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Pretty Girl

by *Erika Dusen Tamindzija*

You know boys. All pretty girls do. You were born with the knowledge of boys in your blood, an understanding surpassing instinct and perhaps of spiritual dimensions. You know the difference between what they want and what they will admit to wanting. You know how to give it to them. And you know how to make them fall in love.

It's really not that hard. He says something funny and you throw back your head, laughing, arching your back ever so slightly and bringing your fingertips up to the soft part of your skin where your neck meets your left ear. Then, while your body is still shaking, you lean forward, looking at him, eyes shining, lips parted in a big smile. You let him experience a second or half-second of that, just enough time to allow him to believe that a connection exists between you.

Powerful as that eye contact is, it's not the real trick; no, the real trick lies in the *breaking* of eye contact – suddenly, swiftly, blushing as if you are exerting physical resistance to some strong attraction. Boys love to think they are conquering you.

It's a useful, if dangerous, talent. It may get you who you want and what you want, but you get so used to doing it, you realize that you're using the same moves, the same lines, the same gleaming eyes on boys in whom you have no interest. And by the time you're aware, he's already in love with you and you have to break his heart.

When you are just 14, you and your sister spend a week with your Aunt Susan and her husband up at their lake house. You and your sister spend all day in your bathing suits, splashing in the water and working on your tans. Whenever you look up, you see your uncle watching you.

He follows you into the house one day. He compliments you on your tan and, though you haven't asked him to, he wraps a towel around your shoulders. He lets his hands pause over your small breasts, and you can feel his breath on your neck. It makes you very uncomfortable, but you are afraid that telling him so will only make it more awkward. You know if you say it out loud, it will become real.

“You're so pretty,” he whispers in your ear. Then he slides his

fingers beneath the towel to the soft pink of your breastbone.

When your aunt walks in looking for a towel for your sister, he jumps away. You know by the guilty look on his face that you were justified in being uncomfortable. You run to your room, leaving wet footprints in the hall, and let him deal with your stone-faced aunt.

Later, you hear the front door slam as your uncle, taking the first step in what will become a quick divorce, leaves to spend the night at a friend's house. Your aunt comes up to your room to talk to you. She sighs. "You're going to have to be more careful, honey. Pretty girls always have to be careful." You are embarrassed and upset, yet part of you is tingling with excitement. This is a power you did not know you had.

Being pretty gets you things: the best summer jobs, the occasional good grade, access into stores five minutes after they have closed, and boys, lots of boys. Their eyes are always on you. When you catch them looking, most have the decency to look away, blushing, but some just continue to stare, as if it is their right to do so.

Those are the boys you like best.

Many boys try, but you reserve your virginity for someone special. Jim is two years older and has been accepted to Georgetown on full scholarship. He dreams of revamping the UN, and you think he might actually do it. Like all the others, he tells you that he loves you and, though you don't believe him, you let yourself pretend.

You make love for the first time in his room. You lie on his bed while he is kissing you and look up at the swimsuit model poster above his bed. It hurts more than you expected and you are embarrassed and disillusioned. Still, you are glad it is over. You know the next one will be easier.

You enjoy having a boyfriend. It feels like a relief to belong to someone else, to use that as an excuse. Most boys don't take it well when you say you're just not interested. But then you realize that you're not really interested in your boyfriend either. In fact, you never were.

When you finally break it off, he says nothing. You wish you could see his face, but you are two time zones away and are forced to imagine his brown eyes brimming with tears, his hands twisting and untwisting the phone cord.

Finally, he speaks, his voice unwavering. "I just hope, twenty years from now, you'll look back on this as the worst decision you

ever made.”

You are silent but you know that, as much as you might miss him tonight when you lie alone in your bed, you will never regret leaving him. He too is silent, but you stay on the phone a little longer, knowing that it is the last time you two will ever talk.

You sit in the library’s private study area, concentrating intently on the book before you. Marko sits down next to you and asks in a loud whisper what you are reading. While you loathe to be interrupted, his warm breath on your ear sends shivers down your spine.

You bend the cover forward to show him the title: *Pride and Prejudice*. “It’s for school,” you say flatly, hardly bothering to take your eyes off the page.

“Hm. Is it good?”

You are not sure how to answer. While you enjoy much of the book, you find yourself rolling your eyes at Darcy’s heartfelt confessions. You suspect you might be too rational for romance. You wonder if such books are really meant for women like Jane Austen: less attractive girls without the experience to know what men are really like.

While you are musing, Marko leans in closer and slides his hand slowly up your skirt. Without looking up from your book, you open your thighs.

Daniel is different. His sister is best friends with your sister, so you knew him for years before you finally notice his green eyes and dimples and how he cracks jokes when he is nervous. He is often nervous around you. But he is dating some brunette underclassmen and you just started meeting the captain of the soccer team in the locker room after school lets out. You know Daniel could be yours if you really wanted, but it doesn’t seem worth the trouble.

You and Daniel end up going to the same college and see each other almost every day. You are delighted to find that his presence helps keep boys at bay, and you use him as a shield long after things fall apart with Captain Soccer. You know your presence scares off other girls, but he is still dating that brunette and doesn’t seem to mind.

One day you are watching a movie together in his dorm room and suddenly he is kissing you. He kisses your nose, your neck, your ears. His kisses are slow and warm and make your fingertips tingle with electricity. You want more.

Afterwards, in the flickering light of the television, he strokes your cheek and whispers that he likes you – *really* likes you – and always has. “I don’t know where this is going,” he says, “but right now I’m happy.”

He leaves, and you spend hours remembering his words, his touch.

You carry on the affair for months. You didn’t realize you could feel passion like this. It frightens you. It frightens him. Sometimes, afterwards, he tells you he can’t do this anymore. You find his resistance amusing. He is already lost, and you both know it. He kisses your forehead and in that moment you realize that you are lost too.

One night he calls you to tell you that his girlfriend found about the affair. You feign concern, but you are secretly happy that you will no longer have to sneak around. You think you two can finally have a real relationship. But you are wrong. He tells you that the two of them decided to work things out and that he can’t see you again.

You say you understand because you think you do. He and his girlfriend have been together for years. It is the logical choice. You can tell he is relieved that you are being so reasonable.

After you hang up the phone you sit alone on your bed for a while, waiting to feel something. Eventually, after you have given up and pick up your things to go to the door, it hits you. It starts behind your ribcage and twists down through your stomach and then lower, to your knees. You have to sit down again. Then it moves back up, through the stomach into your throat. Your eyes sting and you begin to cry.

Oh, you think, so this is how it must feel.

After that, it is never the same when you know you have to break a heart. You cannot help remembering that pain when you see their eyes well up or hear them slam down the receiver. You wish you could take that pain away from them.

You start out with little cuts. Pin pricks really. One for each boy with whom you’ve shared your bed. One for each heart you’ve broken.

You never let anyone know. It is your little secret. When the cuts are new, you wear long sleeves. But you are a fast healer, and the red gashes soon turned into fine, pink lines.

Your date sees them and points, his brow furrowed quizzically.

“Cat scratches,” you say.

He looks at the lines and decides to believe you. Nodding, he tells you, "I'm a dog person myself."

During sophomore year, just for fun, you do them in alphabetical order. Aaron was an engineering Masters student. Brad was a frat boy with sweaty hands. Craig sat next to you in English. David worked at the gas station right outside town.

You have it down to a science; you wait until you get your period. Somehow you find it easier to break up with guys when you can feel blood trickling between your thighs. Still, you know that Evan, who brought you roses on your second date, really cares about you and it makes you extra nervous. You decide to cut the jitters out of you. You still feel horrible, but at least now it's a calm horrible.

You vow no more than six per year.

Your older sister is a feminist. She is worried about your "relationship patterns." She tells you to slow down, to take a break between boys now and then. You want to listen to her, but it is so hard when there are always so many boys waiting to be next.

"You don't need a man to make you happy," she says, rolling her eyes, but you know she has had some boyfriend or another since she was 15. Her indifference seems to make her irresistible to the male sex. You wish you could be like her. You can feign love but never indifference.

But you are even prettier than your sister.

You graduate and follow your sister to Chicago, where you take a job at the Stock Exchange. That's where you meet Ryan. He smells faintly of evergreens and on your first date he holds your hand through the whole movie. For almost a year you pretend that this could be something, this could go somewhere. But deep down you know you will leave him. You knew it as soon as you met him.

Eventually, you break up with Ryan because he will not say he loves you. At least, that's what he thinks. You know he *does* love you, that he is just frightened by the enormous significance of the word, of the responsibility it entails. And you use that against him.

He thinks it is his fault. You imagine him crying himself to sleep at night, cursing himself for ruining the best thing that ever happened to him. You have a strong feeling that in six months he'll be back in your life, begging you to give him another chance. But you'll tell him that he's too late; you've moved on.

You always move on.

You look at yourself in the mirror, at that blond hair, those hazel eyes, those high cheekbones. Even your tears don't mar that perfect image. You look vulnerable. And there's nothing more attractive than a vulnerable girl.

You know you don't deserve to look like that, not after you hurt him so much.

You bring the knife to your skin carefully, pressing just enough and then a little more. You watch as the blood runs red across those white arms, as it drips onto the bathroom tiles below.

It doesn't hurt, not really. It feels good to see it on the outside.

You pour yourself into your work and land promotion after promotion. Your sister tells you she's so proud to see you succeed in a male-dominated field. She doesn't realize how easy it is for you to blend into such an environment. Everyone at the exchange is too busy to see you as a pretty girl. They hardly notice you're a girl at all. It's just numbers and reports and analyses, and you meet those needs quickly and efficiently.

You find you have little time for a relationship. Occasionally, you pick up guys in bars and take them home. It's not exactly dating, but at least it temporarily fills that dark void inside of you.

You run into Daniel at a bookstore. He is on a business trip. He is wearing a wedding ring. You think that makes him safe. You think that makes you safe. But he can still make you laugh and his dimples are more attractive than ever. You have only been talking over drinks for half an hour when he tells you he loves you, that he had never stopped loving you. His words made your head spin.

You find yourself back at his hotel. Surprisingly, you have never been a young lover in a hotel before. There's something so exciting, so adult about the whole thing. When he touches you, you think that it all finally makes sense. All those boys. All that pain. All those things you read about in novels.

You meet him for breakfast one week later, when he is back in town. He is already sitting at a table, brooding over black coffee. You know as soon as you see his face that it is over.

During the three hours it takes to say goodbye, the two of you actually make jokes. And laugh. But during that last hour you are quiet for long stretches at a time because really there is nothing more to say, no conclusion to come to except that you probably

shouldn't see each other again, and neither of you wants to say it.

He tells you, "If this were a novel, we'd get to be together." You try to smile.

When you part in the parking lot, he actually says, "See you later." You know he means goodbye, but you stare at his back as he walks away and hope.

You go home and carve his initials into your forearm.

Because you have too much to do at work that week, you plan your breakdown for the next weekend. You push it all from your mind and think about spreadsheets and the price of corn. But when you wake up on Saturday, you are already crying.

You cry so hard, you give yourself hiccups. You cry so hard, you make yourself throw up. You drink vodka. Lots of vodka. You do it next to the toilet so it's easier to throw up.

When there is nothing left in your stomach, you rise slowly, steadying yourself on the sink. You catch a glimpse of yourself in the mirror and lean in to look at your reflection more closely. Your blond hair is tangled, your hazel eyes are bloodshot, and you have bruises under your eyes. This is far past vulnerable.

As a rule, you don't cut when drunk, but the pain is unbearable. You pick up the razor next to the sink and crush it underneath your heel. You remove a blade from its broken plastic handle and press it into your skin until *that* pain is all you can think about. You begin to feel dizzy but you focus only on the pain. The last thing you see before you pass out is your own face, rushing toward you like a terrible ghost.

Your parents and sister are sitting next to your hospital bed when you wake up. Their faces are lined with worry and disappointment. You are embarrassed.

You tell them it wasn't a suicide attempt, but they don't listen. You try to explain how carefully you avoided your veins, what an expert you are at keeping yourself alive, but your forearms are wrapped in white bandages and it's all they see.

"You did this because of a man, didn't you?" your sister asks accusingly. You don't want to tell them about Daniel. You tell them you have been under a lot of stress from work, but you know they don't believe you.

To make them feel better, you agree to seek professional help. Your father has done all the research. He says that there's a very well respected hospital that specializes in self-injury an hour

away. He says your medical insurance covers in-patient treatment for up to 20 days. Out-patient care is covered up to an additional 20 visits. He assures you that if any additional treatment is necessary, he and your mother will cover the cost.

You thank him for his generosity and for all the research he has done. You try not to imagine him on the phone with a representative from your HMO, explaining how your sister found you lying unconscious in a puddle of glass and blood.

“Self-injury is a coping mechanism,” says your therapist, a 50-ish woman whose most remarkable features are her thick-framed glasses and blindingly white tennis shoes. “It’s a way to stay alive. People who inflict physical harm on themselves are often doing it in an attempt to maintain psychological integrity, to keep from killing themselves. They release unbearable feelings and pressures through self-harm, and that eases their urge toward suicide.”

You know about coping mechanisms. You’ve read the brochures they keep by the front desk. You know that the typical closet “self-injurer” is female, in her mid-20s to early 30s, and has been hurting herself since her teens. She’s middle- or upper-middle-class, intelligent, well-educated, and often hides a background of physical and/or sexual abuse. But you know you have never been abused. You are the abuser.

“Boys are usually better able to express anger and pain more directly. Girls live in a much more body-focused culture.”

Your support group takes place twice a day in a room down the hall. These are girls, real girls, aged 15 to 18. They are here because they have low self-esteem. They fret about their weight, their hair, their acne. They are pickers, scratchers, hair-pullers, head-bangers, and burners. You do not belong with these girls

As part of your therapy, you are told to keep a journal and document your urges to cut. You use it to write down only what you’ve eaten each day. *One apple. A peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Half a Snickers bar.*

“I know what you’re trying say,” the therapist tells you. “You want to tell us ‘Look at me. Look how much I hurt.’”

“Yeah,” you reply, rolling your eyes, bored with this psychoanalysis. “That’s why I hid those cuts successfully for ten years.”

Around all these girls you don’t feel like cutting, not until you meet Tom. He’s an orderly at the hospital and on his breaks he sits at the top of the stairwell and plays the guitar. He sees you in the

hallway one day and nods. After that, you're surprised how easy it is to seduce a man while you're committed to a mental hospital. At night, you sneak him into your room.

But it's short-lived. Your roommate, the heavy one with thick black eyeliner, must have ratted him out to the hospital because you learn he was fired soon after. He didn't even get the chance to say goodbye. Or perhaps he didn't care to.

That night you manage to cut yourself with the sharp edge of a ripped soda can. You do it on the inside of your thigh, right where he kissed you. You don't think they'll check there, but they find drops of blood on your sheets and do check and after that you're under 24-hour supervision. They won't even let you go to the bathroom by yourself.

"I know about Tom," says your therapist. You don't react right away because you have already forgotten his name.

"Do you really think you hurt him?" she asks. "Do you really think he would want you to hurt yourself?"

You tell her that you don't care. That it's not about him; it's about how cutting makes you feel. She looks like she doesn't believe you. You wonder if you believe yourself.

You stop talking in your one-on-one sessions. Your therapist responds with silence of her own. The two of you sit in chairs across from one another and stare at each other for two 50-minute sessions a day.

Eventually, the silence becomes unbearable. You talk to fill up the space in the room. You talk about work. You talk about how your roommate hates you. You talk about your aunt's ex-husband. And perhaps because you couldn't stop yourself or perhaps because you had never told anyone before, you tell her about Daniel.

"Why are you punishing yourself more?" she asks. "Why isn't your emotional pain enough?"

You don't know. You wish you did.

After you have been there a little over two weeks, they tell you that your brother is here to visit. You don't have a brother, but you don't let that show on your face.

When you sit down at the table across from Daniel, you can tell that he expected the worst: a half-open gown, unbrushed hair, vacant eyes. You are wearing jeans and a long-sleeved, form-fitting T-shirt that hides your scars. You know you look great. You

always do.

You don't say hello. You ask, "Who told you I was here?"

"My sister is friends with your sister, remember?" He is quiet while it sinks in that your pain is not private. "Your sister is worried about you. She said I shouldn't visit," he continues, his words rushing out, rushing together. "I think she thinks that might make it worse."

You wonder if your sister told him to stay away because he was a man or because, somehow, she knew. You finger your shirt above the place where you know you carry his initials, still pink and raised. You ask him why he came.

He shrugs, obviously unsure himself. The two of you sit quietly at the white table. The plastic surface is scratched. You stare at the scratches, mesmerized, until he breaks your concentration by taking your hand in his. Your skin feels so cold in his warm grip.

"I want to apologize. God, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize that you—I didn't realize what I was doing." He pauses to swallow. "If only I exercised more self-control. But I look at you and everything I know about how much I care for my wife just falls away." He stares into your face and you know it's happening even now.

In a low voice he tells you, "I know I'm not supposed to say this but I think I'll always love you." He keeps staring at you: at your eyes, your cheek, your ears, your mouth. You are not sure what he eventually sees, but whatever it is, it makes him sad. He shakes his head. "Your sister was right. I shouldn't be here."

You nod slowly in agreement. And you realize the reason has nothing to do with your pain or your recovery. Seeing you is how he hurts himself.

When he gets up to leave you feel nothing but relief.

You check yourself out after 20 days. It's time to go back to work, to go back to life. Your therapist is happy with your progress, but she wants you to sign up for additional out-patient treatment. You think of your support group, all those sullen teenagers with dagger eyes, and decline.

You think you will be okay. Your physical scars have healed, and it no longer hurts when you hear his name. You will return to your apartment. You will replace the mirror you broke when you fell. You will get an electric razor. You will learn to live with emotional pain without the accompanying physical pain.

After all, you are a pretty girl. And pretty girls get happy endings.

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