

*The People
We Hate
at the
Wedding*

GRANT GINDER



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Alice

May 1

Christ, Alice thinks, staring at the envelope, these invitations must have cost a fucking fortune.

Her phone buzzes against her desk, and she picks it up before it has a chance to ring twice.

“So, how much?”

It’s Paul, her brother.

“Hold on.” Alice scrolls down the website for a stationary company called Bella Lettera that she heard a coworker gushing about yesterday. Buried below a hundred pictures of dainty thank-you cards and save-the-dates, she finds what she’s looking for: a pink-and-white pricing table for wedding invitations.

“I’ve only got about five minutes,” he says.

“I’m going as fast as I can.” She squints at the screen. “Why are you in such a rush?”

“I’ve just—I’m at work, okay? I’ve got shit to do.”

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“You’re the one who was begging to talk last night.”

“Yeah, and you said you were busy, just like I’m saying I’m busy now. So . . .”

She wasn’t busy; that had been a lie. When she got home last evening, she’d had grand plans of going for a run in Laurel Canyon—plans that were effectively squashed when she checked her mail and found, among the catalogs and bills, an invitation to her half sister Eloise’s wedding. She opened a bottle of white wine and dealt with the bills first—or perhaps *dealt* is too strong, too ambitious a word. Really, she just stared at the crushing amounts her creditors were demanding. Then, when she was good and drunk, she leaned forward and ripped open the invitation, giving herself a nasty paper cut in the process.

“Shit,” she’d said, and stared at the dot of blood on her finger as she waited for the sting to register. A few moments later, once the cut had got her satisfyingly angry, she shoved her finger into her mouth and sucked on it, cringing at the metallic taste: her blood, she thought, the stuff that filled her body, was nothing but a fistful of pennies.

Returning to her couch, she sat down and stared at the mess of paper in front of her. As a rule, she doesn’t believe in omens. She never reads her horoscope, and she thinks Fate is just the name narcissists give to Coincidence. Getting caught in a traffic jam, winning the lottery, dying in a plane crash: it’s all just the slapdash workings of chance. Things happen, and things don’t. Still, though: slicing your finger open on your sister’s wedding invitation can’t be a good sign.

Paul says, “*Hello?*”

“I’m here, I’m here.”

She skims down the table’s columns: foil, no foil; card-stock type; multiple colors.

“*So how much did they cost?*”

“Okay.” Alice drums her fingers across her desk. In the cubicle next to her, the phone rings. “Let’s see. We think it’s two-ply paper, right?”

“I think so,” Paul says. “I’ve got it right in front of me. Thick and nice as shit.”

“Yeah, I’ve got it right here, too.”

Alice picks Eloise’s invitation up off her desk. The paper is full and cottony, halfway between papyrus and a quilt, she thinks. And if she looks closely enough, she can see details she missed last night: wisps in its pulp, places where it’s been *hand* pressed—all sorts of little irregularities that add up to a hefty price tag.

Paul says, “Okay, so we can agree on two-ply?”

“Absolutely.” She traces her half sister’s name. “How many colors are we dealing with?”

“I was just going to ask that,” Paul says. “I count three: gold, silver, and that terrible, shitty English-seaside blue.”

Alice liked the blue when she first opened the envelope; it had reminded her of the peonies her mother used to grow in their garden in St. Charles.

“Right,” she says. “Three colors. Do we think it’s letterpress or foil stamping or what?”

Paul’s breathing finally slows down. “So, Mark and I were talking about this last night. He originally thought it was letterpress. But, I mean, if you look closely, you can pretty *obviously* see the foil.”

Alice closes her left eye and squints at the name of the groom: *Oliver*. The elegant *O* glints under the office’s fluorescent lights.

“Definitely foil,” she says. “And we estimated how many?”

“I’d say two hundred fifty. That bitch knows a lot of people.”

“I think that’s probably reasonable.” Alice reaches for a pen and a Post-it, jots down a few numbers, and performs a series of mental calculations. “So, we’re looking at about eighteen hundred, but that just covers the invitation, program cover, and program panel.” She scrolls down to the site’s next table. “For response cards, and the save-the-dates we got a few months ago, and menus, and all of *that* shit, we’ve got to consider another . . . looks like about fifteen hundred.”

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“So we’re up to about thirty-three hundred.”

“. . . and then envelopes are going to run another seven hundred, at least.”

“Okay, so four thousand. Anything else?”

Alice does a quick inventory. “No, I think that’s it.”

“We’ll throw in an additional five hundo, because it’s Eloise, which brings us up to forty-five hundred dollars,” Paul says. “And you’re sure this website’s legit? Like, it’s analogous to something El would use?”

“Totally.” Alice lowers her voice to a whisper. “The girl I overheard talking about it is a *real* fucking snob.”

“Okay, good. So: *forty-five fucking hundred dollars on invitations*. Absolutely ridiculous.”

Alice examines her invitation again. “At least they came out nicely.”

“Well, they *better have* for nearly five grand.”

“You’re acting surprised.”

“Aren’t you?”

“No,” Alice says. “We knew it would cost her at least that much. We just wanted to be justified in our disgust.”

Paul says, “It’s blood money, is what it is.”

“You’re being a *little* dramatic.”

“Am I, though? Our entire childhood, her dad’s funneling cash into some trust fund for her, just because he feels guilty over what he did to Mom.”

“He’s her father. That’s what rich fathers do. They give their daughters money.” She adds, though she knows she shouldn’t, “And speaking of Mom, you should really give her a call, you know.”

“I’m not getting into that, Alice. Do you hear me? I’m *not* getting into *that*. Anyway, we never saw a cent of that money.”

“It wasn’t ours, Paul. We didn’t deserve any of it.”

She wants to believe herself.

Paul scoffs. “We went to a public school that looked like it was out of some D-rate John Hughes movie; she went to school—elementary school

through high school—at Collège Alpin Beau Soleil in Switzerland. We spent our fucking summers in Tampa. She spent hers in Santorini.”

“Yeah, well. Still. I’d much rather have had our dad for a father any day.”

“Me, too,” he says.

Alice tosses the invitation down on the desk. “I can’t remember the last time I thought this much about a piece of paper. You’re at least going to go, aren’t you?” she asks, once she’s sat back down.

“Probably not,” Paul says. “Mark and I were already talking of plans that weekend.”

“The wedding isn’t until July eleventh.”

“And?”

“And today’s the first of May.”

“So what’s your point?”

“What life-changing plans could you possibly have made over two months in advance?”

In the background on his end she hears a gentle roar: a leaf blower, or a passing truck.

“We’re talking about going camping with Preston and Crosby. In the Poconos.”

Alice plants her elbows on her desk and cradles the phone against her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” she says. “Did I hear you right? I couldn’t have. I actually couldn’t have. Because what I *thought* you just said was that you were going to *miss your sister’s wedding* to go *gay camping* in the Poconos.”

“Half sister,” Paul corrects.

“I can’t believe this.” She pinches her eyes shut and wards off the beginnings of a flash migraine.

“I can’t just drop everything every time Eloise decides to smother us with her own happiness, Alice. I have a life, you know.”

“You’re implying that I don’t.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to. That’s what makes it an implication.”

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There's a pause. Alice bookmarks the Bella Lettera website, unbookmarks it, and then bookmarks it again before finally closing the window.

She says, "Please tell me you'll be there."

"I need to think about it."

"*Paul,*" she says, trying not to plead. "*Tell me you'll be there.*"

"I have to go."

"PAUL."

"Alice, I'm leaving now."

She leans forward and lowers her voice to a whisper. "So help me God, Paul, if you hang up on me I'll fucking come for you."

Alice hears Paul sigh dramatically, and the line goes dead.