

The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors Even

“A hilarious picture,” Marcel Duchamp.

I have proven my worth. In the obstacle course, I wore a mermaid dress with a four-foot train. The alligators rose up from between the rubber tires and sank their teeth into my hem. I soldiered on. I baked a cherry pie with one hand wire-bound to my phone, while texting status updates with my thumb. To test my potential skill as a mother, they led me blindfolded into a nursery. Twenty five babies were presented to my nose. I identified my nephew by baby-head-smell alone.

I have piloted a minivan off-road while dodging desert jack-rabbits and singing my college fight song. I have kept my cortisol levels low while shopping with my mother. I walked into a downtown whiskey bar at happy hour wearing beige sweats, no makeup and a pony tail—the bartender did a close-up to vouch for my lack of make-up. Not even mascara. I held my head high, amidst the Friday-night blow-dries and Botoxed lips, and tried to make my best, most vulnerable, most wholesome face. I managed to get a regional manager of corporate sales to hit on me anyway. The tabloids gave me a lot of credit for appearing on TV with no make-up. The regional manager came on the show the next week to compete for my hand in marriage. He got a second date, but he lost to the cowboy from Wyoming in the dirtbike competition.

To qualify, all my bachelors must have: a square jaw, biceps of at least 14 inches around, and a cleft chin, but no more than a quarter inch deep. When at ease, they must stand with their feet at least six inches apart, with loose knees. When I give them a rose, to indicate that I wish to see them again, they must either produce real salt tears of joy, which will be tested in the lab for Visine residue, must punch a flat surface hard enough to make a mark, or must bite the inside of their lip until it bleeds. They test for the blood with a white Kleenex. No tight jeans and no ironic facial hair are allowed on the show. Tattoos are allowed if they are under three inches in diameter at the widest point and include no proper names or photorealistic faces. No iPhone fanatics, no organ transplants, no obscure sport nuts—including soccer. No Marxist libraries, no indie-band nostalgia, and no weird hats. I managed to insert a clause for no white Lacrosse caps and no investment bankers. And you have made the cut!

By now, you have already calmed a shark in the shark tank by pressing your fist into its nose. You have rescued a kitten from a Nascar straightaway. You have baked eggs and spinach with a butter crust, and then texted the Jumbotron at Dodger's Stadium on a night when your ex-girlfriend was in attendance to see the announcement—its massive, red, LED letters, high above the crowds: *I am a man who eats quiche*. You have made the appropriate noises of admiration when I appeared in a sequined evening gown. You have made appropriate follow-up remarks about how I look equally good in jeans. When we're "alone," you have said that you don't need anybody else, and when we're surrounded by other competing bachelors, you have maintained that you feel like you and I are the only two people in the world. You have cried, at least once, when describing difficult episodes from your childhood. You have remembered to ask me what I like, and you have listened to my answers. You have made it to the final three.

Now, you sleep in the attic room of an echoing seven bedroom house at the edge of an Orange County housing development called The Tides. At night, you can hear one of the other two remaining bachelors snoring. You want to tell me about it—he's two floors away, it seems impossible for a single human to produce so much noise with his face, like a helicopter over Macarthur Park at night—but you don't want to seem petty.

They film you in your sleep.

One night, you are taken into a warm, padded cell. The light is greenish. The cell fills with the sound of waves crashing on the beach. Sleep overwhelms you like a curtain coming down. A different kind of sleep, black and profound. You let yourself down into it with abandon. And then: High-pitched screaming sounds rock the walls. Terrible wails and beeps.

The producers drag you out of the cell. The floor is ice cold through your socks. The producers say: Give us ten push-ups.

Then you re-enter the cell.

Back inside, the sound of waves has been replaced with a gentle lullaby. You are hooked up to electrodes that measure your brain waves. The stickum itches. Once you have fallen back into a deep sleep, the alarm sounds again. People are yelling at you. You must leap up, run out of the cell, and check all of the doors and windows in the mansion, while repeating the words "safety first, safety first, safety first." If you miss a window, or a door, disqualification.

The third time, your dreams become technicolor kaleidoscopes of Brazilian beaches and haunted clocks that speak your name. A snake exits through your belly button and tries to lick your face. The alarm sounds. The producers hound you out of the cell and into the kitchen. An egg and a bowl sit on the counter. You're wearing nothing but boxer shorts and one sock.

The producers tell you: Crack the egg. Separate the yolk from the white. If you get any shell in the white, you are disqualified. If you break the yolk, you are disqualified. Also, you must sing softly to the egg. If you fall silent, you are disqualified. Your head feels like banging anvils under cotton. You tap the egg against the bowl and shift the yolk into the other half of the shell. The white is cool and gelatinous as it slips through your fingers. You are suddenly grateful that your mother, when you were young, forced you to bake pies with your sister. You remember that your sister warned you never to come on this show.

A bell rings. Congratulations! the producers cry. You passed the egg test! This test roughly approximates the pressures of changing a baby's diaper at two in the morning. You will make a good father. Now, jump into this tub of ice water.

When you emerge, spitting, Russian women hit you with birch twigs. This approximates nothing but itself.

Dressed and shivering, you stand in line for three hours at the DMV, before moving to a plastic chair. The producers have taken your phone away. You have been given a novel. It's Wallace Stegner's *Angle of Repose*, a novel we have both claimed to like—early California, geographical surveys, tormented love. But you've read it before, and you can't concentrate on it, not with the noise of speakers repeating impenetrable dictums about when to move from A to the Testing Line at Form C. It's unclear why you are here.

You sit for another four hours. The wooden panels on the far wall dance, separate, re-fuse, and seem to threaten you. A producer approaches you with instructions. You must get a new driver's license picture taken. At the moment when the flash goes off, you must smile and shout out a spontaneous idea for a romantic date. If you freeze, or don't seem genuinely enthusiastic, disqualification. This, the producers tell you, will roughly approximate the pressures of marriage.

A man in coveralls eventually approaches you and tells you to move to the plastic bench to your right. You move. The woman behind the main counter shuffles paper. You

stare at her, and rise. She seems well-informed and purposeful, maybe she can help. You don't know, after all, whether to wait for someone to call your name, or whether to choose another line to stand in. The woman raises her eyebrows and points you back to the bench. You try to acknowledge the frustration without letting it overwhelm you.

A family of eight shuffles by. All six children wear leiderhosen. The cameras circle you like vultures, looking for a reaction. You wonder, Would a good father laugh? Would a good husband take notes for interesting dinner conversation later? Or would a good father pull this Sound of Music nutjob aside for a man-to-man chat about fashion, individuality and child-rearing?

The DMV worker calls 44. The speakers crackle. Something tells you it's your turn. You reach the front. The DMV employee instructs you to move towards the white screen, and you do, but then water bursts from the sprinkler pipes along the ceiling. Everyone runs towards the door. The family of leiderhosen shout and drop their papers on the way out. Wet and alone, you remain standing. It seems important to stay on mission. The camera men have retreated to behind the water line. The DMV employee seems to have ducked. You walk over, wiping your eyes.

"Hello?" you say, leaning over the counter. The woman is folded over herself, hugging her knees. You can see her bra through the wet polyester fabric of her shirt.

"I need to get my picture taken," you say. "It's very important."

She doesn't move. The water comes down.

"It's not just for my license," you say. "It's for love. For possible marriage. It's for TV."

At this, the woman looks up. She points to a machine near the wall.

"Red button," she says.

After you push the button, you jump in front of the lens. In the photo, you look wet and blurry and distressed.

After the flash, you yell: "I will take her to a water park!!" with genuine, romantic feeling.

Back at The Tides, you're instructed to get your bathing suit. Then they tell you to think about me. They demand proof of your love. They lock you in the screening room with a cup. Because the contract states that you must not, for the duration of taping, be exposed to women or images of women who are younger and prettier than I am, and because of

something you said in your application for the show, the porn that flickers onto the flat screen TV involves a Japanese school marm sitting alone on a desk. You find it sad and a bit frightening.

“This is never going to work,” you say out loud.

But then you realize that for the first time in weeks the cameras have gone. You are alone, truly alone, in the screening room. Waves of relief flood over you, somewhere between euphoria and nausea. You close your eyes and think hard about sequined dresses falling to the floor, and you get the job done.

At the water park, I’m nowhere to be seen, even though there is no one else in the park. They have rented out the entire place, for romance. You climb the plastic stairs for a tubular five story twist-and-splash slide. You begin to go down. Near what seems like the middle, you spread your legs and jam your bare feet against the rubberized sides, to brace yourself to a stop.

Four tunnels open ahead of you. One flickers with distant flames. One seems to glow blue. The mouth of the third opening is obscured with jets of what seems to be jello. The final tunnel seems to run with a river of black marbles, echoing and clattering.

“This is weird!” you yell. You look around wildly for the cameras. “What is this?” Water builds behind your back, increasing the pressure. You twist to let it run past.

“How do I choose?” you yell. “Is this a macho test? Do I pick the hardest one? Or the easiest? Is it a riddle?”

A voice crackles from an unseen speaker.

“You get one question. Is this your question?”

Your ears fill with rushing liquid.

“Yes! This is my final question.”

You aren’t sure, but you think you hear the sound of people conferring. The voice comes back.

“It’s a life test.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“It’s like a personality test. You just choose whichever tunnel you choose. And that choice says something. About your views, on life.”

Your foot slips. You let go. You slide into a world of cherry jello.

At the bottom of the slide, four young men in khakis run at you with white towels. The cameras circle. The producers strip you, right there on the wet astro turf, and then dress you in jeans and your favorite t-shirt. The jello-ed towels look like carnage. You hope vaguely that it will be time for another solitary proof of your love. Instead, they hustle you onto a tarmac. It's time for the final test.

As you fly upwards, one thousand sixty hundred and sixty six women spread out on the ground below, covering over two point six acres of open space. We hold one thousand six hundred and sixty six roses in our respective teeth. Your X80 glider separates from your carry-plane at 30,000 feet, two nautical miles above the sparse cloud cover. Torn pieces of cumulus cling like scarves to your wings. You look down. A thousand faces turn towards you, like an uneven field of sunflowers. You must pilot the glider, and before you land, you must discern which face is mine. You must choose.

Up in the air, it's just you and one camera man. A bearded giant, he is jammed into the back of the cabin, his face hidden behind his machine and its red, blinking light. The glider is not quite silent. The air murmurs, a distant version of the rushing water of the slide. The sun passes from one small round window to the next, repeating bursts of light.

"Is there a trick?" you ask the camera man. "Is there some way? Will they really let me get it wrong?"

He grunts.

You look down again. One girl stands in pink fiesta lace, rotating slowly on a metal carousel in an old playground. Another girl in a short black cocktail number, at the top of a hill, seems to shimmy in a samba. You turn the glider through another cloud.

We, on the ground, turn our faces in unison to follow your path across the sky. I drop my hands. I raise my chest. Some girls shout. Some girls jump. But not me. I don't move. I don't hold up a sign. I don't wave my arms or dance. Instead, I clench my fists and bite down on my flower. It tastes like bitter grass. I mimic the sound of the clouds.

Pick me, I whisper, into my teeth.

We have come this far. We have done this much. You know me, despite the cameras, despite the script. And I know you. So get it right. I'm this one, right here. The one for you. The girl standing right over here.