

BIJOU

By Kali VanBaale

I began that day the same way I had for the previous six months, by stalking the mailman. From my scout position at the front window of our rented duplex, I studied our hilly St. Louis street—a street in an older neighborhood we’d found so charming at the time—for any sign of the mailman’s goofy blue fur hat. A thin film of sweat formed on the underside of my breasts, braless beneath my flannel pajama top because I didn’t have time to change, and I paced the matted path of carpet in front of our drafty picture window, anticipating what damage the goofy blue hat would bring for me that day.

The comforting low hiss of water racing through the wall pipes stopped and I knew that you had finished your shower. I knew that you would dress, style your hair and come downstairs for breakfast. Another five, maybe eight minutes. I knew your routine by heart. I patrolled the carpeted trail faster.

Finally, the stupid hat materialized as it passed by the window. I waited, hand poised on the front doorknob, for the rusty squeak of the lid hinge, the clap of metal against metal as it closed. The crunching sound of the mailman’s footsteps faded down the salted walk and I jerked the door open and extracted the envelopes from the small black box unassumingly hanging next to our house number.

There it was, right on top: the Visa statement with only my name on it. Even though I’d called to tell three different customer service people to use my new post office box, they

still sent the bills to the house. You began to descend the stairs then, and so I jammed the unopened envelope into the waistband of my heavy flannel pajama bottoms and scurried to the kitchen.

“Morning, baby.” You patted my bottom on your way to the coffeemaker and I noticed that you were wearing a new shirt the same stormy blue color as your eyes, the feature I’d noticed first about you when we’d met.

“Mail’s here.”

“Great.” You poured two mugs of coffee, one for yourself and one for me (with a drop of milk and two spoonful’s of sugar, just the way I like it), and buttered a muffin. With your silk tie flipped over your shoulder, you ate while studying the sports section. I sat next to you and pulled out the crossword section of the paper, trying to look casual despite my frayed nerves from the close call with the envelope. Eight-letter word for *plentiful*. Ends in *t*. I scribbled in the letters. A-b-u-n-d-a-n-t.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” you said. “Some lady named Cindy Preston left a message on the machine about a job you applied for at the Quincy Medical Clinic in the HR department.” You tipped your chair back and reached for a scrap of paper next to the phone.

“Really?” I laid down my pen and took the paper from your hand, reading the telephone number.

“She wants to do a phone interview with you sometime this week,” you said through a bite of crumbling blueberry muffin and you raised your eyebrows in a hopeful expression. “You need to call her office and set up a time.”

“Okay.” I resumed studying the puzzle and squirmed against the envelope edges digging into the skin of my belly. After a few moments, I realized you were staring at me.

“What?”

“Are you going to call?” you asked.

“Who?”

“That Cindy Preston.”

“Oh, sure. Of course.” And I sincerely meant it at the time.

“This is a big step,” you said. “You made it to the first interview stage. And I think you’d be great in an HR job. You’re so good with people.”

It was a genuine compliment—I knew from the soft tone of your voice and way you blinked your eyes more slowly—despite all the other unanswered applications I’d filled out, and it only made me feel worse about the envelope in my underwear and all the other things you were unaware of. I slipped the phone message into the front pocket of my pajama shirt

You opened your wallet. “I picked up some toothpaste and stuff last night. Your half is \$12.89.” You flattened out a crumpled receipt on the table. “You can pay me later if you’re short right now.”

I stared at the scrawl of your hasty math on the bottom of the receipt and I admit that the guilty pangs in my gut I’d been feeling just moments before evaporated beneath the heat of annoyance.

“Is that a problem?” you asked, laying a hand on top of mine to soften the delivery of the question.

“No, no, it’s fine.” I smiled for good measure so you would believe I was giving you the “it-really-is-fine” answer and not the other “fine-but-you’re-actually-an-asshole” answer. I didn’t want to attract scrutiny by picking fights with you over money.

I folded the receipt and tucked it under the saltshaker. It's true, I had agreed to split expenses when we'd moved in together after graduation because it made sense to keep things equal until we were married, and at the time, the idea appealed to what I naively imagined was a very pro-feminist arrangement. You had that good job in the financial district, after all, while I, a communications major, had been suffering through fruitless interviews for nearly a year and didn't want to feel "taken care of" by your higher income.

At first, I hadn't minded splitting the bills and hadn't stressed over the job search because I'd been too busy being in love with you, and cohabitating, and anticipating a proposal from you any day, just like we'd talked about that night on the steps of the Union after a brutal Western Civ final. Waiting for you to pop the question had felt like a never-ending night before Christmas. Would you surprise me with a romantic dinner and rose petal-covered house after I arrived home from a mind-numbing day of folding jeans at The Gap? Or would you pay to have the words *Nicole, will you marry me?* blazed across the scoreboard at a Cardinals game? We'd always loved going to baseball games together. The possibilities had been endless with holidays, birthdays, weekend getaways, and dinners at nice restaurants.

But eighteen months later, I was still pulling only part-time hours in retail hell and my fruitless post-graduation job search had forced you to declare, to my private devastation I tried so hard to hide from you, that an engagement should wait until I got a career off the ground. Every month you continued to pay the bills, balance your checkbook, and tell me how much I owed you. Rent, utilities, phone, groceries. Even the random three-item grocery charges. The only things in the house we didn't split equally were special foods just one of us ate (Hot Pockets for you, Lean Cuisines for me) and my "girly items," as you put it. You

refused to pay for my tampons, although you deemed it reasonable to split the cost of my birth control pills. Fine, I continually told you, even though it was the other “fine.”

You rose and set the folded paper on top of my puzzle. You kissed the top of my head and tenderly tucked loose strands of my hair behind my ear, the same way you had that night on the steps of the Union after you’d told me how much you loved me because I was such an amazing woman, and asked me to move in with you so we could eventually get married.

“Have a great day,” you said. “Good luck with the application.”

I held your warm hand to my cheek for a moment, thinking about that night and how it was a much more romantic moment than it sounded, then let you go.

Still in my pajamas with my laptop computer tucked beneath my arm and cordless phone clutched in my hand, I made my daily trek to our basement storage space beneath the stairs. There, I retrieved a key hidden in a crevice between the sheets of bare drywall, and unlocked the doorknob. You never went into the storage room because, as far as you knew, all it contained were boxes of our old college textbooks, term papers, and discarded Christmas decorations we never used. You never noticed that I’d changed the knob a few months earlier. Inside the narrow, cramped space, I tugged on the cord to a spiral fluorescent bulb and it flickered to life, immediately illuminating a heavy plastic garment bag hanging from a nail protruding from a wooden wall stud. Inside the bag, as you now know, was the dress. A real Amsale silk taffeta wedding gown from the famed designer’s Blue Label. It was a gown so special with its ruched bodice, sweetheart neckline, and giant hand-made taffeta and organza flowers adorning the skirt that it even had its own name—the “Bijou”—which I’d loved because I’d minored in French, and as a Francophile loved all

things French. And really, the second I'd seen the dress I'd known I didn't give a shit about feminism.

I stepped over several stacks of bridal magazines—giving Bijou a loving stroke as I passed her—and sat on a cold, metal folding chair in front of a small card table barely wedged beneath the steps. From the waistband of my pajama pants, I removed the envelope, now crinkled and bent at the edges, and stuffed the unopened bill into a shoebox on the table.

I'd found Bijou at a reputable bridal consignment shop in downtown St. Louis one afternoon, several months after we'd moved in together. I hadn't been actively shopping for a wedding dress (we weren't even engaged yet, so that would've been silly!) and had gone inside the shop just for fun, to cheer myself up after another disappointing interview for a job at the greater St. Louis food bank (*You really don't have enough experience. We're looking for someone who can hit the ground running.* You have no idea how tired I got of hearing that). As soon as I'd laid eyes on Bijou, I'd known she was *the one* in the way a person knows another is *the one*, or a couple knows a house is *the one*. I had to have her. I'd been dreaming of my future wedding gown since my freshman year of high school when, out of boredom, I'd perused bridal magazines checked out from the library during study hall (when I should've been doing geometry homework) and I'd one day come across a picture of a gown very similar to Bijou. I'd torn the photo out of the magazine and kept it in the bottom of my jewelry box all those years, occasionally taking it out to look at, dreaming of the day when it would be my turn. And then there she was in the window of the store, nearly an exact replica of my picture. As soon as I put her on, I'd felt beautiful, successful, and so much better than I really was.

Purchased new, Bijou retailed for \$9000, but the consignment shop was selling her for a bargain \$6000, and like the saleslady had said, they *never* got the Bijou on consignment and they'd *just* gotten her that morning and she'd *surely* be sold by the end of the day. And so, I had walked out of the store with a cumbersome garment bag and six grand on my Visa card (my credit limit), despite not earning enough income to pay for the gown, despite not having a wedding date, despite not even having an engagement ring. I would find a full-time job any day now and then get engaged, I told myself, I'd just scrape together the payments, and it wouldn't be a big deal, and it need not concern you.

Settled at the card table beneath the stairs, I hooked up my laptop computer and plugged in a phone to the wall jack for a second line I'd had installed months ago (and another bill mailed to the post office box). Once the computer hummed to life, I clicked on the plain blue logo AUDIO ENTERTAINMENT, LTD. I logged my employee ID number, then a password—my “actress” name. A blank work log appeared and a time monitor reset itself to zero. I slipped on a headset and adjusted the mouthpiece, and briefly thought about the phone number in my pajama shirt pocket and calling that Cindy Preston, but the phone panel had already silently lit up with a routed call. On slow days, I could wait for up to an hour to get a call, but other days, like that day, the calls started coming as soon as I put on my headset.

I clicked on the acceptance icon. My earpiece buzzed. The time monitor began its count.

“Allo,” I said in a confident, authentic-sounding French accent.

“Ah, yes...hi. Is this Bijou?”

“Oui.” I immediately recognized the voice. One of my regulars. “This is Bob, oui?”

“Oh, you know it, baby!” he said. Bob was a semi-truck driver and called at least once a week when he was on the road. Mild masochist with a major food fetish. Lonely but harmless.

“I’ve been driving all day and night. Finally got to sit down for a hot meal.”

I asked what he was eating.

“Hot roast beef sandwich, mashed potatoes drowned in thick, hot gravy.”

“Deliciosso!” I cringed at the unintentional Italian, but Bob hadn’t noticed. I picked up an old afghan from the floor and wrapped it around my feet because they were always cold from the bare concrete floor.

Bob lowered his voice even more. “And for dessert, a big, fat juicy slice of pecan pie.”

“Mon dieu! You dirty boy! You should be punished!”

“Oh, yes, I am a very dirty boy. Tell me what you had for dinner last night.”

I began to tell him a story about cooking a traditional French dinner while wearing nothing but a white lace apron and black high-heeled shoes, and I giggled and gasped in all the right places, and Bob moaned and *oh yeah’ed* in all the right places and, I’ll be honest, it actually made me smile to hear the pleasure in his voice.

I’d started the PSO job for no other reason than desperation. I hope you understand that. Several months after purchasing Bijou and still no job after dozens of applications (and the Visa bill and mounting interest not paying itself) I’d responded to an Internet “phone actress” pop-up ad. *Work from home! Set your own schedule! Be your own boss! Make up to \$75 an hour!* I saw the dollar sign and couldn’t help but click on the icon out of curiosity. I’d completed a lengthy telephone audition and on-line training with topics like *Tips to Extending a Call* and *Know Your Clients: Perverts, Pornographers, and Professionals*, had picked my “actress”

name Bijou with a knee-jerk reaction because it seemed to be the only name on my brain those days, and was answering calls before I lost my nerve by thinking too much about what you would do or what my parents would say if they ever found out.

In the span of three months, I set up my little office in the basement and to my surprise, quickly became one of the most popular operators at Audio with my breathy French accent, keen listening skills, and never-ending well of improvised erotic tales. All of my regulars knew Bijou's usual hours—early mornings (after you went to work and before I had to be at The Gap) and late at night (while you were asleep, a risky shift, but you were such a heavy sleeper.) At one point, Bijou was Audio's top earner for three months straight, and I was able to charge \$1.25 a minute—a platinum rate in the business—and earned more in a week on the phone than I did in a month at The Gap.

Forty-seven minutes and \$58.75 later, the conversation with Bob wound down.

“Au revoir, my bad little boy,” I said. “I will keep something warm in the oven until next time.”

I disconnected and began flipping through the pages of a new bridal magazine I'd left on the card table the day before. On page twenty-seven, I sat up and immediately dog-eared a photo of a veil. It was exactly what I'd been looking for—elbow-length silk tulle, peal-and-crystal encrusted hair comb. It was exquisite and would match Bijou the dress perfectly. It was also \$250. I quickly figured the amount on my calculator: the equivalent of one hundred and eighty minutes on the phone. I could earn that in just half a day, easily.

Now, I was well aware that once I had a full-time job and we were officially engaged, I'd be forced to explain to you how I'd paid for such a lavish gown and accessories. I'd considered several feasible lies: An unexpected inheritance from a dead aunt. Long forgotten savings bonds from my grandparents. A winning lottery ticket. If the dress was already paid

for, regardless of my job situation, how could you be mad? But, of course, there would be no reason to reveal the existence of the dress and a lie to cover how it was paid for until there was a full-time job. My life, you see, had become a dead-end street.

Thinking about all of this, I sighed and pulled out the phone message from my shirt pocket and had just started to dial this Cindy Preston's number on the cordless when the PSO phone lit up with another routed call. I set the cordless back down and reconnected my headset.

"Allo!"

"Hi, Bijou."

Again, I knew the voice. "Ah, Bonjour Gregory! Comment ça va?"

"Uh, yeah. Listen, I'm kinda low on money right now, so can we keep this one to around ten bucks?"

Poor Gregory. A perpetually broke engineering major with a 4.0 GPA and no luck with the ladies. Sometimes, we skipped the dirty talk and he just asked me for dating advice. "No problem," I said. "Rapidement today."

"So, what are you wearing?"

"Mon dieu...let me see. Black lace *pan*-tees, tres sex-ee..." It was always the same. The boy never varied his what-are-you-wearing fantasy, number one on the "most requested" list from training. My eyes drifted to the photo of the veil and I scratched my head with the end of a pen.

At nine minutes and fifty-seven seconds, Gregory jostled the phone. "God, you're an amazing woman," he panted.

I froze at his words. Goose pimples crawled up my arms and a burning, bile lump formed in the back of my throat.

“Um, Bijou?”

I collected myself and adjusted the earpiece. “Ah, oui! Our time is up, mon cher. Until next time.”

I disconnected and shivered, drawing the afghan up and over my arms. You said that to me often, after, while lying in each other’s arms, still breathless and clingy. You would bury your face into my neck and whisper it against the skin just below my ear, just like the night on the steps of the Union. *You’re an amazing woman.* This happened every once in a while—a client saying something you’d said to me before, or his voice sounding vaguely like yours—and my life as Nicole and my life as Bijou would momentarily, disturbingly, bleed together.

I tore the photo of the veil out of the magazine and tacked it to the drywall. I ripped off the headset and shoved away from the table, discarding the afghan. I turned to the plastic bag hanging in the corner and unzipped it. I gently ran my fingers over the pristine fabric and delicate beadwork, pushing Gregory’s words out of my mind. He was nothing to me, I reminded myself. Just minutes. I abandoned my pajamas in a puddle beneath the desk and slipped into the gown. The press of corset boning against my ribs and swish of crinoline and silk taffeta about my legs almost left me lightheaded. Standing in front of a cracked full-length mirror, I held a silk Christmas poinsettia bouquet at my navel and posed. *You’re an amazing woman.* Only I uncontrollably heard it in Gregory’s voice and I flinched, as if someone has raised a fist to me, and I hurled the ugly fake poinsettias at the mirror.

The phone lit up again. I carefully perched on the edge of the chair, mindful not to wrinkle the delicate fabric of the gown, and slipped on the headset. The voluminous skirt billowed out around me as if I were sitting on a giant organza mushroom, like Alice in Wonderland.

“Allo,” I said, but my voice came out sounding flat, uninterested.

“Uh, is, is this Bee-joo?”

Excitement rippled through my stomach. An unfamiliar voice. A new client. A potential regular. First time calls were always long, and if I kept him on for over an hour, I earned an extra quarter a minute.

“Oui,” I answered, forcing my voice higher and lighter. “Il est *Bijou*.”

“Oh, great. My name is...John.”

I shook my head. So many of them were named “John” the first time and usually took two or more calls for them to get comfortable enough to give me their real names. I removed a blank card from the Rolodex and started jotting down notes as he spoke. Insurance agent. Lived somewhere in the Midwest. Married. Two kids in college. High stress job.

“Trés bon, John,” I said. “What would you like to do with Bijou today? Something, how do you say...naughty?”

The man laughed, a deep, phlegm-y laugh, and coughed hard to clear his throat. “I’m new at this. And a little embarrassed.”

I added “smoker” to his notecard. “Non-sens! Don’t be! Give Bijou your fantasy and she will make it come true.”

“Okay, then. Let’s see. I prefer, like, exotic, tropical places, brunettes, big tits. Oh, and I really love massages. My wife never gives them to me.”

I also heard this often—men looking for something they couldn’t get from their wives—and quickly put together a vivid scenario for him in my mind. “D’accord. I will give you a très sensual massage. First, you are lying on a soft blanket on a secluded beach with no

one around. You can hear the waves gently washing against the shore, and the rustle of palm trees overhead.”

“Oh, yeah, that sounds really nice,” John breathed as I continued with the details of this exotic island paradise, and I could hear a deep crackle in his lungs when he inhaled.

“I sit down next to you and start with your head, running my fingers through your hair, scratching lightly with my nails, rubbing your temples. I move down to your neck, nibbling at your ears with my teeth, rubbing out those tight, *hard* muscles with my fingers.”

“Yes, yesyesyes...”

I talked slowly and my gaze wandered to the picture of the veil on the wall. I would wear it with the blusher, I decided, so that you could gently lift it away to reveal my face at the end of the aisle. Very old-fashioned, perfect for the formal atmosphere of the Basilica of St. Louis, your family church. I’d have a set of outdoor pictures taken downtown with the St. Louis Arch in the background because we had our first date there, so the pictures would be very sentimental.

“Now I slowly untie the drawstring of your swim trunks,” I said, drawing out the syllables, calculating each word for the digital timer running at the corner of the computer screen. I was already up to fifty-two minutes and had just finished the “massage” portion of the conversation.

“Yesyesyes...”

My hair would look best in the veil pinned up and curly because Bijou was a romantic dress and curls were always soft and romantic.

“We lay down in the sand together—”

“Nicole?”

I froze. It couldn’t be. Your voice, from the top of the basement stairs.

“Are you down there? Who are you talking to?”

John coughed again. “Bijou? Hello?”

Your footsteps, pounding down the stairs over my head, coming closer and closer. It wasn't even time for lunch. You were supposed to be at work. I couldn't move. I couldn't think. Your steps, on the concrete.

Then you were standing in the doorway of the little storage room, staring at me, at the headset, at the dress.

“Beejooo?” John yelled into his end. “I think we got disconnected!”

“Oh, sorry, uh, pardon moi. One second.” I covered the mouthpiece and tried to inhale a deep breath but the tight corset of the dress constricted my lungs. “Ryan—”

“Why are you wearing a wedding dress?” you said, and your face looked so confused, so angry, so hurt all at once. But worse, you looked at me as if you'd never seen me before. As if I was a stranger, some intruder you'd surprised in your own basement.

“Who the hell is on the phone?” You planted your feet far apart with your clenched fists on your hips like you do when you're getting mad. “Who the fuck are you laying down in the sand with?” And then your piercing stare moved to the blue logo on my computer screen and your face became instantly pale, sickly. And then you lowered your voice to a near whisper. “Are you doing what I think you're doing?”

I opened my mouth to answer you, and I really was going to answer you. I'd even previously concocted a lie for that very scenario—telemarketing sales from home just for some extra cash and the dress was on loan from a friend, just to try on for fun—but the words of the lie never came and I just sat there and looked at you. Only now do I understand that my silence was not because I was horrified from being caught, but because I was relieved.

“You’re doing what I think you’re doing, aren’t you?” you asked again with tears in your eyes, a crack splintering your voice. But you didn’t wait for me to answer this time. You turned and left the storage room and your footsteps pounded back up the stairs over my head. When you slammed the basement door, my laptop shook on the wobbly card table.

The time monitor continued climbing. I moved the cursor on the computer screen, ready to disconnect John so I could go up and talk to you, to try and explain, face the lies I’d been telling, salvage what I could. My finger hovered over the mouse, but my unblinking stare slid from the disconnect icon to the picture of the veil once more, the beautiful, lovely veil that would go perfectly with my gown that was so special it had a name. My name.

Fifty-four minutes. Sixty-seven dollars and fifty cents. Seven more minutes and my rate would go up a quarter. A strange sense of calm and relief washed over me. The telephone line crackled. I moved the cursor away from the time monitor and let go of the mouse, even as I heard the tires of your car peel out of the driveway.

I removed my hand from the mouthpiece. “Ah, pardon moi, John!” I said, “but I had to take off my bikini top so you can put some oil on me. Do you want to rub some oil on my bare, golden skin?”

“Oh, yes, yes I do,” John said. “You’re so good at this. Sogoodsogoodsogood...”

I stood and gazed at my reflection in the mirror once more and nodded. Yes, Bijou was so good at this.