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How to be Bad

Written by

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1

JESSE

AT THE END of July, back when I was still fun, I bought Vicks two tufts of fake armpit hair from Jokes-A-Plenty. They were like Band-Aids with fur. She cackled and wore them all day, calling herself She-Woman of Fantastical Florida, and she kept them on for her date that night with her boyfriend, Brady McKane. She wore a camisole.

She told me the next morning that Brady nearly spit rocks when he saw her, although she was probably just making the story good. Brady adores that girl and wouldn't care if it was fake nose hair she was sporting. Heck, he'd adore her even if it wasn't fake.

I'm thinking about that as I pull into the parking lot of the Waffle House, where me and Vicks work. The armpit hair, not how much Brady adores Vicks. 'Cause I remember that jokey girl I used to be, and I remember how easy it was with me and Vicks, making each other laugh and being best buds. Now there's something off between us, and I can't stand it.

Part of it's me, I don't deny it. Ever since Mama first found the lump, I haven't been myself. That was seventeen days ago, which is a long time to stomp around all pissy and full of secrets.

But Vicks has also gotten herself into a big ol' funk, which I pin on the fact that Brady left town almost two weeks ago. Still, can't she look past her own troubles and see that I'm hurting too? Besides, it's not like he left the country. He's in Miami, not Timbuktu.

I want Vicks back. I *need* her back, especially now.

I cut the engine of Mama's sherbet green Opel and gear up to go into the restaurant, even though Friday's my day off and by all rights I should be lounging on the sofa and watching one of those birth stories on Lifetime, where the baby almost dies but at the last second is saved, and everyone is full of tears and happiness and second chances. Life is good, and look at those eensy perfect toes and fingers. What a blessing. Praise the Lord.

It's just that these days, there hasn't been much in my life to praise.

"Oh, babe, I must'a pissed God off something serious," Mama said to me last week when she got the official news from the oncologist. She laughed, but her eyes were holes of worry ringed with jet-black liner.

And I'm obviously filled with worm rot, because what I shot back was, "Yeah, I guess you did."

This came the day after the wet T-shirt contest, mind. My mama, my *mama*, in a wet T-shirt contest! With truckers spraying her boobs with ice water! And R.D. standing there all proud, I'm sure. Grinning and nudging his buddies and saying, "That's my woman. Ain't she something?" No doubt serving Icee Gator Aid from his frozen drink cart, which he thinks gives the truck stop a touch of class.

Well, I am here to say that there is nothing classy about the goings-on at that truck stop.

Mama claims she knew what that fancy clinic doctor would be telling her, and that the contest at R.D.'s Truck-o-Rama was her chance to give "the girls" a final whirl. Plus, it won her a hundred bucks. Doesn't that mean she'd taken something sour and created something sweet?

Um, *no*. What it means is that R.D.'s a perv, Mama's a sinner, and those horny truckers are pervs and sinners for going along with it.

I wish I could erase the entire last week: Mama, the lab reports, and most definitely R. D. Biggs, who yesterday left me a twenty-dollar tip for no reason at all, other

than I'm Mama's daughter and apparently he wants to share the love.

I used to like R.D., or at least I liked him more than some of Mama's other boyfriends. I liked his belly laugh, and I liked that he'd play Pictionary with me and Mama on our weekly game night. But I no longer want him around, his worried eyes following me as I deliver eggs, toast, hash browns, grits. And waffles, of course. The Awful Waffle, that's what me and Vicks call this place. Though the waffles are actually delicious.

"Listen, Jesse," he said, after he'd practically licked his plate clean. He leaned in, his expression all fatherly, and I could tell in a flash I did *not* want to hear what was coming. "Your mama's experiencing some hard times."

"No. Uh-uh." I got real close and lowered my voice to a furious whisper, 'cause no way did I want anyone hearing our business. "You do not come talk to me about hard times, not after . . . what you made her do!"

"Jesse, what the . . . ?" He splayed his greasy fingers on the counter. "Are you talking 'bout the other night? I didn't make her do nothing. She's a grown woman—ain't she allowed to make her own choices?"

I stalked away 'cause he's not worth my time anyhow. But when I got home, I informed Mama I didn't want that fool in my trailer no more.

"*Your* trailer?" she said.

"Why'd you have to tell him, anyway?" I said.

"Tell him what?"

I glared. She knew. Stupid R.D., coming in and blabbing about her medical woes.

She sighed. "Baby . . . when you're hurting, you lean on your friends."

"You call him a friend? Making you act all nasty in front of his trucker buddies?"

"I wasn't . . . he didn't—" She broke off. "Listen, Jesse, maybe he's not the friend you'd pick for me, but he's still a friend. More than a friend. And you know what? I'll take them any way I can get them."

"You'll take *anything* any way you can get it," I said under my breath.

"'Scuse me?" She put down her dishrag. I walked out of the trailer's dinky kitchen and into the equally dinky living area, which smelled like dogs. She followed me and grabbed my arm.

"You think it helps my situation knowing how you're taking this?" she said. "Knowing my daughter thinks I'm a . . ."

"Whore?"

She sucked in her breath.

I couldn't believe I'd said that—though I didn't take it back.

"God, Jesse," she finally said. "R.D. was *right there*. No way was he going to let anyone disrespect me. If he can stand by me, why can't you?"

"You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain," I said.

She stared at me like she didn't know who I was, this daughter who would act so hateful.

"I can't fix this," she finally said. "*You* can't fix this. We just gotta hope for the best, that's all we can do."

"And pray," I said.

She barked out a laugh. A laugh!

"Fine," she said, "you pray for me. That'd be nice. Know what'd be even nicer?"

I stood there, feeling trembly.

"If you'd live your own damn life instead of passing judgment on mine. I mean, I *swear,* Jesse. You're so set on following God's rules that you've turned into a god-damn Goody Two-shoes."

"Mama—"

"No. You act like you're so special, like you're racking up points in heaven by being so *good* and looking down on the rest of us, but all the while, you're missing out here on Earth."

I looked away. She grabbed my head and turned me back.

"I mean it, Jesse." She kept ahold of her voice, but just barely. "You better live this life of yours while you can—*real* living, the kind where you get a little dirt on your halo—'cause, babe, not one of us knows how long we got."

Fine, Mama, I said in my brain. Not then, but later,

once the heat of it had turned to a hard, fierce, teary ache. *If that's what you want, then fine.*

The midmorning sun toasts my skin through the windshield. I spot Vicks inside the restaurant, and I can just bet she's sweating up a storm. *Four eggs, over easy. Waffle on two. Three hash browns, scattered, smothered, chunked, and diced.* She's the only fry cook who's a girl, and the only cook under the age of twenty. She's seventeen like me, but I just wait tables. Anybody can wait tables.

From my primo parking space, I can also see the new girl, Mel. Mel's been hostessing here for just two months, meaning she's got less rank than anyone. But she doesn't act like it. Not that she's out and out rude, but she watches everyone with her big blue eyes, and I can see the thoughts running through her head about how redneck we all are. How redneck *I* am, because I don't wear four-hundred-dollar jeans.

For real, four hundred dollars! I noticed them right off. See, our uniforms consist of black pants and a gray-and-white-striped shirt. The shirts we get from Waffle House, along with the butt-ugly bow ties. The pants, however, are our own. Most people buy a pair at Kmart or Mervyns and don't think another thing about it, 'cause they're going to be filthy by the end of the shift anyway.

My pants are bad. I admit it. They snap shut too high

on my waist, and they've got these dorky pockets that fluff out and make me look fat, which I'm not. Put me in a pair of cutoffs and a tank top, that's the real me.

MeeMaw—that's my grandma—likes me better in church clothes, but I'm not wearing skirts and dress-up shoes on my days off. I can be close to the Lord in shorts just as well as in a skirt, I figure.

Anyway, last week Mel showed up in a new pair of black jeans, and I told her they were cute. I was trying to be nice, since Vicks had gotten on me for being so snarky.

"Thanks," Mel said. She seemed surprised I was talking to her.

"Where'd you get them? I have the hardest time finding good jeans in this town."

"Um . . . ," she said. She tugged a strand of her hair and drew it to her mouth, like maybe she didn't want to go sharing her jeans secrets.

"Well, what brand are they?"

She twisted around, searching for a label. "Um . . . Chloé?"

Chloé? That was a brand of jeans?

That afternoon I took the bus to the public library and used the Internet to look up Chloé jeans. No stores in Niceville stocked them, but I could order them from some place called Bergdorf Goodman for the low low price of three hundred and ninety dollars, plus shipping. I felt like an idiot, knowing that's why Mel didn't tell me.

The next day I asked Mel why she was even working here. It just slipped out, and Vicks shot me a look like, *Cripes, Jesse. Be a little cattier?*

But c'mon. We'd all seen Mel climb out of her dad's silver Mercedes, and the diamond studs she wears glitter in a way my cubic zirconias never do. Plus I'd heard Abe, our manager, making conversation with her about the African safari she'd gone on before she started working here. Mel had fidgeted, but she confessed that yes, she'd seen actual lions and zebras and giraffes doing their thing in the wild.

Me? There's no call for any trip to Africa. Mama's got a zillion and a half boarder dogs stinking up our trailer on any given day. That's *my* wildlife adventure.

Anyway, that's when I finally asked Mel what I'd been wanting to know since the day she started: Why was someone like her working at the Awful Waffle?

Her answer: "Um . . . because no one I know would ever eat here?"

Vicks thinks she didn't mean it the way it sounded, but those were her exact words.

I climb out of Mama's Opel, and the door squeaks when I shut it. Mama's going to be madder than tar that I took it without asking, but tough.

I tug at my shorts and smooth down my tank. I push my fingers through my hair, combing out the tangles. One thing I've got on Mel—not that I'm counting—is my corn silk, ultra-blond hair.

Mel's longish brown hair is cute enough, but she keeps it in a ponytail 24/7, so it's not like she gets any mileage out of it. Same with her face. Cute enough—maybe even pretty—but a touch of eyeliner and a swipe of lip gloss would go a long way. As for her body . . . well, fine. She's hot. Sure she folds her shoulders in like no one ever told her to stand up straight, but she's like a size two and has one of those athletic bodies that's probably from years of private tennis lessons. Goody for her.

Vicks is so much cooler looking. She might not see it that way, but she is. She's got this awesome shaggy haircut that she did herself, and she dyed it jet-black with a couple streaks of white. The black came first, and then she got sick of it and was like, "Think I'll bleach it out." The streaks frame her face and make her dark eyes stand out. Plus, unlike Mel, she isn't afraid of a little eyeliner.

The bell on the door jingles as I step into the restaurant. The smell of waffles and bacon hits me hard, and suddenly those stupid tears are back.

"Hey there, Jesse!" Abe calls, glancing up from the cash register. "Just can't stay away, can you?"

"That's right," I say. I blink and paste on my smile. "I need my toast burnt like only you can do it."

"Uh-uh," he says. He steps out from behind the counter and makes as if to swat me, and I sidestep the blow.

I call out "hey" to Dotty, who's got two All-Star Specials balanced on her arms, and say, *"Hola, amigo,"* to T-Bone.

"You looking for Vicks?" T-Bone says from the griddle.

"Yeah, she was just here. Where'd that girl get to?"

"She's on break, but it isn't on the schedule," Abe complains. "Tell her to quit ruining her lungs and get back here, will you?"

I head for the back exit, then stop and turn. "Hey, Abe. Can I have tomorrow off? Sunday, too?"

"You gotta be kidding," he says. "Tell me you're kidding."

"It's just . . . I need a break, that's all." My heart starts pounding. What if he says no?

"Aw, Abe, take a chill pill," Dotty calls. "I can cover for her. I was supposed to have the kids this weekend, but Carl Junior's taking them to Disney World. Did he *ask* if he could take them to Disney World? No, he did not. Did he stop and think for one second that maybe *I* was taking them to Disney World? No, he did not."

Disney World! I think, which is a sign of how twitchy my brain is. I've always wanted to go to Disney World, especially Epcot, which stands for "Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow." I've seen the brochures, and the whole thing's done up like a miniature world, with itty bitty countries snuggled up side by side:

France and Germany and China and all those amazing places. There's even an Eiffel Tower stretching clear to the sky.

Miami, I remind myself. *Miami's the thing to focus on, not Epcot and the Eiffel Tower. Geez, girl, get your head out of the clouds!*

Out loud, I say, "Thanks, Dotty."

"You bet." She deposits a side of bacon in front of a woman in a pink T-shirt. "I've told Abe a dozen times—ain't I, Abe?—that you've been working yourself too hard these past few weeks. I been worrying about you, darlin'."

She wipes her hands on her apron and heads my way, and I sense I'm in for a hug. Which would undo me.

"Well, don't," I say sharply. Right away I feel bad, 'cause she knows about Mama's health problems, and she knows *I* know she knows. She and Mama play bingo together, and of course they get to talking. It's just that no one else at the Awful Waffle knows: not Abe, not T-Bone, not even Vicks.

Mama doesn't understand why I haven't told Vicks. I don't know why, either. Not in a way I can explain.

"I'm fine," I say to Dotty. I don't like the way she's looking at me, so I let my gaze slip off sideways. "Really. So, uh . . . see you kids on the flip side, 'kay?"

I find Vicks in the back parking lot, leaning against the concrete wall with a cigarette between her fingers.

Beside her is Mel. I suck in my tummy, because that's how Mel makes me feel.

"Jesse!" Vicks says. She pushes off the wall and slaps my palm. "What's up, toots? Thought you didn't work today." Her smile is big, like she's genuinely glad to see me, and it makes me wonder if I've imagined all the weirdness between us lately.

"Hey, Jesse," Mel says. She's got some kind of accent that I haven't figured out yet. Up north or something, somewhere snooty.

"Hey," I say back. I angle my body to shut out Mel, though not enough that anyone could call me on it. "Listen, Vicks. I've got an idea."

"Oh, yeah?"

"An *awesome* idea," I say, thinking about Vicks and Brady and how she'll jump at the chance to go see him for sure. Brady left early for the University of Miami because of football workouts, though by now he's probably started classes and everything. He's a freshman, and he's playing for the Miami Hurricanes. Pretty cool. Heck, Miami in general sounds pretty cool.

Niceville, on the other hand, hosts the "world famous" Boggy Bayou Mullet Festival. Now there's a whomping good time. You can eat fried fish while cheering on your top picks for Baby Miss Mullet, Junior Miss Mullet, and Miss Teen Mullet, which I was in the running for once, but I couldn't figure out a talent, so too bad for me.

Vicks flicks me. "So are we going to hear this awesome idea?"

"Oh. Right. Well . . . how's Brady?"

She looks at me funny, like I'm changing the subject. But I'm not. I'm just warming up to it. "He's busy," she says. "Practice starts every morning at six, then they run them again in the afternoon."

"It's not good," Mel says, all sympathetic, like she's got the inside scoop. "I can't believe he's only sent her one pathetic text message since he left."

What? This is news to me, and I don't like it. I especially don't like that Mel's the one reporting it.

"That true?" I ask Vicks.

"'The U rules, wish you were here. Heart ya!'" Vicks says. She looks uncomfortable, like she knows she done wrong by me. When you're best friends with someone—even when things aren't quite right—you give *her* the inside scoop. Not some new hostess girl.

"He sent it at two A.M.," Mel goes on. "When he knew Vicks would be asleep."

"Whatever," says Vicks. "I'm not going to be some whiner-baby girlfriend, all freaked out because he doesn't check in every morning and every night." Her tone is ballsy—classic Vicks—but her brow furrows as she draws on her cigarette. And her foot, which is pressed against the concrete wall, is tap-tap-tapping away.

"But . . . how can he not call you?" I say. "You've been

going out for almost a year."

She sighs. "Tell that to him."

I'm floored. Whenever me and Vicks and Brady went out for wings this summer, or when the three of us went to the movies, Brady would hold Vicks's hand and give her little kisses and not care a whit that I was looking on. "You are just gone over this girl, aren't you?" I said once. Brady just smiled.

"No, listen, *you* tell him," I say to Vicks. 'Cause this is my great idea: to drive to Miami so Vicks can see Brady. "Let's go down and see that bum in person. The U is only six hours away."

Vicks snorts. "Six? Try nine."

"You *know* he loves you, Vicks. We'll kick his behind for not treating you like he should!"

"How would we get there?" Vicks says. "Take the bus? That's classy. I'd hop off the Greyhound, all grubby and smelly, and be like, *'Dude, it's me, your stylin' girlfriend. Wanna take me with you to Freshman Composition?'*"

"I've got my mom's car," I tell her. "I've got it for the whole weekend."

She snorts again. She's no stranger to the Opel.

"Don't be rude," I say. I'm trying too hard, and it's making me sweat. "Think about it: you and me and the open road. We can do whatever we want, whenever we want to do it. And I got the radio working again, so we'll have music."

"I need to find a good radio station around here," Mel puts in, as if we're all three having a conversation. "All I can find is country, so I pretty much just listen to my iPod. Hey, does your mom's car have a built-in iPod?"

I glare at her.

"No iPod in the Opel," Vicks says. "I regret to inform."

"Is there a CD player?" Mel asks, and I glare harder. Plus my cheeks heat up.

"No, o innocent one, the Opel is a minimalist outfit," Vicks informs her. "No power windows, no AC, no cup holders, no CD player, and definitely no built-in iPod."

Now I glare at Vicks.

"And the windshield wipers are kaput," she adds.

"They are not kaput!" I protest. "They get a little sticky sometimes, that's all. Anyhow, who needs wipers? We're in Florida! The sunshine state!"

"Yeah, right."

"'The sunshine state,'" Mel says. "I like that." She blinks and smiles, and it's like she's trying to smooth things over or something. Which is so not her place, it's not even funny.

She gazes at me with her too-blue eyes and says, "That's so cool that your mum's giving you the car for the entire weekend."

"Mum?" I say. Who says *"mum"*? I turn to Vicks.

"So . . . you up for it?"

Vicks stares into space.

Mel fidgets. Out of nowhere, she goes, "Um . . . I am."

I'm speechless. Did anyone ask her to go with us to Miami? Did anyone ask her to go sticking her nose where it isn't needed and sure as heck isn't wanted? I mean, really. Where does she get off?

With my body I shut her out for real.

"C'mon, Vicks. A little bit of fun before school starts? We can swing by—" I almost say *Disney World*, but I don't, 'cause I don't want Mel knowing I've never been, or even just guessing. Mel's traveled to Africa, and I've never crossed the state to Disney World? That's sadder than a hound dog who's lost her pups.

"We can swing by that museum place you told me about," I improvise. "See the giant lizard."

Vicks crushes her cigarette and flicks the butt on the ground. "It's not a lizard. It's a gator. Old Joe."

"Fine, see Old Joe," I say. "We'll make a road trip out of it, go to any of those tourist sites we want!" Vicks adores that crap. She's got a whole book of roadside attractions involving mermaids and albino squirrels and monkeys wearing Beatles wigs.

Vicks checks her watch. "I've got to go back in."

"But . . . what about my idea?"

She sighs. "Who would I get to take my shifts?"

"T-Bone. You know he needs the extra cash."

"Yeah, and speaking of—how would we fund this adventure? I bet you've got, what, all of fifteen dollars?"

"Thirty!" I reply indignantly.

"And I've got maybe ten dollars, tops, since I blew my entire last paycheck on booze and Lucky Strikes."

"You did not."

"But I did buy Brady a laundry hamper for his dorm room, the kind that stands up on its own. The rest I socked away in my college fund." She shrugs. "Sorry, Jesse. We can't go anywhere on forty dollars."

"We can if we want," I say. There's a wobbling in my chest. I drive my fingernails into my palms.

Mel clears her throat. "Um . . . I've got money. I can pay."

I turn and gape.

"Fuel, snacks . . . whatever." She gives an awkward hitch of her shoulders. "I could get us a room at a hotel."

I throw up my hands, because she is insane. *"Why?!"*

"I want to see Old Joe?" When Vicks and I stare, she juts out her chin. "What? I *do*."

This isn't the way it's supposed to play out. Mel's ruining everything. Except the truth is, Vicks isn't helping much, either. And when I think on that, my insides twist tighter. After all, she's the one who's been on me for being a wet blanket—so why's she being like this?

Can't she see how much fun we'd have, dang it?

Then I realize how to make it happen. It's a gift from God, which proves it's true, I guess, that He works in mysterious ways. Mysterious, annoying, Chloé-clad ways, but who am I to go against His will?

"Fine," I say to Mel, knowing there is nothing Vicks hates worse than not being Tough Girl Numero Uno. "We'll go to Miami. It'll be awesome."

Mel looks slightly alarmed that I've accepted her offer.

I turn to Vicks, trying to stay cocky. "So what do you say? You in?"

2

VICKS

JESSE KNOWS ME way too well. I do want to see that gator. I read all about it in this guidebook called *Fantastical Florida*. Back when my brother Penn and I had to share a room, we used to read to each other out loud, whispering because we were supposed to be asleep. That book is full of weird stuff. A building shaped like an orange. A bat tower built by a guy named Perky that no bats ever lived in. World's smallest police station. A twenty-two-foot statue of Jesus Christ built entirely underwater. Xanadu, home of the future, which looks like it's made of marshmallows.

Penn and I used to try to get my dad to take us to some of these places on vacation, but he always made us go visit Grandma Shelly in Aventura. No stops, except for gas—a straight drive down.

According to *Fantastical Florida,* Old Joe Alligator is three hundred years old. He used to sunbathe in the town square and even swam with kids in the fountain. Never hurt a flea. Then some stupid poacher shot him, so now he's stuffed and displayed in a glass case in a Florida history museum only a couple hours from Niceville.

Maybe we can hit Coral Castle, too, on this trip. Years ago, Ed Leedskalnin, this hundred-pound weakling from Latvia, got dumped on his wedding night by his sixteen-year-old fiancée Agnes Scuffs. Then he spent twenty years carving a memorial to her out of coral, working only in the middle of the night. He moved blocks of coral that weighed thousands of pounds, and no one knows how he did it.

Now it's a palace to unrequited love.

Ed Leedskalnin. What a wimp.

If Brady never calls me, if he never ever calls me again and just goes around humping cheerleaders at the U like we never were each other's first time and it never meant all the things we said it meant—to be actually doing it like we might be together forever—and he acts like we never built that matchstick house for

our six-month anniversary, or made our own potato chips in his mom's deep fryer, or stayed up all night talking, or like we never used to see each other every day and tell each other everything and text each other nearly every minute we were apart . . . If Brady just disappears on me the way that sixteen-year-old Latvian girl did to the hundred-pound weakling, no way am I building him a coral castle.

I'm not the kind of girl to take shit from a guy. You don't grow up with five older brothers and not know how to fend for yourself when it comes to the opposite sex.

Anyone building coral castles has got to be an only child.

Me, I'd just—I'd do something else, for sure.

Make him come back.

Force him to remember. How he noticed me sprinkling vinegar on my school pizza, to give it some kick. How he noticed me again when I dyed my hair black. How he hadn't known I'd noticed him, too, until I slammed his locker shut that day with barely enough time for him to get his hand out safely, then went running down the hall. How all of a sudden I wasn't Penn Simonoff's little sister, I was something else. How he asked me to come watch a football game of his. He played outside linebacker for the Travers Manatees.

"No thanks, dude," I had told him.

"You don't like football?" Brady asked, wrinkling his forehead.

"I love it," I answered, glad to surprise him. "But I like touch games on Sunday afternoons, or watching it on the national level. Super Bowl Sunday? I'm your girl."

"Really?" he said, raising his eyebrows. He was flirtatious.

I went on. "The problem is, I spent way too many years watching my brother Tully's high school games, and let's just say it was a losing streak for the Manatees. Before Coach Martinez took over. Can we catch a movie instead?"

Brady laughed. It was the first time I'd seen that huge smile break across his face just for me, and the first time that bouncing laugh had shaken up the room because of something I did.

I made up my mind just then that I wanted to make him smile, over and over, every day.

"Yeah, we can catch a movie," Brady said, but then even before we set a time or figured out what to see, he leaned in and kissed me on the neck, like he was aiming for my cheek but kind of went astray, and he giggled while he was doing it, but it felt good, and I could tell he liked me the way I liked him.

This was something real. Not just a date, not just a crush, not just a fling.

So, yes, I will be taking Jesse up on her offer. I want to

go down to Miami, and when I get there, I want to make Brady remember what it seems like he's forgotten in ten days of summer practice and half a week of classes.

Because I know he hasn't forgotten at all.

What I *don't* want to do is ask why he hasn't called. That's certain death. Steve, Joe Jr., Tully, Jay, and Penn taught me that. They had so many girls my head spun as they banged the screen doors going in and out, but if there was one thing that made my brothers cool off fast, it was the way some flowery girl would whine, "Why didn't you *call* me?"

Because there's no answer to a question like that. "He didn't call you because he didn't want to call you," I'd say, if they asked me when I answered the phone. "I think you should take that as a message."

"Well, tell him I called," the little Rose would say, "and ask him why he didn't call when he said he would."

"You got it," I'd say, and write it down in large letters and stick it on the Frigidaire. "Your girlfriend's nagging at you again. Call the droopy little flower and get her off my back."

And Steve, Joe Jr., Tully, Jay, or Penn—whoever it was—would never bring that girl through our screen door again. Not because of what I wrote. They didn't care if I hated their girlfriends or wanted to be just like them. Why they didn't call was, guys don't like to be pegged on bad behavior. They like you to overlook it, or

coax them round to something better from the side, not with the head-on relationship jabber.

And the girlfriend, poor flowery girlfriend, would probably go and build a little coral castle of her own, writing in her diary or sobbing on the phone with some other Roses, or sending cutesy photographs or heart-shaped notes to our mailbox that my brothers would open and then forget about, leaving them lying on the kitchen counter for anyone to see.

Guys respond to action. They respond to a body sitting next to them on the old couch while they flip through the channels. They respond to a girl who understands football, a girl who keeps her mouth shut and doesn't yammer on like it's important what she bought at Target that afternoon. A girl who eats when they take her out to dinner.

Jesse's waiting for me to answer, to say yes or no to her crazy plan. She's starting to look worried, and I feel like a wench.

I know she's sad I didn't tell her right off about what's been going on with Brady since he left for the U. Instead I kept quiet about it for days and days—and then told little Mel.

I don't know why, really.

My friends from Travers—to them, Brady and I are the perfect couple. Me and Brady, walking down the

halls with our hands in each other's pockets. Going to the Halloween dance as Superman and Lois Lane. Kissing during assembly. Me sitting at the seniors table surrounded by a crew of Brady's friends, me wearing Brady's old Mr. Bubble T-shirt. Me and Brady, all the time.

I don't want to deal with their reactions. Their sympathy. It's a lot easier to tell a girl your boyfriend hasn't called you back when the whole way she thinks of you doesn't hang on your being the girlfriend of a senior starter on the district champion football team.

Jesse—I could have told her. Should have told her. We've been close ever since we started at the Waffle last year. She goes to public, but not to Travers, which makes it a lot easier to be real friends. Because Jesse doesn't think about "VicksandBrady" like the girls from Travers do. To Jesse, I'm the person willing to wait while she goes through giant bins of discount makeup at Eckerd. I'll sit through her boring Christian network TV shows and let her pick all the cashews out of the nut mix. I'm the one who'll help her think up questions for the funny surveys she posts on the wall of the staff room, asking people to write in their favorite word, their least favorite sound, their most beloved song. I buy her a toasted almond ice cream bar when I bike down to the 7-Eleven on my break, because I know that's her favorite, and I'll even go out to Applebee's with her slightly bat-shit mom and say stuff like "Oh, Ms. Fix, what happened to the

unhappy pit bull you were telling us about last time?"—and then listen to the answer, because her mom will seriously talk about dogs for an hour and a half at a go.

To Jesse, I'm not one half of "VicksandBrady." I'm just me. Her best friend.

Mel and I aren't really friends, but somehow everything about the Brady situation came pouring out of me when she stepped outside to—I don't know what she was doing, really. Watching me have a cigarette break.

I feel sorry I didn't tell Jesse first. There isn't a truer friend than Jesse when my parents are driving me crazy or I'm freaking about a test or if I just need a little retail therapy—but I haven't been honest with her about me and Brady.

She's really Christian, Jesse is. The one time like five months ago when I hinted that Brady and I were maybe going to do it—*sex* it—and asked her to come to Planned Parenthood with me, she got all uptight about how sex before marriage is a sin, and how Planned Parenthood just supports that kind of sinning. Then it was as if she decided she'd said too much, because all of a sudden she clammed up.

Like she couldn't even talk about it, it was so bad.

I wonder if her spaz had to do with her mom not being married. And obviously, doing it, since Ms. Fix ended up with Jesse. Or maybe it's got more to do with Jesse's dad, whose name I don't even know, and how he

split before Jesse was even out of diapers.

Brady would never pull a trick like that, but also—I'm never giving him any reason to. Hello? We have Planned Parenthood now. Anyone can go, and you barely have to pay.

Jesse must figure that by now I'm not a virgin, but since she made it clear she didn't want to hear about it, I'm not telling her.

Lately—since right before Brady left, actually—she's made remarks. Like God is taking up more room in her brain than usual, so Christian stuff pops out. Like she wants to help me be saved.

It is really, really not fun to be around.

Still, here she is, standing in the lot behind the Waffle, waiting for me to say something. And she's got to be hurt I told Mel instead of her about Brady not calling, but she's not showing it except maybe in her eyes. There's a crazy-strong yearning coming off her, how she's jingling her keys and stalking this grease pit on her day off. Just to get *me* to let *her* give me a ride.

I gotta love her. Plus, I want to see Brady so bad it's making my eye twitch. And then she pulls this thing of pretending she wants to go with Mel, which I know she doesn't at *all*; she's just trying to make me say yes—and I can't tease her anymore.

"What the hell," I say. "Let's do it."

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