

JAC JEMC

## The Ratio

**Z**ia decided to stay with Uncle Al, at least until Christmas, which is something she only told me and my mother while she was dropping off her lasagna the day before the party.

Zia might otherwise be known as Zia Zia, because she is my aunt and Zia is the Italian word for “aunt,” but we spare her that humiliation, and just call her Zia. Well, except when Uncle Silvio has a few drinks, and trying to get her attention, slurs out, ‘Hey, Zsa Zsa!’ Uncle Silvio is actually Uncle Al’s uncle, and my great uncle, so maybe that’s why Uncle Silvio has a problem calling Zia by her given name. Or maybe it’s just that he’s a dirty old man who wants everyone in a skirt to come sit on his knee.

Zia is in her late twenties, so she’s not, like, an old-old aunt. She’s pretty cool and actually kind of hot, but not like tight clothes, big boobs kind of hot, but more, like, buttoned-up kind of hot. Like, if you wanted to cast someone in that librarian part where she takes that pencil out of her hair and it falls all loose and pretty and she whips off her glasses and *then* you realize how sexy she is, Zia would be pretty perfect. What she ever saw in my Uncle Al, I’m not too sure.

Zia sat at the kitchen counter and vented, while Ma measured out the flour and stuff for cookies. I was playing Guitar Hero, which I’m pretty awesome at, while they talked, so I was really only half-listening.

Zia was saying some wild stuff. She was talking about how inattentive Uncle Al was to her “needs.” My mom said it was only because Zia got married so young and if she’d been with more men, she’d know how much better she had it with Uncle Al. Zia laughed and said that wasn’t the issue. She swore Ma to secrecy and said she could count the culprits on five hands, and that she should have realized earlier that this wasn’t the right match.

I understood why Ma was trying to talk Zia into staying with Uncle Al. Ma liked Zia, and Uncle Al was her baby brother. Uncle Al and Zia didn’t have kids, so if they got a divorce, Zia would be gone forever. Four years of commiserating over familial drama, down the drain. My mother would have to wait for Uncle Al to go through a series of bimbos before it would be her duty to train another woman on the ways of our family, until she had another confidant, and that was only if Uncle Al found someone half as nice and smart as Zia.

Zia was really getting into it over there; she was talking about how she was too young to stay in a relationship because it was comfortable and easy. She had signed on and thought those feelings of eternal commitment would come, but she realized too late that she should have done that stuff in the right order. She talked about how she thought she would be pretty fine if they got a divorce. She wasn’t even sure if she would miss him, but the thought that four years of conversations and actions would take on a different meaning by this one little act of separation was giving her anxiety attacks. ‘Everything I’ve said to him, he’s gonna think was a lie now, and that’s just not true. I meant everything and I’m trying to end it now because I don’t want to *start* lying.’

Ma apologized as she turned on the mixer, saying it’d just be a second. Zia came over to the couch and sat behind me while I pounded out the song. I could feel her eyes on the screen admiring my wicked skills. I made it through the song, 98% accuracy, and turned to her, offering her the guitar. She screwed up her face, saying, “Okay, but can’t you make it easier or something? And you have to tell me the rules.” I told

here there weren't, like, rules, she just had to hit the right color key and the bar down where the strings would be, each time a dot rolled up on the screen. She looked a little terrified, picked the lame Matthew Sweet song, and stood. At first, she was messing it all up. She failed the song about three times, but by the fourth time, half-way through, it seemed like she was really getting it. The bridge killed her again though, introducing a pattern she wasn't ready for. I told her she could try again, but she handed me back the guitar, defeated. "Don't give up so easy. You were really getting good," I said, but she shook her head and took her seat at the counter again. I followed her to get some juice from the fridge.

"What else, beside – you know – is bothering you?" my mother asked, raising her eyebrows. Zia was quiet for a minute and then she said, "It's like he's always sure the next thing will make him happier. He doesn't know how to just enjoy what he's got." I turned leaning against the counter and gulped down my glass. My mother looked at Zia, skeptical. I know how my ma argues, she thought she'd found a loophole, "Isn't that what you're doing right now? *You're* not happy with what *you've* got: *Al*." My ma's a simpler mind than Zia. I can't always keep up with everything Zia's saying, but I could see this argument was happening on different levels. Zia's eyes were tearing up and I couldn't really take it, so I headed back to the couch and flipped the TV on low. Zia started crying for real, talking about how *she* knew how to fix her unhappiness though, and how it was different and how she knew she made a big mistake and how not being happy with a mistake is different than not being happy with something you're sure of. "Since I married him," she said, "there's been this buzzing in my ears, asking if I'd made the right decision, and lately that's not what it's asking. Now it's asking what I'm going to do about what I did wrong. And it keeps asking if breaking up would make it better, and the answer I keep coming back to is: *Yes*."

Ma had come around the counter now. She was rubbing Zia's back, trying to calm her down. I watched them in the reflection of the screen and wondered if I should go upstairs and finish my geometry. Geometry, though, was not a sufficient lure. I tried to focus on Sports Center. Zia was really blubbing, "I don't think I can love a man who loves me the way I act around him now. I'm terrible: intolerant, nagging, inattentive, unsupportive. How can I respect a man who loves a woman with those qualities?" Whoa. Complex. Zia was really losing it. She went on, "And then he was putting together the Christmas music, for the party, like you asked him to, and I was reading the playlist over his shoulder, and it was all carols and then I see, 'Mack the Knife,' and I was like, 'Mack the Knife? Why would you put that on a Christmas CD?' And he shrugged and said, 'I don't know. I like it. Why do you have to be on my back about every little thing?' And I said, 'Mack the Knife' isn't even an Italian song.' And he said, 'What are you talking about? Sure it is.' And I said, 'Uh, no, it's not. It's *German*. It's from *The Threepenny Opera*.' And he says, 'It's Sinatra!' And I said, 'Not originally!' And he said, 'Who cares?' And I said, 'You're missing the point. I'm asking why that song is on your *Christmas* CD,' and then I realized how ridiculous the whole thing was and I knew that the fight wasn't about the CD; it was about something bigger."

My mom nodded, "You got that right." No kidding. Zia had seriously gone off. I liked that song, too. I would have liked if it came on at Christmas Eve, instead of "Jingle Bells" or whatever.

They were quiet for a while, and turned around to see what they were doing. Zia sat with her elbows propped on the counter, her face in her hands. Ma was sitting next to her. I could tell by the look on my Ma's face that she finally saw that the problems were bigger than she'd realized. Zia was seriously unhappy and Ma was going to lose a good friend.

Zia complimented Ma on our tree. She said she liked that it had a theme. It was all jeweled ball ornaments and little glass birds. Zia said she and Uncle Al had bought their tree days ago, but Uncle Al wouldn't bring it in until Zia promised him she wouldn't leave. She'd been driving it around on the roof of

her car for days. Ma didn't believe it, so Zia told her to go look outside. Ma and I walked to the front window and pulled the curtain back. There it was: a huge tree, seven feet probably, tied to the roof with the yesterday's five inches of snow piled on top. Ma turned back to Zia, still at the counter and said, "That's not safe." Zia shrugged and stood, "I better get home."

The phone rang and it was Danny asking if I wanted to come see the new snowmobile his family had bought for their lake house. They were towing it up there the day after Christmas. I missed what Ma and Zia said as Zia was putting on her coat and gloves. After I hung up with Danny, I said, "Hold up, I'm leaving, too." Ma asked where I was going and I told her, "Danny's just for an hour." "It better be," she said and I walked Zia to her car. Zia hugged me, "Oh, man. Don't tell your uncle any of that, okay? Don't tell anyone. I'm a mess right now, and I don't need anyone else knowing about it." She pulled away, held my shoulders and looked in my eyes, "Seriously, right?"

I smiled, "Well, I *was* going over to Danny's to give him the hot gossip, but if it means so much..."

She laughed and pushed my face away, "What a punk." She unlocked her car, "Get outta here or I'll run you over." She shut her door and waved from inside, smiling.

I waved back and she pulled away. I started thinking, if they got a divorce, every time I'd see whichever new wife Uncle Al picked, I'd have to call her Zia Sophie or Zia Stephanie or whatever her name would be and it would be like I was listing off the order of Uncle Al's wives instead of just saying the new one's name: First Zia then Janet – Zia Janet, like memorizing the presidents in order.

I started walking to Danny's and about a half a block away, I saw an older man walking his dog. I stared at him, trying to figure out what was weird about his face and then I knew: he was missing an ear. His head was uneven. I looked away, feeling bad for gawking, and immediately thought of something my grandma always used to say when I wouldn't shut up, "You've got more ears than mouths for a reason."