

## Grace Under Pressure

As the green and gold balloons sway in the cooling breeze, the Maid of Honor pulls the best man to the edge of the tent, where the clear, dry ten o'clock sun enlivens the hem of her green dress.

“Look at me, and be honest,” Grace says. “Are those musicians here because of you?” She gives a pointed look toward the other end of the tent.

Gideo scratches at his sideburns, which are neatly trimmed for the occasion. “Your tone makes me want to say no. But... yes.”

At one of the tables, cousin Michael and his husband Rogelio chat with some of the other early arrivals. Near them, between two enormous green-and-gold floral arrangements, a quartet of string musicians tune their instruments. The cellist, a serene fat man, drags his bow across the open D string, then dips the frog low to whisper a double-stop, two strings at once, D and G, a perfect fifth.

But no one is looking at the string quartet: All eyes are diverted a little to the right, where the sweating wedding manager speaks with a half dozen Hispanic men dressed in sombreros and white tasseled shirts. The men carry instrument cases—guitarrón, trumpet, vihuela—and impatient expressions.

Turning back, Grace puts hands on hips. “The last time you brought up this mariachi bullshit, Daphne told you the best gift she could *possibly* receive on her big day was a *horizon clear of mariachi*. How many margaritas did you *have*?”

From him, a pause, and a small melting. She has seen this look before, and knows that

he doesn't remember.

When Daphne started going out with Vance, Grace received weekly phone calls about the alumni house on King George Street, cocktail parties in the backyard, croquet right across the street at St John's. Sometimes this Gideon fellow would come up, Vance's best friend since they were plebes in the Academy.

In October, she tagged along on Daph and Vance's weekend in Boston. Vance was giving a guest lecture at Simmons College on the Friday and they were staying in town until the Monday. Vance, Grace learned, is a man of few words. But a good man. On the Saturday, Gideon called and said his work was bringing him to the city on short notice. The more the merrier said they, which was all well and good until the couple went to bed at eight thirty that night, leaving Grace and Gideon alone together at the Battery Wharf Hotel Bar. Gideon and Grace. Two lonely plucks of the G string.

Something about him reminded her of John, but something else reminded her of... other men she has known. The next time she saw him was the New Years party at the house, but all she remembers of that night is empty champagne flutes, couch cushions that could swallow you whole, excusable smooches at midnight...

At the edge of the tent, Grace says, "I'm supposed to check on my sister. Just pay the mariachi so they can fuck off."

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In the farmhouse, the bride weeps.

The bedroom of the bridal suite is a long room. In the middle of one long wall, there is

a queen-size four-poster bed with cream satin sheets. A couple of wicker chairs face a glass-topped coffee with ring stains on it, crisp sunlight appearing on the ceiling in the shape of the tabletop. Floral wallpaper covers the walls, a cream background with bunches of green stems leading into baby tulip cones. Those baby tulips taunt Daphne as she grunts out another sob, back bent, staring into the lap of her white dress, clutching the pee-on stick in one white fist.

The door is opened. Daphne looks up, meets Lucy's eyes. Her pickle-green bridesmaid's dress swishes between her ankles and then she is there, cupping Daphne's tear-sticky cheeks, firing off questions.

When Daphne tries to voice her internal incoherence, Lucy steps away and says, "I'm getting the others." But Daphne is thinking, *We are not sinners because we sin. We sin because we are sinners.*

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Grace, not wanting to get dragged into peripheral tasks, takes the path around the side of the farmhouse. As she skirts the fenced-in generator, she thinks of the cellist in the tent. The sensations are still there: strings digging into her fingertips, the hum of the hollow body against her, the thrill she felt when she played a perfect D on the A string and the D string would start vibrating without being touched and everything felt like it was dovetailing together.

When was the last time? She tried to get back into it when Mercy started school, but she kept feeling like the instrument squirmed away from her, the fingerboard shrugged off her fingertips like unwanted compliments. It was easier when John was around to help her.

Wasn't everything? She remembers him fresh off the boat from Aberdeen, twenty five, teaching strings from his studio apartment down the street from Ma's house. In the spring of her senior year, he was playing his fiddle with the window open and Grace stopped to throw a quarter into his second-story window. He leaned out and dropped the coin down to her, said he wasn't playing for money. She asked what he *was* playing for. He said hate. And that made her laugh.

The next time she heard him playing, she called to him and sang a phrase of a Marvin Gaye song. He came to the window, picked up the tune, gave it a few ornaments—this pleased her immensely. She asked what instrument he was playing. It looked like a fiddle but it was painted in some places and the scroll was carved in the shape of a creature's head. It's what they play in Norway, he told her, and came down to show her, his Scottish accent startling her with its brazenness—'It's got the four strings here, like a fiddle, but here, under the neck, see, it's got *five more strings* that you don't ever play directly. So you play the top strings like this—and if you don't muck it up, the bottom ones vibrate along.' And she leaned in to see the under-strings resonate one or two at a time as he played a slow tune.

That fall she left for Drexel. Saw him again seven years later at Ma's funeral. Asked him out on the spot.

Coming to the front lawn, Grace catches sight of her daughter, hair done up with a green bow, leading her great aunt Theodora down a path in the trees. Glancing at the time, Grace crosses the lawn and follows them down the path. Theodora seems to have cooled down in her middle age, but Grace still remembers when she and Ma would uncork a wine botte each

and stay out on the porch until the middle of the night.

The sunlight falls in ribbons here, cut up by the narrow white birch trunks. Theodora, with her pasty skin and gaudy pink fascinator, is seated on a log bench saying something about monetary incentive; Mercy is crouched at a creek's muddy bank, inspecting a frog up close. Catching sight of her mother, she says, "Mom, how come you never told me about the Communist Manifesto?"

As soon as she has turned away from the frog in her palm, it jumps away. Grace presses a hand to her throat. "Get out of the mud, baby. You'll ruin your dress." Mercy doesn't seem to have heard. She thrusts a hand into the water. The dress is pale yellow.

Frustration blossoms in Grace's gut. She snaps her fingers. "*Mercy Elizabeth Friar.*"

"Okay, okay." Mercy stands, goes to sit beside Theodora, one hand held out of sight. "I'm done. Promise."

"Put it back," Grace says.

Mercy feigns confusion, but Grace says it again. The girl tosses her secret frog back into the water with a sour expression. Grace imagines the same expression on Mercy's face when she's twenty-two and addicted to crack. Is she going to listen to her mother then? Is she going to care? Is she going to stop doing crack?

Jesus, that's a horrible thing to think. But she's right, Mercy isn't going to listen to her forever—all Grace can do is prevent her daughter from *wanting* to hide frogs/crack. How to do that? Well, for one thing, don't bring a crack addict into the house. Or a coke addict, or a ket/pot/meth head. Or, an alcoholic.

She smooths her daughter's hair. "Maybe after the ceremony there'll be time for frogs."  
To Theodora she says, "Auntie, why is my eight year old asking me about the Communist Manifesto?"

Theodora shrugs. "She had questions about Occupy Wall Street. I couldn't dance around it forever."

"The proletariat have nothing to lose but their chains," Mercy says, but she sounds unsure.

Grace shoots her aunt a look, but Theodora holds her hands up. "I don't know *where* she got that one."

"Gideon told me." Mercy's expression of vague consternation reminds her of John. She's got his forehead already.

"Tell you what," Grace says, "you'll learn about the communists when you're older."

"When I'm ten?"

"Yep, when you're ten." Grace kisses her on the head. Oh, her future addict daughter—how charming a addict she will be! "And don't listen to everything Gideon tells you."

Leaving her aunt and daughter alone again, Grace comes to the front lawn and locks eyes with one of her sister's bridesmaids who is hurrying down the porch steps, an urgency in her eyes. Christ. What can it be now?

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In the farmhouse, just beyond the rustic front hall, Grace enters the bridal suite

bedroom. Sunlight pours through the window. At the foot of the four-poster bed there are one green-clad bridesmaid and one bride with her shoulders hunched. When Daphne looks up, Grace sees the mascara staining her cheeks.

Before Grace can speak, a second bridesmaid hustles in and hands Daphne a cosmopolitan in a highball glass. The sight of the cocktail only makes Daphne bawl harder. The thwarted maid sets it on the bureau.

Grace kneels in front of her sister. “Babe. It’s bad luck to cry in a wedding dress.” She gathers that neither maid knows precisely what’s going on yet. She asks her sister, “Did Vance... do something?”

This seems to make Daphne want to cry more. She clears her throat. To her maids she says, “Guys, can you give us a minute?”

Once the door is closed behind them, Grace mirrors her sister’s posture on the bedside, a stone forming in her gut. She’s been cheated on, hasn’t she? Or abused. My God, who knew Vance had it in him? Man of few words indeed. Man of many punches.

Daphne scratches carefully around her braids. “Do you remember that Bridget Jones movie we watched with Vance and everyone at New Year’s?”

Grace is thrown. “With Colin Firth?”

“Colin Firth is in all of them. We did the third one. Bridget Jones’s Baby.”

“Oh right, the one where she doesn’t know if the father is Colin Firth or Patrick Dempsey.”

“Yeah...”

It was good that Colin Firth ended up being the dad, since Patrick Dempsey's character was just some playboy billionaire. That is what Grace means to say. But when she sees the desperate mist in her sister's eye, she stops short. At length, she says, "Oh, my god."

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In the tent, Michael absently tugs his earlobe. "Are you sure?"

"People are more open than you think, babe," says Rogelio. "I'm sure he'll be happy to talk to you."

"You think?"

Rogelio gives him a pat on the shoulder. "Give 'em hell."

Michael stands to his full, lanky height and walks with his shoulders back—but not too far back—toward the mariachi fellows. He is equipped with such Spanish as he has learned over the past few months. *Buen día, como te va?* Another step. He eyes the guitarrero. *Me llamo Miguel. Me encantaría hablar contigo sobre...*

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In the bridal suite, a sick feeling takes Grace. The room has become muted by cloud cover. "Are you serious?"

Daphne is barely audible. "I took a test just now."

"Jesus H Christ." The air presses in on Grace's gut. Standing, she opens the window and fans herself with a magazine from the coffee table.

"I think I made a mistake, Gracie."

*Oh, do you think?* Eyes fixed on the carpet, Grace says, "Please tell me you and Vance



opened the relationship up.” Months ago, Daphne mentioned it as a possibility.

Daphne coils her feet beneath her but does not speak

“Well?”

“Come on. Don’t do that.”

“I’m only trying to get informed.”

“You know we didn’t.”

“Jesus, I’m only trying to get in-*formed*, Daphne.”

“I *cheated*,” Daphne snaps. “On my *fiancé*. And there’s a *baby* in me and I don’t know who it fucking *be-ongs* to. Do you feel informed yet?”

The sick tightness slithers into Grace’s throat. She is distantly aware of the cleaving in her brain, carrying her off from herself. “How did the affair start?”

Daphne flinches at the word. Sitting on the bed with her legs tucked into the dress, she looks like a pixie. “Vance and me went back to Annapolis for the navy game in December. Which was whatever. But then he brought me to this super cute café bookstore kind of place that he said he used to study at when he was at the Academy, but when we got there he got a call so he got a table on the patio while I ordered for us, and when I got to the front of the line, for a second me and the barista kind of just looked at each other, like—like at each other’s souls or something.

“Then when we were leaving, I asked Vance to pull the car around because I was going to order another coffee. I didn’t even want another. But there was no line this time and it was just me and this one barista and we were chatting and... Next thing I know there’s a folded

piece of paper tucked into the hot sleeve on my cup.” She makes a distressed sound in her throat. “You know how much I love Vance, right Gracie? I love him so much. You know I do.”

Grace’s gaze has hollowed out. “Do I?”

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One minute, Edgar is ankle deep in a debate as to whether Goku could beat Saitama in a fight, and the next minute some gringo is tapping him on the shoulder. Edgar expects just another white kid trying to practice his Spanish—but as soon as he sees the queer look of this gringo, he knows this is different. Then Edgar sees another queer-looking *pendejo Dominicano* smiling at them from a few tables over. Must be the gringo’s boyfriend.

“Buen día, señor,” says the gringo carefully. “Me llamo Miguel. Me encantaría practicar my Español contigo.” But Edgar sees through this lie. He has heard about these subtle homosexual propositions—and now the proof is before his very eyes! *Pinche maricón!* He twists up his face and shoves the gay little gringo on his ass.

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“I know you aren’t on birth control. Do you use protection with this guy?”

“Condoms.”

“Every time?”

“Yes. Most times.”

“How many times have you slept together?”

“Jesus, I don’t know.”

“Ballpark.”

“Like, two dozen.”

“Oh my god, in three months?”

At once, Daphne shoves herself up from the bed and stands facing her sister, shivering with sudden rage. Her branch-like fingers spasm at her sides; a strangled, wordless cry issues from her. Grace’s mask weathers this except for a pressing together of the lips. After a moment, Daphne’s hands start balling and flexing open in a more controlled way. Her breaths rasp from her. She forces a smile. “My therapist told me I should not become angry so easily. I apologize.”

Grace sucks her teeth. “Did she tell you anything you couldn’t have figured out yourself?”

“She told me this isn’t you. Or me.”

“And what exactly is that supposed to mean?” But after a moment, it clicks into place. A release of adrenaline makes her armpits prickle. Sunlight floods back into the room. The bridal gown glows with it.

“This whole... act. It’s Ma.”

Grace is dropped into a recollection of one morning in, let’s see, she was sixteen then, Daphne was ten, so eighty-seven, maybe eighty-eight. Mom was on the couch, still high from the night before, watching reruns of The Andy Griffith Show as the girls left for school. Her boyfriend of a two-week tenure was at the table eating the girls’ cereal. Dressed in nothing but boxers and a sweat-stained wife beater, he stopped Grace with a big meaty hand to the shoulder. *Jesus would weep*, he kept saying. *Jesus would weep to see you going out in that skirt. I can just about see your kitty hairs, Gracie.*

In the bridal suite, one hundred things press to be clear of Grace's mouth. Few are sufficient. In the end, she says, "My therapist said the same thing."

There passes a moment of silence between them, and then Daphne's mouth curls in a self-conscious smile that seems to say, *Don't we look silly?* Standing, she goes to the bathroom.

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In the tent, Gideon forks over three hundred bucks to the foremost mariachi man and apologizes for the trouble. The man nods his head once and turns to his amigos. Much to everyone's relief, the order is given to move out.

Except, they all notice at once, the guitarrero does not move out. He is speaking with one of the cousins on the bride's side of the family, Micah, or Mike. Then, without warning, the guitarrero shoves the guy, hard.

At once, nearby family members shout their indignance. Mike sits on his ass with two scraped palms, looking dazed, his husband and others rushing forward. Mike's husband Rogelio passes him by, makes a beeline for the guitarrero, winds up, and swings for a knock-out. The guitarrero can't flinch out of it completely, and Rogelio's knuckle catches his jaw, sending him spinning—for an instant, his shirt's white tassels are weightless and flaring. Then he falls back against his amigos, who bear him out of there in short order, one of them shouting, "En serio, Edgar? Otra vez!"

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Grace comes to stand in the open bathroom door, watching her sister press a damp rag to her puffy eyes.

“Are you going to ask me why I did it?” Daphne asks.

Grace sighs. “Do you love him?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What about Vance?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have to tell him,” says Grace. “Preferably before—”

“Before I put my makeup back on. I know.”

Grace huffs a laugh. “Before you marry him.” And as she looks at Daphne, her face becomes more and more childlike, as if Daphne the bride were merging with Daphne the ten-year-old, waiting in silence as Earl or Sal or Tyler told Grace that Jesus would weep--I mean come *on*, what a crock of shit! If only someone had said then. If only *someone* in the room had gotten her ass up off the couch and kicked that rank ass to the curb and told her daughters that Jesus would not in fact weep to see them. That Jesus is the last person who would judge them. That Jesus loves them more than we can know—and why should He weep but for the loathsomeness of men like Earl/Sal/Tyler? Would the Lord weep, he would weep in shame—if not for the accusation of the innocent, at least for the vileness of the accusers.

Daphne *now* blurs with Daphne *then*. Everything blurs now. Ah. Grace is crying. She should step outside. Check on things. Get some fresh air. Oh, inhaler! She’ll go to the car and get Daphne’s backup inhaler in case she gets wheezy before her vows. How long has it been since the last asthma attack? Years? No matter. Grace will retrieve the inhaler.

Outside, Grace takes a survey of the tent. Most of the guests have arrived now. Michael

receives light medical treatment from his husband. Must have taken a tumble. Oh, and the mariachi is gone. Thank you, Gideon. The quartet are in the middle of Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring; the fat cellist looks as if he has not moved since Grace went inside.

In the parking lot, she unlocks her 2002 Honda and climbs into the driver's seat, rifling through the center console until she finds the inhaler. She also happens to find a single cigarette, like a needle in a haystack, a solitary Camel.

While tapping ash out the window, Grace notices a slight tremor in her hands. She places her cigarette in the side of her mouth and rubs her hands together—and in the rearview, she glimpses Mercy in her pale yellow dress climbing onto the sedan's trunk to sit.

In the same moment, there is a knock on the passenger window. Gideon stands there, awaiting permission. She unlocks the door and he climbs in.

“What are you doing in here?” he asks.

God, he looks fantastic in a tux. Grace takes the cigarette in her hand and blows out of the corner of her mouth. “Waiting on the world to change.”

“Oh, is that all?”

She shrugs. Then she says, “Sorry. This is my last smoke.”

“Save your sorry, dear. I don't smoke.”

“I've *seen* you smoke.”

“That was before I started not smoking.”

Grace glances at her daughter in the mirror and grins. “Don't tell me she got to you.”

He smiles sheepishly. “She's a promising young rhetorician.”

“She’s been giving me shit for months over it. Won’t even get in the car. Obstinate little thing.”

The horizon through the windshield is short, only about twenty feet to the trees, but at the top there’s a sliver of blue sky. No clouds today, no storm, nothing looming, nothing slipping. How long since she visited John’s grave? Two years? A quarter of Mercy’s lifetime ago. She’ll set some time aside next month to make the trip down. Otherwise he’ll have no way of knowing what’s all going on these days.

“I was just thinking earlier,” Grace says. “I really don’t want her to be addicted to crack.”

Gideon frowns. “Why were you thinking that?”

“Jesus, *I* don’t know.”

He scratches at his sideburns. “Is that something you’re worried about?” She only smiles wearily at her lap. He allows a moment to pass, studying her profile and chewing on his inner cheek, before he says, “Well. They say the worst part about being a drug addict is ending up a Christian.”

She thinks of John’s Norwegian fiddle and the strings that never get touched but only vibrate when you strike the exact right note. John told her once that they’ve got twenty or more ways of tuning the thing, and that got her thinking that maybe they know something in Norway about people, too, because there aren’t too many of us who are tuned the same way. So maybe we’re just fooling around with the strings. Seeing what makes us sing underneath.

Grace drops her cigarette out the window. Her last one. Yes, next month she and Mercy

will make the trip down to Tampa. She looks at Gideon and says, “How much paid time off do you get?”