

“-”On est tous les memes

Crrrr! Crrrr! Crrrr! The annoying and alarming sound of her 15-year-old alarm jolts Zoe out of her peaceful slumber. The one night she actually gets some good sleep, her alarm decides to work.

‘What a life,’ she mumbles to herself as she buries herself further in the blankets.

She feels for her husband, who’s half in, half out of the blankets on the other side of their king-sized bed.

‘Must be nice,’ she thinks as she pays attention to his soft, dreamy breathing.

He gets to start work at 10am being an engineer and all. Zoe is about to start complaining about the unfairness of life when she catches herself. She made a promise to herself to do better and become more mindful. Yes, yes, mindfulness is all the rage but ever since she started incorporating it thoughtfully and intentionally in her life, it’s made a big and notable difference.

It’s time for her to get up and embrace the day in full. She removes the blanket from her husband’s head, gazing lovingly at him and smiles to herself. She kisses him softly before she leaves the comfort of the blankets. Her feet lightly touch the carpeted bedroom floor and slip quickly into her favorite fuzzy slippers that her sister gave her. She never gives up an opportunity to wear fuzzy slippers, be it summer or winter.

She stumbles sleepily to the bathroom and her eyes are flooded by the warm light in the bathroom as she turns on the light.

‘Gotta make the light less bright,’ she thinks to herself.

She finally opens her eyes and gazes upon the masterpiece that is she. She has sleep in her eyes, her satin bonnet is intact (yay!), and her breath leaves a lot to be desired as she finds out as she stretches and yawns. She stretches for a minute or so before reaching for her electric toothbrush and giving her mouth the much-needed refresher it seeks.

Her bathroom routine is simple enough: brush, floss, loo, face, body, lotion, hair, meditation. Because today is full of so many possibilities, she puts in a lot more effort into her appearance. Her skin, the color of burnt copper, shimmers against the glowy Palmer’s oil that smells so good, hydrates her skin, and makes it shimmer in the sunlight. Her hands are adorned with her wedding and engagement ring and two more gold rings, one on each of her index fingers, a bracelet on her left hand and a gold necklace gifted to her by her hubby on their fifth anniversary adorn her neck. She’s dressed in her favorite brown pants, a white camisole and cream long coat with a beret to dress her gorgeous locs.

She goes downstairs to get her overnight oats with cocoa nibs, a generous drizzle of honey and strawberries and blueberries. Today she's feeling peckish, so she whips up an avo and red chili pepper sandwich on wholewheat toast with an omelet. It's Instagram worthy so of course she takes a pic. As she munches meaningfully on her food, she allows the comforting sounds of the humidifier running in the background to settle her thoughts and ground her in the moment.

She cleans up, opens the windows downstairs for fresh air, taking five deep breaths, thanking God for life, this wonderful life she gets to live as fraught as it is with worries. She goes back upstairs to her husband, watching him for a bit before gently kissing him goodbye and touching his hair and face affectionately. She gathers her things (big white and black handbag full of her iPad, toiletries, sunglasses, stationery and other bits and bobs befitting of a lady) and makes her way outside. Because she's open to new experiences, she's taking the subway instead of her car. That way she can be fully present and engage with people as and when the need arises. She checks everything one last time, sure she has left her hubby his favorite meal of oats and apple slices before she sets off.

Mr. Jones is outside, wearing a blue and white vest with trendy shorts and his favorite pair of sunglasses. Zoe finds out that he's had this particular pair since the 70s, '72 to be specific and 'You'll never find a pair like 'em,' he assures her, and she doesn't doubt it for a moment. She enjoys the little moments they share like this. This man is a trove of wisdom, dating as far back as 1945. She's still not convinced he's not from before World War I but that's a story for another day.

'Met a bird like yer that loved men in vests,' he explains to her about his outfit.

'Ah,' she says in wonderment.

'And now yer gone and looked so mighty pretty on this fine day, just brightening the space everywhere you go,' he beams.

She laughs and thanks him. One thing about Mr. Jones is he'll never *not* compliment her and tell her that if he were a few decades younger, he'd have given her husband a run for his money. Her husband playfully jokes that he doesn't trust her to be alone with Mr. Jones because of how much he makes her laugh. And Mr. Jones seems to be very well aware of this fact, haha!

They leave each other with laughs and promises of food to share. Zoe is in high spirits and is so grateful that she decided to take the subway today. As she walks down the road, she notices an old, ladylike, and very fashionably dressed woman escorting her white Royal Poodle. Seeing it on TV and from afar, Zoe always thought that the dainty creature is quite a diva. I mean, just look at it. Everything about it screams, 'Don't dirty me! I'm fragile and the dog I think I am.'

'Love it!' Zoe laughs internally to herself.

It's hilarious really how prim and proper this breed is. Everything is in place as it should be. The little (or not so little, depending on the owner) pom poms that adorn its tall body are just the right fluffy texture, the right dimension, the circumference just so and the entire body is in alignment. As Zoe thinks these and more thoughts in her mind, said subject walks up to her with all the confidence in the world. Having decided she is worthy of its time, the animal moves up close to Zoe, waiting patiently for a pet.

'My, my, my, my Prissy has taken a liking to you,' her owner says impressed.

The gods must be smiling down on Zoe today because everything is going so swimmingly well.

'I'm honored that she thinks so highly of me,' Zoe responds meekly.

'She can be very particular and has never been wrong about an individual,' her owner continues. 'That's how she saved me from that no-good Ben.'

Zoe can tell some serious tea is on the way and she stands poised in a way that says, 'I'm ready for all the tea' and boy does she get it!

Twenty minutes later, Zoe almost misses the train because she's so engrossed in her thoughts about the conversation she just had with Ingrid, the Royal Poodle lady. The older generation is brimming with wisdom and let's not forget drama. They *really* lived. Our generation seems to think that flashy cars, big wheels, fancy mansions, and constant trips around the world are living, but that's just a sliver of reality. There is so much more to life than the material possessions we own. Sure, they're nice and add to the comfort and accessibility of life, but they're not ultimately what makes you think to yourself, 'Ah, this is the life.'

Ingrid has seen everything from a world war to civil war, multiple miscarriages, escaping a burning building where she was the only survivor, burying five close family members within weeks of each other, almost dying from measles at the age of five and losing her sight for eighteen months because of the shock of the lose of her twin brother. That was just the icing on the cake. Zoe doesn't get to hear the half of it, but since this is a route that she is now sure she'll take more often, she'll be sure to pass by the lady's bakery and indulge her love of sweets and tea (both literal and figurative) while soaking up all the wisdom she can.

In this moment as she sits down on the seat in the train, Zoe is filled with immense gratitude for the life she has. Sure, she's had her fair share of drama including a stalker, infertility woes and dealing with narcissistic parents, but somehow, after hearing Ingrid's inspiring and sometimes almost unbelievable life, she's grateful for what she has. For the life she has built, is building and will continue to build. For the friends she has chosen, for her husband who shares the same values as her, for her job that allows her to make people happy and for the fact that she's alive. That in itself is a reason for her to be grateful.

The subway is pretty full and there's something familiar and human about it. People from all walks of life, distracted by modern technologies, surround her. Teenagers who would rather be at home gaming than on their way to school, nurses on their way home from a stressful night in the ER, laborers in their work overalls gathering their strength for the work ahead that needs to be done, professionals decked out in suits, busy on the phone while punching in numbers on the calculator or making notes on the screen or a notepad. Everyone, no matter who they are, is busy with their own thoughts, just trying to do the best they can with what they have. In this moment, Zoe feels so grateful to be human and have this shared experience of being on the train with the others.

A little boy with a smooth, silky soft skin, round face, smile that melts your heart and skin tone the color of a raven, watches Zoe openly with the kind of childlike curiosity that makes you wish you could go back to being a kid again and forget about adulting which comes with problems, bills and much more. She smiles warmly to the child and is that blushing she sees on his adorable, innocent face? How cute!

'I still got it,' she teases herself and laughs a little.

The little man sees that as an opportunity to shoot his shot.

'Are you laughing at me?' he inquires while holding a superhero in his one hand.

'No, baby. I just laughed at the way you were blushing just now when I smiled at you,' she tells him. He thinks about it and plays with the superhero in his hands.

'Well, pretty girls are supposed to make you blush, right?' he says nonchalantly. The way he says it so matter-of-factly catches her off guard.

'You are how old again?' she asks him in amazement.

'Four and a half,' he says, proudly showing her five fingers.

It has always amazed her how much age matters to men, even when they're still small like this one. She laughs. His mother, who looks very tired but peaceful and is with child, laughs tiredly.

'He's not turning five for the next six months but insists on adding the half every time someone asks,' she says.

'That half separates the men from the boys,' Zoe jokes and both women laugh.

The young man seems content that his mother and the beautiful lady are getting on and continues playing with his toy while keeping a watchful eye over the ladies. Out of nowhere, the mother grabs Zoe's hand and places it on her protruding belly.

'May you be blessed, and may God grant you the desires of your heart and may your arms hold the bundle of joy you seek,' she says powerfully, looking straight into Zoe's eyes.

The way she says it, the light shining on her, the melodic and comforting hum of the train on the tracks move Zoe so powerfully, she doesn't notice the tears on her face until the pregnant lady wipes her tears with hands so soft and loving. In that moment, they share an unspoken bond of sisterhood, love, understanding and hope. Nothing quite as powerful as the force of love, understanding and human compassion.

Zoe moves forward with hope and purpose. Suddenly, the world takes on vivid color. Her vision is heightened, the greens are deeper, blues softer, pinks brighter. Her senses are on 100. The birds chirping in the air sound so melodious. The smell of delicious baked goods waft through the air with an alluring scent. The wind blows and caresses her cheek and curls playfully. The cool touch of the handle of the door feels soothing as she pushes the door into her office building. Yeah, life is beautiful.

As she makes her way to her office, Zoe greets the people she sees every day: Maria the cleaning lady who always has a hug and a smile for her; Jimmy the IT guy who never runs out of dad jokes to share; Felicia who has never in all her time at the company had a fashion faux pas; Milly who changes spectacles like candy; Gary who is always gushing about his next bundle of joy learning to smile (his wife is pregnant with their 7th child) and Phil the office clown. Today, he has a present for her: her favorite, Caramel Ribbon Crunch Frappuccino, with an extra drizzle of caramel syrup because some things are meant to be sweeter than sweet. Her sweet tooth screams thanks to Phil as the sugary sensation hits her palate and tickles her tastebuds. There's a party of sorts happening in her mouth, and she thinks she will die because are you supposed to get this much pleasure from so much sugary goodness?

'Yes, you are,' Phil says, and only then does she realize that she said her thoughts out loud.

She blushes in embarrassment, which isn't quite embarrassment but more bordering on 'whoops' if that makes sense. As she listens to what she missed earlier, the drink keeps giving her bursts of happiness like she's never known up to this point. If sweet, rich, and dark were a drink, this would be it.

Zoe's boss rushes into her office where she is now listening intently to the million and one things Grace was supposed to do but didn't because 'my mental health needed the break.' Of course, mental health should be top priority, but what can be said when you constantly use that as your excuse to *not* do something you *know* you're supposed to do? Surely there has to be a balance to these things. Using that as a crutch to get out of doing what you should be doing is reckless, but then again, that's human nature. Humans are very fickle and go with the wind as they please. It's easier, isn't it? Just like it's easier to say you have thousands of online "friends" when the reality is you don't have any genuine real-life friends you can call at the drop of the hat.

'But let me not go down that rabbit hole,' Zoe tells herself as she tries to listen to Grace's story.

'Enough,' Zaza van Grande says with the swish of her long, blonde hair and throwing of her scarf over her bony shoulder.

Grace takes the cue immediately, meekly bowing and scurrying from the room like a mouse that's met a rat twice its size. She knows which battles to fight, and Zaza is not the one to fight. Especially today.

Zoe braces herself for the tirade of words she knows are waiting to burst like a broken dam from Zaza's pouty lips. And does she get it. The influencer they are supposed to be styling is being petty af and has refused to do the shoot because she was not allowed to use a bag from a competing agency. Make it make sense. This campaign is supposed to promote ADVENT's latest leg warmers and sis wants to pair the outfit with a beanie from a rival agency.

Whaaaat?! CrisVO is as diva as they come and she's not even 25. In many ways, social media has ruined the lives of youths because the lines between reality and the online space are so blurred. They need to take a step back and analyze whether all the things they're doing, promoting, and standing for are what really matter in the long run. But who is she to try and get them to think rationally, Zoe sighs internally. She has so many deep conversations like this with herself that it's become second nature for her to zone out when others are speaking about trivial matters. Her husband calls it "The Smart Zone" where she's thinking smart things because the other person isn't.

'You HAVE to speak some sense into her. You're the only person she actually tolerates. The rest of us are boomers or ancients according to that little brat,' Zaza finishes off her long and energetic schpeel. Zoe smiles, resting her hands on her boss' shoulder pads lightly.

'Cris only acts like this when she feels like she's not in control, so we'll make sure she feels like she's in control then she'll do what we want her to do. It's the art of persuasion,' Zoe says.

Zaza scoffs dramatically. 'I'd be sooner seen in rags than have to condescend to that little froufrou.'

And I ooooh! 'I've got this,' Zoe assures her once again.

Zaza sighs loudly yet again but Zoe can tell she is lighter and at ease. She puts so much trust in her it's ridiculous. It's no wonder though since Zoe's keen eye for design and top-tier people skills saved the company from bankruptcy almost ten years ago. Zoe is Zaza's secret weapon and there's no way in heck she's ever letting her go. When she attempted to leave five years ago because of serious health issues, Zaza herself told the doctor to put Zoe on medical leave and that she was to come back when she was fully recovered. All this while still getting her full salary and benefits.

'God is good,' Zoe says.

'All the time,' Zaza smiles back. The women share a moment of love, faith, hope and mutual understanding.

'Madame, chaos ensues!' Rodrigo shouts from the door. Both women turn to him and Zaza with a shake of the head, moves in the direction of the frantic man who looks just about ready to lose his head. Zoe laughs to herself as she picks up her phone and searches for CrisVo's contact. She's going to video call her because she can better read her body language and typing would take so much longer. The young influencer answers the call on the second ring, almost as if she's been waiting for this call.

'Malaika, where have you been?' Cris says almost immediately.

'I'm fine, how are you?' Zoe says smiling.

Cris rolls her eyes in exasperation. 'There's not time for all that,' and when she sees the big sis look on Zoe's face, she concedes. 'I'm fine, glad you're fine too. Happy?'

'I'll be happier if you can come through like you promised you would for the campaign,' Zoe says.

Cris scowls. 'The Dragon sent you, didn't she?'

'That same dragon is the same one getting you all these campaigns that pay for that fancy apartment, hair, nails, phone, frequent trips to the Maldives...'

'But I'm the one who does all the work!'

'The work you're doing is because people gave you the work. Of course you must do the work so you can enjoy every second of your magnificent life in style.'

Cris looks about ready to counter that argument but huffs instead and falls back on her bed.

'You good?' Zoe asks, sensing there's something more.

Cris sighs and it's a sad sigh. Zoe waits patiently for the young one to open up. And she is rewarded for her patience.

'I'm just feeling really insecure about my face and hair today,' she says eventually.

'Why?'

Cris huffs. 'I don't know... Maybe it's because of that stupid comment I saw saying my head looks like a bag of frozen Captain Crunch.' Zoe really empathizes with the young'un because she too had her fair share of cyberbullying and thanks to therapy and a strong support system, she's doing much better now.

'How did it make you feel?'

That question seems to be the trigger for the rush of tears that unexpectedly come gushing from the pretty girl's eyes. She lets out all her frustrations and emotions. She's been holding in a lot and Zoe is the perfect person to soothe her aching heart. The influencer life is not easy, especially when you're young and vulnerable, seeking approval in all the wrong places. Zoe herself gets tearful and they share a bond of sisterhood, mutual understanding of pain and love. By the end of the call, Cris is onboard once again and will be with them after lunch to shoot the campaign much to Zoe's relief.

Time flies when you're having fun. The rest of the morning is spent sending emails, chatting with her mom on the phone and setting up a lunch date for next week, reviewing some designs and curating a Pinterest board for one of their clients.

Zoe hears a loud, rumbling from below her blouse and she knows that's her signal to eat. She looks up at the wall clock that looks like a gold wristwatch, but much bigger, and it tells her that it is indeed lunch time, 12pm to be exact. She stretches lazily like a cat and grins like the Cheshire cat from Alice in Wonderland. Lunch is going to be awesome today because she's going to a restaurant that she's had her eye on for the past couple of months. She hears they serve the best poke bowl and she's about to put them to the test. If they pass her palate, she'll become their brand ambassador. That's how she is. She raves about products and items that have made a positive change in her life. And thanks to affiliate marketing, she makes money from it even though she would still do it even if she didn't get paid for it.

Today's lunch will also be awesome because she has a lunch date with Jin-Ae, a pretty, petite South Korean girl who's new to the team and usually sticks to herself. She's a brilliant designer and knows exactly how to piece things that one would normally not think would work so well together. It's her God-given talent. Zoe has taken the initiative to find out more about this designer wonder and how she's assimilating into the company and the area.

The two meet in the lobby and walk to the restaurant that is about five blocks away. Zoe made a reservation ahead of time so they're shown to their table. Jin-Ae is such a vibe. She's quiet, but around the right people, she goes in. LOL. She has four siblings and is the lastborn. She came to the US five years ago and it's been a rollercoaster since then. She graduated with a degree in Computer Science as her parents wanted her to, but pursued her passion for fashion and illustration and works at their company as a fashion illustrator. Were her parents mad? Heck yeah. Are they proud that her work won her the coveted Illustrator of the Year award twice in a row? Heck yeah. Asian and African parents are in the same WhatsApp group. They may not have your back when you decide to do something that is not traditional but best believe that they will blow your trumpet when you succeed.

The lunch date was such a success, Jin-Ae calls her "Unnie" now and they walked back to the office arm in arm, laughing and bonding over fashion, food, music,

and dance. You never truly know a person until you spend time with them and ask them pointed questions, so you know how they think about certain things. Assumption will get you into trouble so rather do the decent thing and get your facts right.

With a belly full of delicious poke (the poke bowl passed the taste check and will be promoted on her latest IG story) and a heart full of gratitude and happiness, Zoe settles in her office to take her customary 30-minute power nap. Everyone in the office knows this time is sacred for her and they have all respected it, which is amazing. Humans can be nice too,' she chuckles to herself before falling into a peaceful slumber.

The rest of the afternoon is quite busy with the campaign in full swing. CrisVO gives her a warm, lingering and heartfelt hug to thank her for earlier. Zoe even notices the influencer's energy is light and carefree and her face is glowing. This is going to be a phenomenal campaign and even the haters are going to notice that this is a new person. Today is one of those days that most things go swimmingly well (most because she had to deal with an irate customer who used words not worthy of being repeated) and you say thanks to the Almighty for the gift of goodness. The commute home is bustling and laced with expectation as Zoe is beginning to feel the fatigue of the day's happenings. She is looking forward to a hot bubble bath, delicious food and snuggling with her man. She blushes at the last thought.

When she enters her home, Zoe feels at peace. She stops and breathes deeply for a few moments, taking in the calm and scent of her always-smelling nice home. She puts her bag in the mudroom and changes her shoes into her comfortable home slippers before shuffling into the bathroom to wash her hands. She notices a familiar scent: something's cooking in the kitchen! And husband of the year goes to her hubby. She walks into the kitchen and is greeted by a hunk wearing his black with white lettering "Mr. Good Looking is Cooking" apron, dancing to Afrobeats as he seasons the chicken, singing his lungs out. She never gets tired of the sight of this beautiful man, especially when he's in the kitchen. She hugs him from behind and starts singing along, catching him by surprise. He almost drops the spices.

'Aye, beautiful, I was about to turn up on you,' he laughs.

Zoe bursts out laughing. 'Oh, you were this close to bringing the heat,' she says, using her fingers to show how close he was to turning up which is pretty close.

Her man puts away the spices so he can give his undivided attention to his beautiful wife who he has missed during the day. He holds her in his arms and just stares at her. When their lips meet, the world just makes sense. This connection is exactly what she's been craving. It's the perfect culmination of all the amazing connections she has throughout the day. The icing on the cake, the chef d'oeuvre, the cherry on the top. You get it. This is the beginning of the favorite part of the day for her. Why? Because they catch up briefly on each other's day before she goes up to take a shower or in today's case, a bath and have dinner together after which they'll have couple time which they call "ours".

After loving on her man some more, the main character goes upstairs to rinse away the stress and busyness of the day. The hot bubble bath is exactly what she needed, and she can't wait to eat and lie on her man as she falls asleep. Her nighttime routine is simple but invigorating and what makes it gratifying is the fact that it limits digital inputs as much as possible so that she can take a real break from the outside world and its incessant demands on her time and energy.

As the couple eats supper, they chat about their day, laughing, teasing each other, empathizing, and even giving advice for that troublesome client or the valid feelings of imposter syndrome. It's so easy to talk to her husband, especially about the difficult, cringy and uncomfortable thoughts that are second nature to her. That's one of the reasons she knew he was the one. Among many others including his physique and impeccable culinary and dancing skills. She realizes just how blessed she is to have had as wonderful a day as she has now. And her hubby notices.

'A penny for your thoughts?' he asks, gathering their clean plates.

'I'm so blessed, you know,' Zoe says, smiling.

'Oh? How so?' he asks, standing up and taking the dishes to the kitchen and loading up the dishwasher. His wife waits for him to come back before continuing.

She settles him on her lap, caressing his long, thick hair as she looks down at him.

'The moment I chose to be mindful about my surroundings, the more I realized how awesome I am, my life is. I interacted with different people, some I never would have thought to speak with if it hadn't been for life throwing us together and me taking the initiative in some instances. There's so much beauty in just speaking with someone you don't know from a bar of soap and feeling connected to them whether they're young or old, Asian or white, high in social status or lowly in means. Our shared experience is everything and we're more the same than we are different. I just... words fail me but I'm the luckiest girl alive today.'

He gives her the look that will forever melt her heart and take her breath away.

'This is one of the reasons I chose to do life with you perpetually,' he says gushing over the person that is his spouse.

As their lips meet for not the last time that night, the beautiful day of connecting with humans spanning different ages and backgrounds is sealed in stone and cocooned safely in Zoe's trove of treasures to be taken out and reveled in at times when life feels overwhelming and she feels disconnected from herself and others.

