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Kiss the Bride

Isobel Tucker had been invited to a wedding in Lexington. The bride was a girl she'd gone to high school with, and although they hadn't been particularly close, Isobel thought there would be a lot of folks at the reception it would be nice to see again. She had not spoken to most of her former high school classmates in some time, having spent college and the subsequent five years – which everyone who knew her had assumed would be marked by glorious academic achievements, culminating in a Ph.D. and a swank teaching job – taking every pill and swilling every drink she could get her hands on.

"Do you think a wedding is really the best place to take your sobriety for a test drive, darlin'?" asked Isobel's cousin, Pauline, who was sitting on her porch drinking a cup of coffee and looking sultry. Pauline always looked sultry. She was close to forty, looked about half her actual age, and made lots of money doing something in business that Isobel had never quite understood. "Everyone's going to be all drunk and happy, and you're going to want to be drunk and happy too."

"I can get happy without getting drunk," Isobel said indignantly. "That's the whole point. Anyway, I figure this can take the place of my high school reunion. I have no intention of going to *that* and explaining to everyone where, like, nine years of my life went."

"You don't think everyone at this wedding will want to know where the last, like, nine years of your life went?" asked Pauline drily.

"No," scoffed Isobel. "We'll all be talking about the bride, saying *Isn't she lovely?* and *Where did she meet him?* and stuff like that."

The wedding was nice, in a generic way. At the reception, Isobel immediately spied a table full of old classmates, who waved her over to join them.

Her excitement at seeing her old acquaintances was considerably dampened when a man, whom she vaguely recognized as having once been a boy in her tenth-grade physics class, greeted her with the words, "Girl, how come you ain't got no date? You still a big nerd?"

Someone else said, "Shut up, Mikey."

Mikey shut up, and Isobel sat down and talked with everyone about how lovely the bride looked, and where she (the bride) had met her husband. Eventually, photographs of people's children were passed around, which Isobel enjoyed until Emma O'Connor, who was now Emma Hooper and a mother of three, asked brightly, "What about you, Izzy? What have you been doing with yourself? Do you have any children?"

Mikey said, "Izzy ain't got time for no kids. She's prob'ly a professor or some shit. All lecturing at the University and everything."

"Well, no, not a professor," Isobel admitted. "And not a mom. I work in a library. An academic library," she added, because that sounded faintly more impressive. "And I'm in grad school."

She did not add that it was library school, and that her boss had said

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to her on one occasion, "You'll be fine. If you can put breath to mirror, you can get a library degree."

"You're just now in grad school?" Emma Hooper, *née* O'Connor, asked, wide-eyed. "I mean, Mikey's right – we all figured you'd be something really impressive by now, because you used to be so smart and everything. What happened?"

Everyone at the table stared at her.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Isobel said.

In the restroom, Isobel scowled into the mirror and decided it was time to hug the bride, offer her best wishes, and get out of there.

"Oh! Izzy!" someone giggled from nearby.

Isobel turned to see who had spoken to her, and saw that the bride had just come through the ladies' room door. Perfect, she thought. The perfect opportunity for a hug and a "you look beautiful" and then a hasty retreat. Maybe out the back door, if she could remember to ask the bride where it was.

"I'm so glad you came," the bride said. She was drunk. Isobel was an expert on drunkenness, and she could tell, by the bride's red-rimmed eyes, her unsteady step, and the excessive enthusiasm behind every word. "I always liked you so much."

"Sure," Isobel said. "I always liked you, too. Listen, I'm really glad you invited me, because you –"

"You look beautiful, too," the bride said, stepping forward in her puffy white dress and cornering Isobel against the wall. "Getting married is a pretty huge grownup thing," she went on, touching Isobel's honey-blonde hair. "It makes you wanna do something *crazy*."

"Well, obviously, 'cause this is pretty fucking crazy," said Isobel, looking at the bride in patent disbelief. "This is your wedding day. You don't want to do this. Okay, if you and your husband have some kind of understanding, that's cool, but –"

"Understanding?" The bride chuckled in what she seemed to think was a sexy way. "He'd *kill* me if he knew what we were doing."

"We are not doing anything," Isobel said. "I am a guest at your wedding. I am not here for your cheap thrills. I don't know what you've heard about the last ten years of my life, but I don't do this kind of thing anymore. On the sly, with other people's significant others, I mean. And if I did, it would be because I *wanted* to, not because I was a novelty guest for you to invite to your wedding and make out with in the girls' room and write in your super secret diary about later."

To her own ears, Isobel's speech did not sound terribly sophisticated, or like anything that had a great deal of moral weight, but it must have done the trick because the bride slouched away, saying nastily, "Still a goody two shoes, in spite of everything, huh? Is this 'I'm not here for your cheap thrills' crap is some *self-respect* thing you learned at AA?"

Isobel did not bother to retort, nor did she stop to say goodbye to anyone. Before she left, she stopped by the table piled high with wed-

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ding presents, and reclaimed the food processor that she'd brought for the happy couple.

On her way home, Isobel stopped to fill up her station wagon, and to use the bathroom at the gas station. Washing her hands, she sighed and gazed at the graffiti that ran the entire length of one wall.

"HOES GET PAID," it said. In pink. The "I" was dotted with a heart.

Isobel said out loud to the wall, "If this is supposed to be some sort of cosmic commentary on my life, I'd just like to point out that I didn't actually *do* anything. Maybe you should try to have, 'Izzy Campbell is a marvelous person,' written on you."

Of course, the bathroom walls also contained the promise, "All the bitches U want" (followed by a telephone number), so perhaps the junior-high-effusive message about hoes was, in fact, nothing personal, but simply the work of an impressionable young hip-hop fan.

"Did you have fun at the wedding?" Pauline asked her when she got home.

"Yeah. It was lots of fun. You want a food processor?" Isobel slammed the package, still wrapped and tagged TO CARRIE AND TED!, down onto her coffee table. It made an impressive temper-tantrum racket, and cats scattered in all directions.

"People showed you pictures of their kids, didn't they?" asked Pauline.