

The Wedding Is Off

by Steven Tagle

I sat in the kitchen with the phone in my hand. The phone had just stopped ringing. When it rang, its screen lit up with the face of the caller. It vibrated and played a tune called "Dusk 2 Dawn." Now the kitchen was silent. I could still feel the vibrations tickling my palm.

My friend's kid sister was the one who called. The picture on the phone was from Carl's Jr. that one night. She had a black hoodie pulled over her face and a ketchup-covered French fry sticking out of each nostril. Her brother's elbow was in the corner of the picture, thrust across the table. When I saw it was her, I held the phone until it stopped ringing.

I glanced over the kitchen counter. White tile. I was hungry. I twirled the phone in my hand. I thought about driving into Westwood to eat with Jess and Matt, but it seemed too far. The phone made a sound like a cash register, and I dropped it. She'd left a message.

"Hi Sammy! It's Michelle, your wifey calling! Just calling because I wanted to seeeeeeee you sometime! Call me back so we can seeeeeeee each other!"

I microwaved a box of macaroni and cheese from the fridge. Interference from the microwave distorted her voice. I poured myself a glass of mango juice, started to read the nutrition facts, then stopped.

She must be eighteen now. I heard she'd enrolled at a community college. When I hung out with her brother, she always wanted to tag along. Most of the time, he let her. I never noticed his elbow in that picture before. His gangly limbs could stretch anywhere—the kid on a growth spurt, cramped wherever he sat. He used to reach across the backseat, tap out beats on my knee. But he had a boring

voicemail message, just like mine, just like anybody's. I'd heard it a thousand times.

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Three days later, she called again. I found her message during my lunch break, fishing the phone from the pouch on my shoulder strap.

"Hi, it's me again. It's Michelle. Do you drive a navy blue BMW now?"

Of course I didn't drive a BMW.

"Cause a navy blue BMW just drove by, and I could've sworn it was you. So I just wanted to call you and tell you that. Because if you do, I think I just saw you! And if you don't, well, I guess it was someone else. La-la-la-la-la-la-la!" She sang into the phone and then hung up. Her voice sounded pinched the way her brother's did when he didn't get his way. I wondered if he was listening when she called.

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That night at the Carl's Jr., we'd let Michelle tag along with us. We ran up the tube slide in the outdoor playplace and threw balls at each other until a Mexican woman made us stop. After we ordered, Michelle took our cups. She made three Suicide Cocktails at the soda fountain: her secret recipe of Sunkist, 7-Up, and Mountain Dew.

We sat at a booth with our trays. Nico and I sat on one side, Michelle sat on the other.

"Those things are so bad for you," Nico said. "Sam needs a girlfriend to help him eat."

I nibbled the arms off my chicken stars. "Would a wife work?"

"A wife would work," Nico said. "Having a wife's like having a second mom."

"I'll be his wife!" Michelle said. "As long as I don't have to sleep with him."

Nico's face scrunched up. "I don't think that's allowed."

"I think he's just dreamy," Michelle said.

Nico shifted in his seat. His leg bumped mine. "No, I don't think that's allowed."

I nudged him back. "Disapproving only makes her want me more."

Michelle found her number in my phone. She turned on the camera and stuck two French fries up her nose. When Nico leaned across the table, she pushed him out of frame.

"Take my picture," she said.

