

PAIRS WITH LIFE

by John Taylor

Excerpt

I turned to face him. At six-foot-four, I was a foot taller and had at least seventy-five pounds on him. I wasn't going for intimidation, though. Ok, not a lot of intimidation. "You getting the Harrison party only proves that there's no such thing as a just and benevolent God."

Andrew scratched his beard mockingly. Not a single hair was displaced. "Harrison? Oh, you mean Harrison-Lowell Partners? The massive private equity firm whose board is having their party here tonight? Those guys?"

I wanted to rip my face off. The truth was, Andrew was half my age, but only a few steps behind me. He was an Advanced Somm, a WSET-3, CSW, and a whole bunch of other mostly useless acronyms. But he had mad tasting skills, which while also hating, I grudgingly respected too.

"Just...get them to do different bottles with each course," I said, trying to mask my aggravation. "No by-the-glass stuff and none of those imports I got on special—"

"Gee, thanks, Corbett," he interrupted. "I'll do my best to remember all of that complex and really insightful information." He walked backwards towards the door, a smug little smirk spreading across his face. "In the meantime, you have an absolutely awesome evening with your bachelorette party."

On my eighth birthday, my mom woke me up at 3:00 a.m., dragged me out of bed and into the cold backseat of her Datsun hatchback and said, "We're going to Disneyland." I'd never been but leave it to say I could sing all five verses of "Yo Ho, Yo Ho (A Pirate's Life For Me)." She didn't pack anything except a bologna and American cheese sandwich for me, and a thermos filled with "Mommy's Orange Juice" for her. We drove seven hours from Tucson to Los Angeles, got out, and discovered the park was closed.

"Oh," she had said with a frown. She shoved me back in the car and we drove home to Tucson without saying a word.

When I heard that Jansen was a bachelorette party, it felt a lot like that.

I already knew in agonizing detail how the whole night would unfold. Jansen was a party of fifteen, but only thirteen would show up, because the group had been out wine tasting the entire day, and two

girls would have already passed out at the hotel, their heads balanced delicately over the edge of the bed to avoid vomit asphyxiation.

Festivities would start with a round of Lemon Drops, followed by selfies, followed by a round of Himalayan Blow Jobs (the shot, not the Sherpa-based sex act), and more selfies. There'd be a polite but stern noise complaint from a nearby diner, which would be met with vitriol and retribution from the maid of honor, and eventually every single customer on the terrace would have to be re-seated with a comped entrée.

By the start of the second course, two more bridesmaids would be "Man down!" and loaded into the limo to be whisked away. This would cause the Bride to launch into Tearful and Wailing Speech Number One: Don't You Understand This Is My Wedding? The remedy for this drama would be another round of shots, followed by the meat course, which everyone would secretly want to eat but no one will eat.

I would then be asked if dancing is allowed. I would say no. This would be met with Tearful and Wailing Speech Number Two: Don't You Fucking Understand This Is My Wedding?

At the end of the evening, three of the four remaining conscious bridesmaids would attempt to split the check, and they would get it wrong three times. It would be my fault, obviously, and then Drunk Math would result in a three-hundred-dollar underpayment, coming out of the service charge.

"I'll bet you a hundred bucks I sell the most expensive bottle tonight," I blurted. I'm not exactly sure why I said it: Anger at a manager who didn't respect who I was or what I'd been through; or jealousy of a kid who accomplished in six years what took me twenty.

Andrew froze at the door. "Wait, what? Are you serious?"

"Dead serious," I said.

Andrew folded his arms across his chest and stared at me as if I asked him to solve a quadratic equation. "So, you'll bet me a hundred dollars that you can sell a more expensive wine to the Mike's Hard Lemonade Crew than I can to the Board of Directors of the nation's third-largest private equity firm?"

Well, when you put it that way... No matter. I was betting on my ability to optimize potential. I mean, it's not like the Jansens had booked their party at Applebee's.

"You got it."

"You're on." Andrew stuck out his hand and I shook it. He had that kind of non-committal handshake that feels like you're clutching a wet hunk of pork loin. I dropped his hand and brushed past him.

I'll never say out loud that I doubted my potential to win the bet, but it crossed my mind to add Franzia to the system and charge \$1,000.00 per box for it.

Helena was leading service for the Jansen party that night, which was good news. She was awesome—an absolute pro at her job, and mostly unflappable. We met for a few minutes to talk strategy. I didn't tell her about the bet, though maybe I should have, because she thought it was rather odd of me to be so concerned about a bachelorette party.

"Chances are we aren't even going to need you," she said.

"How sexist," I admonished her, practically vomiting hypocrisy. "What if the bride is a director at Google? And all her friends are instructors at the Culinary Institute? What if they're all writers for Wine Spectator?"

She wasn't, they weren't, and hell no.

When the bride-to-be finally sashayed into the restaurant atop a wave of millennial entitlement, it was as obvious as the rhinestone tiara atop her head that there would not be a single fuck given to the wine list. I had to admit, though, that the bride glowed; she beamed. She was all shiny teeth, dewy skin and smoky eyes, and radiating with the glorious possibility of a love eternal—a happiness unhinged and unfettered, as ethereal as a dream whispered to the breeze. It was practically contagious, something I could inhale or feel wash over me for one perfect moment as she sauntered by.

Oh, well. Life would drop its fucking jackboot on her heart soon enough.

Helena agreed to let me go in before she asked for an initial drink order, just to see if I could sell them on wine and not something vodka based. I gave the group exactly seven minutes on the terrace before making my entrance.