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Hard Being You

Chloe was not impressed. Yes, the wedding reception was lavish. But isn't lavish just another word for overdone, garish? The whole Bollywood theme, for example – the silk pavilions, the oversized poufs and pillows, the sari-attired waitresses passing around chicken sate and naan crosini with goat cheese and garam masala -- wasn't that a bit much? Didn't it seem gaudily inappropriate in these difficult economic times? Even – quite frankly – un-American? It wasn't like Chloe's cousin Justin or his bride were Indian, after all. They were as plain-Jane vanilla white as Chloe, and the fact that Justin's father had outsourced his suddenly bigger than Jesus software company's call center to Mumbai did not make them any less so.

Plus, it was ridiculously hot. Yes, Chloe could see that the backyard of Justin's parents' new Pasadena estate was the size of a continent. Yes, she could see that it fit three hundred people nicely. But did her aunt and uncle really need to prove that by denying people air conditioning? Didn't everyone else see what she saw: sweaty men holding drinks to their foreheads at the two open bars? Old ladies fanning themselves at the sit-down lunch tables? And was she the only one who felt sorry for the red-faced band members wilting in their tuxedos or the four-foot ice sculpture of the elephant-headed god Ganesh that was melting into a dripping tuber?

No. Chloe was not impressed at all.

Still, when Justin's sister Morgan asked her if she was having a good time, Chloe said, "Absolutely." Chloe did not want to appear ungrateful. After all, her aunt and uncle did pay her airfare from Dallas.

"It is spectacular, isn't it?" said Morgan, and then the girl began to cry.

"Are you ok?" asked Chloe. She wrapped her arm around her cousin and led her to an empty table. Commandeering a saffron-colored cloth napkin for a handkerchief, Morgan wiped large, sloppy tears from her eyes and unwittingly smeared mascara across her cheeks. She was a freckly young thing -- no more than seventeen – and she had a round face and wiry red hair that rebelled against every attempt to straighten it into a sleek, polished curtain. Kinky wisps orbited her head like flaming comets and bobbed fencelically with every snuffle. She issued a long, forlorn sigh and twisted in her tightly wrapped, sky blue sari, the habitation of which – in Chloe's opinion – did not do her cousin much justice. "It's Nothing. Nothing," answered Morgan. "It's just... this whole wedding has me so depressed."

Chloe leaned forward in her chair. She was a few years older than her cousin and was undoubtedly the prettier of the two. She had a button nose and luminous hair that shone like the miniscule cultured pearls she wore round her slender neck. Alighting her pale fingers on Morgan's knee, she whispered, "I know just how you feel."

Morgan looked up. "You think that no one will ever love you?"

Chloe had to process this for a moment. "What are you talking about?"

A suddenly rapturous, wild-eyed Morgan said, "I'm talking about *love*. What if no one ever loves me? What if I'm alone my whole life?" Morgan brushed her cheek against Chloe's ear and whispered in a raw, embarrassed voice, "Don't tell anyone, but I've never even been kissed."

Chloe bit down on her lip. She did not want to belittle or dismiss the feelings of her cousin, but, really, this was Morgan's big drama? Morgan, who got a fucking Saab for her sixteenth birthday and

who just last night revealed her anguish over having to choose between Stanford and Yale. Morgan, who got every fucking thing she ever wanted was now fucking having a nervous breakdown because she'd never had a fucking kiss? Her voice cool, Chloe said, "Morgan, you're still pretty young."

"But I'm so fat." Morgan straightened her back, and it became clear that what until this moment might have passed for a slouch-induced shadow was indeed a bit of a pudge in the stomach. It was not a large pudge. Not much more than the cream cheese on a bagel. But it was something.

"No. You're not."

"I am," sighed Morgan. She bent her chin to her chest and wiped her eyes once more. Her voice trembling as it climbed higher up the treble scale, she added, "I'm fat. I'm obese. How could anyone love someone so gargantuan? You'd have to be a masochist. And no one is that masochistic."

"Oh, sweetie," replied the luminous Chloe, her voice even cooler. "Lots of guys are that masochistic. It's not like *they're* all so great. Beggars can't be choosers."

Morgan did her own bit of mental processing, and when the dig of the insult finally hit her, she rushed from the table, her fingers covering her face and her legs shifting unsteadily in the tightly-wrapped sari.

Chloe felt a pang of guilt as she watched her cousin disappear into the crowd. It had been a mean thing to say. Chloe knew that. She knew that she should regret it too, but she didn't. It was like some hidden beast had been unleashed inside her, and it felt good to let it run wild. Still, she didn't want her snide comment to get back to Morgan's parents. That would be awkward. A battle brewed within Chloe: To

go after Morgan or to not go after Morgan... In the end, Chloe decided that some consideration had to be paid to her feet, which were trapped in a new pair of wickedly narrow aquamarine five-inch heels and already felt like they were being squeezed through a cookie press. Would it really be fair to Chloe's suffering toes to tramp around after someone as fragile as a potato chip? Probably Morgan just needed some time to herself anyway.

Chloe picked up her cocktail purse, an impish silver bag with sequins and a jeweled clasp that had cost her two weeks pay – even with her employee discount -- and removed her compact. As she sat confirming the soft glow of her dusty pink lips and the still-elegant line of mascara that curled up her elongated lashes, a stranger sat down beside her.

Two years working the Neiman Marcus tie counter had taught Chloe a thing or two about sizing people up. A lot of new clerks judged potential customers by their clothes, but Chloe knew better. She'd known men in threadbare Levis and mud-encased shitkickers who picked out a dozen two-hundred dollar ties like they were a bunch of crullers, and she'd seen men in Italian silk suits and Ferragamo shoes hem and haw before pulling out a Discover card to buy the one thing on sale. Flashy, nouveau riche attire or estates did not make a man, teeth did. Men of consequence, men rooted in generations of authority and wealth, took care of their teeth. This man did not. This man's teeth were stained and crooked. Plus, he was old. Really old. Older than her father. And ugly. He was short, and he had a withered onion sort of head, all yellow with a few root-looking white hairs sticking out of his chin. He had no neck to speak of. His onion head sat on a little squash body, narrow at the top and bulbous at the bottom. Jabbing a thick, jaundiced fingernail into her arm, he said, "I know who you are."

Chloe slid her compact back in her bag. She crinkled her nose in an artfully charming yet dubious frown. "I don't think so."

"You're blonde now. And much younger. But, otherwise, you look exactly the same."

She really didn't want to deal with this right now, and she resented that someone would bring this crazy old man to a wedding and then just let him stroll around bothering nice people. She stood up and put on her best retail airs, a sort of fifth-position stance combined with an inquiring tilt of the head and a throaty purr. "Sir, I was just going to the bar. May I bring you something?"

"Good Lord, that was almost convincing! You haven't changed a bit." He gave Chloe's knee a slap as he chuckled and shook his head in delight. "Yes, sirree, I saw you, and I said to myself, 'Well, what do you know, the devils back in town.'"

Chloe's eyes narrowed and she pushed out her plump pink lips. She was trying to decide if she should put the old codger in his place or just leave.

"It must be hard," said the old man.

"Hard?"

"Being you."

"Being me?" The words escaped her lips with an exasperated huff.

"You must never get a break. Always working like you do."

She straightened her head and squeezed tight on her purse. "I think I'm gonna get me that drink. And you're right old man. I'm not getting you anything."

"That's ok, dearie," he said dismissing her with a wave.

"You're just being true to yourself. But it must feel like thankless work sometime. It must be hard."

With a roll of the neck, Chloe spat, "Whatever," and walked away. Determined, purposeful strides that sank into the grass every time her heel met the ground and gave her a slightly unbalanced appearance carried her toward one of the crowded drink pavilions, where she ordered a champagne cocktail only to be garded and given a Diet Coke instead. A good-looking young man – tall with dark hair and honest-to-God dimples on either side of his wide smile – approached her. *Oh, great*, she thought. *Now he's going to ask me to dance, and it's like one-hundred-and-fricking-ninety-degrees outside. Well, I don't care how cute he is; I'm not dancing with anybody.*

But the good-looking young man did not ask Chloe to dance. He begged her pardon as he slid next to her at the bar and ordered two frozen strawberry daiquiris, one of which he brought directly to Morgan, who stood about thirty feet away, directly behind a table occupied by two wrinkled grandmother types, one fat, one thin. Chloe watched Morgan blink back tears as she took a sip of the drink and smile up at the dimpled boy. Two other boys and two other girls huddled round them. Every few seconds one of the friends would pat Morgan's elbow or squeeze her shoulder.

Great. Now she's telling everyone that I'm some horrible bitch, thought Chloe. *Piss and shit. Should've stayed home. But no. I had to listen to Princess Morgan, with her "Come, we'll have so much fun. Come, there'll be so many cute guys. Come, I'm so rich that my parents are sending me to drama camp in fricking Paris next summer. Well, call bullshit on that. This is the lamest wedding ever.* Chloe strained her ears to try and catch a piece of Morgan and her friends' conversation, but the din of music and the whirl of the blender made it impossible to eavesdrop. She decided to get closer.

With daring aplomb, she strode over to the table with the two elderly women, both of whom, she was happy to see, possessed full sets of serviceable, if not altogether air tight, teeth.

Chloe had not intended to talk to the women, but then one of them -- the thinner one, said, "My, you're a pretty girl."

Well, Chloe did not want to be rude. She said, "Thank you, ma'am," and she strained her ears to catch Morgan's voice.

"Friend of the bride or groom?" asked the other woman, the fatter one.

"Groom," purred Chloe graciously. "We're cousins." She pulled her chair an inch or two closer to Morgan.

"And what's a pretty girl like you doing all alone? Don't you have a boyfriend?" said the first woman.

That was a whole other can of worms, the sorry truth of which Chloe did not feel obliged to share with these strangers. "I am focusing on my professional development right now," she said. She glanced at Morgan. Morgan stood alone with the dimpled boy -- the other friends had vanished -- and he was guiding the girl's head upward with one curved knuckle as he smiled down at her mascara-stained face. He kissed her, gently, just barely pulling on her lower lip.

Something snapped inside Chloe -- toward the back of her throat, near her larynx -- something tight and constrictive snapped. It was the wild beast. She could almost taste its dark, bilious skin as it crawled up her throat. An ugly, hate-filled voice came out of her. Looking back at the women seated next to her, she said, "But I'll tell you, I think this is about the worst wedding reception ever. The band's god-awful. The food stinks. The bartenders are all holier than thou. The bridesmaids look like cows. And it's hot. Africa hot. Mars hot. Center of the earth hot. Why anyone would have an outdoor wedding

in this over-watered desert of a town is beyond me. I hope the happy couple chokes on the wedding cake."

The two elderly women eyeballed each other with tight, lipstick-stained grins and narrow, gleaming eyes. Then, as one, they glanced back at Chloe and leaned toward her, the wrinkled folds of their necks stretching like Slinkies to better reach her with their whispers. "You don't know the half of it," said the thinner woman, her soft voice rasping deliriously with heartfelt scorn. "All this foreign stuff upsets our acid reflux. And, frankly, in this heat, it seems criminal to serve chicken. Why, the risk of salmonella must be enormous."

"And this heat! We're just about to drop dead," said the fatter woman, her voice just as raspy and bitter as her friend's. "Did you know that the bride's parents offered to rent The Valley Hunt Club? We could have had air conditioning!"

"Not that our grandniece -- that would be the bride we bought a five-hundred-dollar place setting for -- cares. We came all the way from Montecito, and she hasn't even blinked at us today. Doubt she'll even write a thank you note."

Chloe stretched out her own neck to meet theirs. "I had to rent a car. No one even offered to pick me up at the airport."

The elderly women's eyes bulged, and they shook their heads in appalled disapproval.

"And a minute ago," added Chloe leaning back and pushing her chair out until it was almost directly in front of Morgan, "some crazy old coot called me the *devil*. I didn't come here to be insulted." Chloe's newfound friends looked at each other and burst into laughter.

"What?" said Chloe.

The thinner one pointed behind her. "You mean that man there?"

Chloe twisted round in her chair. There he stood. The crazy old man. His ugly onion head just as ugly; his little squash body just as squashy. He was at the bar talking to the bartender. "That's the one," she said. "Creepy old weirdo."

The father woman shook her head and said, "Dear, dear. Don't worry about him. He sat here for twenty minutes and called us 'vicious mosquitoes.' Said it 'must be hard being us, biting and diving at people all day long.'"

Chloe twisted back round in her seat, and just in that moment, that very split second, she saw Morgan smiling down at her. The dimpled boy's arm covered Morgan's shoulder, and they looked like they were about to head off somewhere dark and quiet. Morgan's eyes shown proud and round her mouth hid the twisted beginnings of a smug, triumphant grin.

Chloe's fingernails dug into her purse. "Hell, I don't know if it's hard being you," she said, "but these days it's fucking hard being me." Then, as Morgan stepped past, Chloe stuck out her foot and tripped her.