her short ride, a red rage rose in her body like mercury in a hot thermometer. She'd felt such intensity of anger only once before, the day her husband Russell Bracket announced he was leaving her for Penny's British au pair. Esther flashed back to that day, that minute, in the pong room of their mansion on Overlook Lane. Russell was expertly bouncing a hollow ball on a green paddle when he exclaimed, 'I've fallen in love with Jemima!' like she should be happy for him about it.

Ping. The elevator doors opened. Esther strode toward the hotel's bridal suite. She knew the number, having sent a bottle of Dom Perignon there an hour ago. As she marched, her eyes flitted across door numbers and the pink toile wallpaper depicting scenes of bucolic life, children and their pets, apple trees. She was so focused, Esther didn't notice the large empty laundry cart in the hallway until she'd crashed into it.

She scanned the hallway for a hotel housekeeper. Seeing no one, she proceeded to Room 1212 and knocked on the door. Amazingly, it opened. The bastard hadn't yet fled. In fact, Bram Shiraz, twenty-five, stood right in front of Esther in the open doorway, guileless, in jeans, a black T-shirt, bare feet. She detected a ripple of disappointment in his eyes when he saw her. Had he hoped his visitor would be Penny? Did he really think her daughter would come up here to grovel?

Bram's expression quickly returned to his usual casual inscrutability, the placid blankness only handsome men could achieve. Esther knew that look well, from her former husband Russell. She'd been tricked by it, just as Penny had been suckered by Bram's mink hair, his round brown eyes and lanky build, foolishly believing this man was as sweet and soulful as he looked. Bram didn't deserve his physical gifts, thought Esther. He should be a hideous hunchback.

A half-packed suitcase was on the bed behind him.

Esther opened her mouth and a laryngeal squeak wobbled out.

Bram didn't wait for more. He returned to the bed and resumed packing as if she weren't hovering in the doorway, wishing him ugly. The gall of him! Each of his movements filled her with revulsion. At least now, with the wedding off, she wouldn't have to see him ever again. She should thank him for what he'd done.

Without looking up from his toils, he said smugly, 'You don't have to thank me.'

As if he'd ended the wedding because she was opposed to it! As if he'd do anything selfless to save his life.

'You got what you wanted,' said Bram. 'Why are you here?'

Esther couldn't say why she'd felt compelled to storm up to his room. Honestly, she hadn't expected to find and confront him. She'd spent her entire adult life (early and enduring) avoiding tense situations. Now that she was in the vortex of one, she was at a loss.

Churning mentally for a tart and cutting reply, Esther's eyes shifted left and landed on the room's dining table. An ice bucket with the champagne she'd ordered for the bride and groom was upon it.

Bram closed the suitcase. He sat on the bed next to it to slip on his socks and sneakers. 'I know you blame me for Penny's injuries,' he said. 'They were accidents.'

'How does someone accidentally dislocate her jaw?' she asked, finding words finally, plus the gumption to enter the room and close the door behind her. She moseyed toward the dining table, her slender fingers gripping the bottleneck. It was slippery with condensation, but she held tight.

He said, 'I don't have to explain what happened. To *you*.' He might as well have said 'to *ewwww*.'

Then he shrugged as if they were discussing the price of milk. That noncommittal rise and fall of his shoulders was, in her mind, as much of an admission as she could hope to get. Anger peaking, Esther went with it.

She made for the bed. Bram met her eyes and she saw the guilt inside. With the mighty force of middle-aged rage, Esther swung the bottle at his casually handsome head.