

## NOBODY DOES IT BETTER

(A Gossip Girl Novel - 07)

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*I must be cruel only to be kind*

*- William Shakespeare, Hamlet*

 [Gossipgirl.net](http://Gossipgirl.net)

Hey people!

Only two weeks left to make up our minds about which college we want to go to- for those of us who have a choice. Meanwhile, we are busy mastering the art of not flunking out of our last ever term of high school while spending as little time as possible actually in school or doing homework. If you see a group of immaculately groomed girls shedding their blue-and-white-seersucker uniforms and lying out in Sheep Meadow in Central Park in their cute new Malia Mills bikinis, that's us. If you see a group of shirtless boys in rolled-up khakis and bare feet, platinum Cartier tank watches gleaming from their tanned, lacrosse-muscled arms, those would be our boyfriends. And okay, yeah, it's only 11am on Friday and we're supposed to be in gym or AP French, but we're nearing the end of the most difficult year of our lives and we have a lot of excess steam to blow off, so cut us some slack, okay?

Better yet, join us.

In case you've been hiding under a rock somewhere and don't yet know us- doesn't everyone? - We are the belles of the ball, the princesses and princes of New York 'sUpper East Side . Most of the time we live in penthouse apartment in those stately doorman buildings on Park or Fifth avenues or in town houses that take up half a city block. The rest of the time we're at one of our "country" houses, which vary in size and location from compounds in Connecticut or the Hamptons to medieval castles in Ireland to beachfront villas in St. Barts. Weekdays there is school- yawn- at one of Manhattan 's small, single-sex, uniform-required private schools. Weekends we play hard, especially now that the weather is fine and our parents are off in their yachts or private jets or driver-operated town cars, leaving us crazy kids to do as we please.

And what pleases us most right now is one of our favorite three-letter words. You may not be doing it, but you're definitely talking about it. Everyone's talking about it. And some of us are doing it. Especially....

### **THE COUPLES THAT MAY AS WELL BE MARRIED**

They sleep together, eat together, and have started sharing each other's clothes, as if they couldn't be bothered with sorting out the rumples pile of his-and-hers clothing beside the bed and just shrugged into the nearest thing, knowing it would soon be shrugged off again. Neither of them can go anywhere alone without people asking "where's.....?" as if it's totally unbelievable that they would spend more than thirty seconds apart. I know, I can hear you scoffing already. Like , how boring to have only one boyfriend. But face it, they're definitely doing more than just talking about that three-letter word, which is

more than can be said for the rest of us.

### **Your e-mail**

*Q: Dear GG*

My dad is an independent film producer and he's at Cannes right now for the festival. Everyone is talking about this document about "privileged New York City teens," but no one knows who made it. First of all, are you in the film? Second of all, are you the one who made it?

-LA girl

*A: Dear LA girl*

I can't really answer your first question because I haven't seen the film, but it sounds awfully familiar.... A certain shaven-headed girl was following everyone around with a camera a few weeks back... As for your second question- I can barely take pictures with my camera-phone!

-GG

### **Sightings**

S after midnight, tiptoeing out to the mailbox outside her fifth avenue apartment building with her arms full of big white envelopes emblazoned with various college crests. She was wearing an itty-bitty baby blue Cosabella nightgown that barely covered her famously gorgeous bottom (to the delight of the doormen on duty and all the cabbies stuck in traffic), but tiptoed back inside again without nailing anything. It must be tough making a decision about next year when she got into every school she applied to, and maybe even some that she didn't! C taking his military-issue scary-looking black boots to Tod's for a little spruce-up. he's going to be the first cadet ever to wear pink tassels in his boots. D and J fighting over the mirror in H&M. looks like a little sibling rivalry has set in now that they're both so famous. V at an internet cafe in Williamsburg IMing random strangers. That girl has no fear. K and I feasting and scheming in Jackson Hole. Oh, God, what now? No sign of N or B... Jeez, don't they ever get bored of each other? What if they have to be apart next year?

Decisions, decisions.... Where will we all be in one year's time? Can we possibly survive without each other? Try not to freak out-yet. You know where to find me in case you need help, or company, or want to invite me over for one of those spontaneous rooftop parties that end-of-the-year seniors are so famous for having.

You know I love you  
Gossip Girl

## N'S BEDROOM 100% PURE LOVE

"Wake up!" Blair Waldorf yanked off the Black watch plaid duvet and let it fall to the floor beside the antique sleigh bed. Nate Archibald lay sprawled across the mattress on his stomach, naked and very relaxed. Blair sat down beside him and bounced up and down as hard as she could. Nate kept his eyes closed as her ruthless bouncing jarred his golden brown head up and down. Why was it that s-e-x made her so hyper and him so sleepy?

"I'm awake," he mumbled. He opened one glittering green eye and instantly felt more awake than he had a second before. Blair was naked too, all five feet four inches of her, from her shiny coral-glossed toes to the chestnut brown waves of her pixie-cut. She had the type of body that even looked better naked than in clothes. Soft without being fat, and more delicate than her usual costumes of preppy, neatly creased jeans and cashmere cardigans or short, tight little black dresses let on. She was still a pain in the ass, but they'd been in and out of love since they were eleven years old, and he wanted to get naked with her for even longer. How typical it had taken Blair six and a half years to stop fighting with him and actually do it.

And once they'd done it they couldn't stop doing it. Nate reached up and pulled her down on top of him, kissing her randomly and ferociously because she was finally his, all his.

"Hey!" Blair giggled. The navy blue silk Romanian blinds were raised and the windows were open, but it wasn't like she cared if anyone saw or heard them. They were in love, they were beautiful, and they were sex fiends. If anyone was looking, it was because they were seriously jealous.

Besides, she relished the attention, even from the random perverted Peeping Toms and Tomasinas who happened to be spying on them through gold-plated opera glasses from windows of the surrounding town houses.

They kissed for a while, but Nate was too worn out to do much else. Blair rolled away from him and lit a cigarette, giving Nate little puffs every once and awhile like the actors in breathless, the super-cool black-and-white French film she'd watched earlier that day on AP French. The blond female lead always looked so chic and beautiful and was never without lipstick. All the people in the movie did all day was ride around on a Vespa motorbike, have sex, sit in cafes, and smoke. Of course they always looked gorgeous. But Blair had to keep her grades up if she wanted to get off Yale's wait list, and what with school and homework and sex with Nate everyday after school, there was hardly time for primping. Blair's wavy brown hair was matted and sweaty, her lips were chapped from prolonged kissing and infrequent lip gloss application, and she hadn't plucked her eyebrows in two whole days. Not that she really minded. Sacrificing a little personal grooming time for sex was totally worth it. Besides, she'd read somewhere that an hour of sex burns three hundred and sixty calories, so even if she was a little scruffy, at least she'd be skinny!

She reached up and felt the stubble gathering between her dark, neat arched eyebrows. Okay, so maybe she minded just a teensy bit, but she could always grab a cab down to Elizabeth Arden for an eyebrow

wax.

Stubble aside, Blair had never felt so happy. After finally doing it with Nate nearly two weeks ago, she was a whole new woman. The only dark cloud in her rosy sky was the irritating fact that she was still only wait-listed at Yale. Just exactly how were her and Nate going to get together every afternoon if she wound up having to go to Georgetown in DC- the only school that had actually accepted her- and he was up at Yale in New Haven, Connecticut, or Brown in Providence, Rhode Island, or one of the other great schools he'd so unfairly gotten into? Not that she was bitter, but Nate had shown up stoned for the SAT's, took no AP's and barely had a B average, while she was in ever AP Constance Billard offered, had gotten a 1490 on her SAT, and had almost an A+ average. Okay so maybe she was slightly bitter.

"If I joined the peace Corps and spent a couple of years building sewers and making sandwiches for starving children in, like, Rio or somewhere, then Yale would have to take me, wouldn't they?" she said aloud.

Nate grinned. Here was the thing about Blair that he loved. She was spoiled, but she wasn't lazy. She knew what she wanted, and because she believed absolutely that she could have everything she wanted if she tried hard enough to get it, she never stopped trying.

"I heard everyone gets sick in the Peace Corps. And you have to speak the native language."

"I'll do it in France then." Blaire blew smoke up at the ceiling. "Or one of those African countries where they speak French." She tried to imagine herself conversing with the natives in some arid African village while balancing a clay pot of fresh goat's milk on her head and wearing an elaborately dyed caftan that could be supremely sexy if tied in the right places. She'd have a killer tan and would be nothing but muscle and bone from all the hard work and horrible intestinal diseases. Children would clamor at her knees for the Godiva chocolates she'd order for them and she'd smile sincerely down at them like a beautiful, unwrinkled Mother Teresa. When she returned to the States she'd win some Peace Corps award for best volunteer, or even the Nobel peace Prize. She'd have dinner with the president, who would write her a recommendation to Yale, and then Yale would fall over themselves to accept her.

Nate was pretty sure the Peace Corps only helped out in third-world countries, not economically thriving places like France, and no way would Blair last more than half an hour in some remote African Village where they didn't have Sephora or even flushing toilets. Poor Blair. It was completely unfair that he'd gotten into Yale without really trying, while she, who'd wanted to go to Yale since she was two years old, had been wait-listed. Then again, Nate was used to getting things without really trying.

He propped his head up on his hand and tenderly smoothed Blair's dark hair away from her forehead. "Unless you hear soon that you got in, I promise I won't go to Yale," he vowed. "I'm fine with going to Brown or whatever."

"Really?" Blair stamped out her cigarette in the sailboat-shaped marble ashtray beside Nate's bed and flung her arms around his neck. Nate was by far the best boyfriend a girl could ever ask for. She couldn't imagine why she'd ever broken up with him, not once, but again and again.

Because he cheated on her again and again?

All Blair knew now was that she was never ever wanted to leave Nate's side. She rested her cheek against his strong, bare chest. Now that she thought about it, moving into the Archibalds' town house wasn't such a bad idea, since her own house wasn't exactly an episode of "Seventh Heaven" right now. Her mother had just given birth to her baby sister just over two weeks ago and was now suffering from

severe postpartum depression. Just this morning Blair had left her mother weeping over a DVD sent from Peruvian Alpaca farm. Apparently, if you adopted a herd of alpaca yearling, you could custom-order hand-woven blankets and sweaters made from the hair of the animals in your herd. Her baby sister would soon be the proud new owner of a hairy white alpaca blanket that would be completely useless all summer long, and probably the rest of her life, unless as a teenager she got into the hippie handmade-chic thing, cut a head hole into the blanket, and fashioned it into a poncho.

Back when her mother was still pregnant, she had asked Blair to name the baby, and out of devotion to her favorite college Blair had chosen the name Yale. Now baby Yale served as a living, breathing, very noisy reminder that no matter how stunning Blair's record was, the school had all but rejected her. Worse still, the baby had taken over her bedroom, and she was forced to sleep in her stepbrother Aaron's room until after she left for school in the fall. Aaron was a vegan Rastafarian dog-lover, so the room had been decorated specifically for him in wall-to-wall organic, environmentally sound products in shades of egg plant and wild sage. To add insult to injury, Blair's cat, Kitty Minky, had taken to peeing on the barley husk cushions and throwing up on the woven sea grass floor mats in an effort to rid the room of the scent of Aaron's dog, a drooling boxer named Mookie.

Hello, Nasty?

Move in with Nate. Blaire didn't know why she hadn't thought of it before. A freaky mother, a cat-pee-soaked bedroom, and a newborn baby sister named after Yale were not exactly conducive to studying or s-e-x. it was only natural for her to seek other accommodation. Of course there was always Serena's house, but they'd tried that before and wound up fighting. Besides, Serena couldn't offer her much in the way of s-e-x.

Unless those old rumors were actually true...

Nate ran his hands lazily up and down her smooth bare back. "have you ever thought about getting a tattoo?" he asked out of nowhere as he traced the lines of her shoulder blades.

Except for a brief stint in rehab earlier that year, Nate had been pretty stoned pretty much all day every day since he was eleven, and Blair was used to his random questions. She wrinkled her pointy, slightly upturned nose at the thought of having a big scar filed with black ink. "Gross," she responded. Leave that to skanky-looking actresses like Angelina Jolie.

Nate shrugged. He'd always thought carefully chosen, tiny tattoos in just the right places were insanely sexy. A little black cat between Blair's shoulder blades, for instance would totally suit her. But before he had a chance to take the notion any further, Blair briskly changed the subject.

"Nate?" she nuzzled her face into his manly, perfect collarbone. "Do you think your parents would mind if I stayed--?" Before she could finish her sentence, the downstairs buzzer rang.

Nate's personal wing of the town house took up the entire top floor, necessitating his very own front door buzzer.

He rolled away from Blair and swung his feet to the floor. "Yeah?" he called, pressing the button on the intercom.

"Delivery!" Jeremy Scott Tompkinson shouted in his hoarse stoner voice. "Hurry while it's still hot!"

Nate heard laughter and other voices in the background. Blaire waited for him to tell them to get lost.



Instead, he pressed the button to unlock the door and let them in.

"I should get dressed," Blair observed tersely. She slid out of bed and stomped into Nate's adjoining bathroom. How could he be smart enough to get into Yale, yet too dumb to understand that inviting his stoner friends up to their steamy love den would totally ruin the mood?

Not that Yale had accepted Nate because of his smarts: the school needed a few good lacrosse players. End of story.

At least Blair had an excuse to use the delicious L'Occitane sandalwood body shampoo the housekeeper stocked in Nate's shower. She toweled herself off with a thick navy blue Ralph Lauren towel, slipped on her flimsy pink silk Cosabella underwear, zipped up her blue-and-white-seer-sucker Constance Billard School spring uniform skirt, and buttoned two of the six buttons on her white linen Calvin Klein three-quarter-sleeve blouse. Braless and barefoot, it was the perfect my-girlfriend-just-got-out-of-the-shower-and-would-you-please-leave? look. Hopefully Nate's friends would get the hint, make like the bees and fuck off. She tousled her damp hair with her fingers and pushed open the bathroom door.

"Bonjour!" a buxom, raven-haired, long-legged L'ecole girl greeted Blair from Nate's bed. Blair had met the girl before at parties. Her name was Lexus or Lexique or something equally annoying, a sixteen-year-old junior who'd done some modeling as a child in Paris was now working on perfecting the French hippie-slut look. Lexique, whose name was really Lexie, was wearing a lavender-and-mustard-yellow hand-dyed cotton wraparound dress that looked homemade but had actually been purchased at Kirna Zabete for four hundred and fifty dollars, and those ugly flat Pakistani sheep herder sandals from Barneys that everyone but Blair seemed to think were so cool this year. Lexie's face was makeup-free; and she cradled an acoustic guitar in her skinny arms. On the bed beside her was a Ziploc bag full of pot.

What a rebel. Most L'ecole girls never go anywhere without a pack a Gitanes, red lipstick, and heels.

"The boys are making bong hits on the roof," Lexie explained. She strummed her thumb across the guitar strings. "Alors, want to jam with me till they get back?"

Jam?

Blair wrinkled her nose with even more emphasis that she had at the thought of getting a tattoo. She was so not into the whole getting-high, playing-guitars-and-laughing-at-your-friends'-totally-stupid-stoned-observations scene, and she really didn't want to hangout with this Lexique girl. Who obviously thought she was the coolest French girl in New York. She'd rather watch Operah reruns on Oxygen in her cat-pee-soaked room while her delusional mom wept over baby alpacas.

Someone had stuck a stick of burning amber incense into the cork heel of one of Blair's new mint green Christian Dior espadrilles. She grabbed the stick of incense and jammed it into a porthole in one of Nate's beloved model sailboats on his desk. Then she laced up her shoes, buttoned a few more buttons on her blouse, and grabbed her vintage Gucci bamboo-handled tote bag. "Please tell Nathaniel that I've gone home," she instructed briskly.

"Peace!" Lexie saluted Blair with stoned gaiety. "Au revoir!" A tattoo of the sun, moon and stars was printed on her shoulder blade.

Hence Nate's sudden interest in tattoos?

Blair stomped down the stairs and let herself out onto Eighty-Second Street . It felt like summer already. The sun was still two hours from setting, and the air smelled of fresh-cut grass from Central Park, and suntan lotion from all the half-naked girls hurrying home to their apartments on Park Avenue . A gaggle of eleventh-grade St. Jude's Nate-and-Jeremy-wannabe's were hovering around the downstairs buzzer outside Nate's town house. One of them had a guitar slung over his shoulder.

"Bien sur. Come on up!" Blair heard Lexie call out to them over the intercom, as if she lived there.

Nate's house seemed to draw all the stoner kids on the Upper East Side with some sort of magnetic pull. And Blair swore she didn't mind- really, she didn't- as long as she didn't have to sit around watching them all jam. After all she and Nate had been through, Blair knew it was going to be different this time. She and Nate were together spiritually, and now physically, too, which meant she could leave him alone, feeling perfectly confident that he wouldn't dream of cheating on her.

She carried down Eighty-Second Street toward Fifth Avenue , checking her cell phone for a message from Nate at every corner. Obviously he'd call any second now. Like all possessive, aggressive, obsessive girls, she liked to think Nate didn't have a life without her.

Then again, if he didn't, she'd go completely nuts.

"They gave us five spreads," Serena van der Woodsen explained as she flipped through the hot-off-the-press June issue of W magazine. "That's ten whole pages!" The world-famous fashion designer Les Best had just messengered the fashion magazine over to her apartment with a note that read, "As ever, you are fabulous, darling. And so's that dark-haired little hottie friend of yours!"

The same dark-haired little hottie, fourteen-year-old Jenny Humphrey, was desperately trying not to pee her pants. Serena, the coolest senior girl at Constance Billard, and totally famous and beautiful model/Upper East Side girl-about-town, had actually asked her to hang out after school today. She was now sitting in Serena's huge, awesomely old-fashioned bedroom- her private sanctuary- on her bed, flipping through the latest issue of the coolest fashion magazine in the world, looking for pages featuring the two of them modeling the type of amazing designer clothes Jenny had always gazed at longingly in stores but never once dreamed she'd actually wear. It was so unreal she could hardly breathe.

"Here, look!" Serena squealed, stabbing at the page with a long, slender finger. "Don't we look like badasses?!"

Jenny leaned in closer to see, happily inhaling the sweet scent of Serena's custom-blended patchouli oil perfume. Across Serena's lap lay a spread of the two girls dressed head to toe in Les Best couture, motoring down the beach in a dune buggy, the Ferris wheel at Coney Island rising up behind them, all lit up. The style of the picture was typical Jonathan Joyce - the uber-famous fashion photographer who had shot the spread- totally natural and unposed, like he'd just happened upon these two girls riding their dune buggy on the beach at sunset and having the time of their lives. Indeed they did look like badasses in leather vests over white bikini tops, and white leather knee-high go-go boots with teeny-tiny heels. Their hair was winged back, their nails were painted white, their lips were painted cotton candy pink, and peacock feathers dangled from their ears. It was all very retro eighties/futuristic/cutting edge, and absurdly cool.

Jenny couldn't pull her eyes away. There she was, in a magazine, and for the first time ever her enormous chest wasn't the focal point of the picture. In fact the two girls looked so fresh and pure the picture was almost wholesome. It was beyond what Jenny could have hoped for. It was heavenly.

"I love the look on your face," Serena observed. "It's like you've just been kissed or something."

Jenny giggled, feeling very much like she had just been kissed. "You look pretty too."

Oops, look who has a major crush on Serena - just like everyone else in the universe!

But Jenny's crush was deeper than most: she actually wanted to be Serena. And the thing Serena had that she still lacked was a questionable past- that alluring air of mystery.

"Bet it seems like forever ago that you were kicked out of boarding school," Jenny ventured boldly, her eyes fixed on the magazine.

"I was worried I'd never get into a single college because of all that," Serena sighed. "If I'd known I'd get into all of them, I'd never have applied to so many schools."

Poor thing. If only we all had that problem.

"Did you like boarding School?" Jenny persisted, turning to gaze up at Serena with her big brown eyes. "I mean, more than going to school in the City?"

Serena lay back on the four-poster bed and stared up at the white eyelet canopy overhead. She'd been eight years old when she'd first gotten the bed, and she'd felt like a princess every night when she'd gone to sleep. As a matter of fact, she still felt like a princess, only bigger.

"I loved feeling like I had my own life, apart from my parents and the friends I'd known practically since I was born. I like going to school with boys, and eating with them in the dining hall. It was like having a whole class of brothers. But I missed my room and the city, the weekends hanging out." She pulled off her white cotton socks and threw them across the room. "And I know it sounds totally spoiled, but I missed having a maid."

Jenny nodded. She liked the sound of eating in a dining hall with a whole bunch of boys. She liked it a lot. And she'd never had a maid, so it wasn't as if she'd miss that.

"I guess it was a good preparation for college," Serena mused. "I mean, if I actually decide to go to college."

Jenny closed the magazine and held it against her chest. "I thought you were going to Brown."

Serena pulled a down-feather pillow over her face and then pulled it off again. Was it really necessary to answer so many questions? All of a sudden she kind of wished she hadn't invited Jenny over. "I don't know where I'm going. I might not even go. I don't know," she mumbled, tossing the pillow on the floor next to her socks. Her flaxen hair fanned out around her perfectly chiseled face as she gazed skyward with her enormous blue eyes. She looked so lovely, Jenny half expected a flock of white doves to flap out from underneath the bed.

Serena grabbed the stereo remote from off her bedside table and clicked on the old Raves CD that she'd been listening to a lot lately. The CD had come out last summer and reminded her of a time when she was completely carefree. She hadn't been kicked out of boarding school yet. She hadn't thought about applying to college. She hadn't even started modeling yet.

"What's so great about Brown?" she questioned aloud, although her brother Erik went there and would be totally pissed off if she decided not to go. Plus, she'd met a hunky Latin painter at Brown who was still totally in love with her. But what about Harvard, and that sensitive nearsighted tour guide who'd also fallen in love with her? Or Yale and the Whiffenpoofs, who'd written a song for her? And there was always Princeton, which she hadn't even visited. After all, it was the closest to the city. "Maybe I should just defer for a year or two, get my own apartment. Model some, and maybe try acting."

"Or you could do both. Like Claire Danes," Jenny suggested. "I mean, once you stop going to school, it's probably really hard to go back."

As if you'd know, Little Miss Helpful.

Serena rolled off the bed and stood in front of the full length mirror that hung on the back of her closet door. She'd rumbled her turquoise Marni peasant blouse, and her blue-and-white-seersucker Constance Billard uniform was hanging lopsidedly on her hips. That morning she'd been late as usual and had tripped running to school, losing her orange Miu Miu cork-heeled clogs and landing facedown on the sidewalk. Now the iridescent pink polish on the big toe of her left foot was chipped, and a purple-and-yellow bruise stood out on her right knee.

"What a mess." She complained.

Jenny wasn't sure how Serena could even stand to look at herself in a mirror every day without passing out in amazement at her own perfection. That anyone as perfect as Serena could have issues was totally unfathomable. "I'm sure you'll figure it out," she told the older girl, becoming suddenly distracted by a photo of Erik van der Woodsen, Serena's hot older brother, propped up on Serena's bedside table in a silver Tiffany frame. Tall and lanky, with the same pale blond hair, cut in a long shag framing his face, Erik was a male version of Serena. Same huge dark blue eyes, same full mouth that turned up at the corners, same straight white teeth and aristocratic chin. In the picture he was standing on a rocky beach, tan and shirtless. Jenny squeezed her bare knees together. Those chest muscles, that stomach, those arms- oh! If boarding school was filled with boys who were even half as gorgeous as Erik van der Woodsen, they could sign her up!

Easy there, cow girl.

Serena's pink iMac beeped, indicating that she'd just received an e-mail.

"Probably one of our fans." Serena joked, although Jenny thought she was serious. Serena went over to her antique letter-writing desk, jiggled her mouse, and clicked on the latest e-mail message.

To: SvW@vanderWoodsen.com  
From: Sheri@PrincetonTriDs.org

Dear Serena,

Our sorority totally worships Les Best and some of us were at his show this spring, so you can imagine how completely thrilled we were when we heard you were considering attending Princeton this fall. And if you do go to Princeton, you have to become a Tri Delt. We already have all these amazing fundraising ideas for this year, including a Les Best fashion show to benefit the Wild Horses of Chincoteague, featuring us, the Tri Deltas, as models! The best part is you won't even have to pledge. Congratulations, Serena, you're already a sister! All you have to do now is get your behind up to Princeton a few days early this August so you can get a good room in our house.

We totally can't wait. Big kisses.

Your sis,  
Sheri

Serena read the message again and then logged off, staring at the blank screen in shock. Pushy sorority sisters were just about the last people she wanted to hear from, and anyway, wasn't Princeton supposed to be sort of intellectual? She picked up the phone to call Blair and then slammed it down again, realizing she'd completely forgotten that Jenny was even there. Jenny was sweet and adorable and everything- but she didn't have, like, homework or a movie to go to or something?

See, even perfect goddesses have a bitchy side.

Jenny slid off the bed and hitched up her extra wide supportive bra straps, guessing she was about to be dismissed. "You know my brother Dan is singing for the Raves now," she announced. "His fist gig with them is tomorrow night. I can put you on the special guest list if you want to come."

Jenny wasn't even sure if there was a special guest list. All she knew she was getting free because she was Dan's sister. Dan thought he was so famous now that he was a member of a band with the number one album on the East Coast, but if she showed up to the gig with Serena- two gorgeous models out on the town in matching Les Best dresses- she'd completely out famous him.

Serena wrinkled her nose. She wanted to go to the Raves gig, she really did, but she and her parents had already RSVPed yes to some Yale prospective students' get-to-know-you party tomorrow night. She couldn't exactly make her parents go by themselves.

"I don't think I can," she explained apologetically. "There's this Yale thing I have to go to. But I'll try to get down there if it finishes early."

Jenny nodded and stuffed the issue of W into her Gap tote bag, disappointed. She'd envisioned making an entrance at the Lower East Side club with Serena. Never mind the Raves- they were rock stars, big deal. She and Serena were supermodels- at least Serena was. Heads were guaranteed to turn,

Guess she'll have to satisfy herself with being the lead singer's little sister. Like that would ever be enough.

## TALK ABOUT AN IDENTITY CRISIS

"Crack me like an egg!"

Daniel Humphrey glared at himself in his bedroom mirror and took a long drag on a half smoked camel. A lame-voiced wimp in worn khaki-colored corduroys and maroon Gap T-shirt. Not exactly rock'n'roll.

"Crack me like an egg!" he wailed again, trying to look angst-ridden, rebellious, and sickly cool all at the same time. The problem was, his voice always broke when he went into the higher ranged, coming out in a breathy whisper, and his face looked soft and young and totally unthreatening.

Dan rubbed at his bony chin and thought about growing a goatee. Vanessa had always had a strong aversion to facial hair, but what she thought was no longer relevant since they were no longer a couple.

Almost two weeks ago at Vanessa's eighteenth birthday party at her apartment in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Dan had been discovered by the megapopular indie band the Raves. Or rather, his poems had been. Thinking they'd both go to NYU next year and live happily ever after, Dan had moved in with Vanessa only a few days before. But their relationship had quickly deteriorated. More depressed than usual, Dan had been sitting in a corner during the party, chugging Grey Goose vodka straight out of the bottle. Meanwhile, the Raves showed up at the party and their lead guitarist, Damian Polk, stumbled upon a stack of black notebooks filled with Dan's poetry. Damian and his band members had gone crazy over the poems, insisting they would work perfectly as lyrics. Their lead singer had just mysteriously quit-rehab anyone? - and so they decided to ask Dan to be their front man. By then Dan was just piss drunk and thought the whole thing was totally hilarious. Throwing himself into the task with drunken fervor, he'd stolen the show, electrifying drunken parties with his brazen performance.

He thought his was a one time deal, a way of distracting himself from the fact that he'd just broken up with the only girl who'd ever loved him. The next day he discovered he was card-carrying member of the band, and completely in over his head.

During rehearsals Dan found that his normally sober self was physically incapable of putting out the same reckless energy that he'd had at the party, and, compared to the other band members, who were all in their twenties and wore clothes tailor-made for them by avant-garde designers like Pisolcock and Better Than Naked, he felt like a geeky, squeaky little kid. He'd even asked Damian Polk why in the hell the Raves wanted him to be their lead singer in the first place. Damian had replied simple, "It's all about the words, man."

Dude, just because he could write them didn't mean he could sing. But maybe if he looked more like he could sing, he might actually convince people that he deserved to be in the band.

Dan shuffled through his messy desk drawers searching for the battery-operated beard trimmer he'd bought last year during a week of experimenting with the length of his side-burns. He moved on to his little sister Jenny's room, and finally found it under her bed, inexplicably rolled up inside an old pink bath towel.

Little sister lesson number one: If you want to keep your shit, put a padlock on your door.

Not bothering to return to his own room, he went over to the mirror on the back of Jenny's closet door and tugged at the outgrown Mr. Trendy Artiste haircut he'd gotten soon after he'd made his switch from bohemian poet to gritty rock star, it was time for a change.

Eek! Doesn't everyone know not to try a new look the day before a big event?

The trimmer buzzed to life and Dan began shaving the back of his neck, watching the light brown strands gather on the faded chocolate-colored carpet in mousy clumps. Then he stopped, worried all of a sudden that a beard trimmer didn't have exactly the right sort of blades to shave one's entire head with. It might leave weird red track marks all over his skull, or shave his head unevenly so that it looked like his hair had been eaten rather than cut.

Sure he wanted to look hard-core, but not chewed-head hard-core.

He debated whether or not to continue. If he stopped now, the shaved parts could be completely concealed by the rest of his hair until he bent over, and then, voila- a shaved neck. It was kinda cool knowing the shaved part was there without being able to see it. Then again, an unnoticeable hair-cut

wasn't exactly the look he was going for.

He put the beard trimmer down, propped a Camel between his lips, and reached for Jenny's phone. If there was one person who knew anything about shaving heads, it was Vanessa. She'd kept her own head shaved since the ninth grade, and, shunning the expensive salons like Frederic Fekkai and Elizabeth Arden's Red Door that her coiffed classmates frequented, insisted on shaving it herself. Secretly he's always thought she looked prettier with a little more hair, but she obviously thought she looked great bald, he wasn't about to say anything.

"If this is about the apartment-share, I will be calling you once I've reviewed your online application," Vanessa said robotically when she picked up.

"Hey, it's me, Dan," Dan responded brightly. "What's up?"

Vanessa didn't answer right away. She wanted to give Dan space to grow and blossom into the next Kurt Cobain or John Keats or whatever the fuck he wanted to be, but breaking up with her and kicking him out of her apartment hadn't been exactly been easy for her. The casual lets-be-friends tone in Dan's voice made her heart feel like a deflated balloon.

"I'm kind of busy actually." She typed a bunch of nonsense into her computer to make it sound like she was drastically preoccupied. "I have a lot of applications to go through- for the new roommate- you know?"

"Oh." Dan hadn't been aware that Vanessa was looking for a roommate. Then again, with her older sister Ruby gone on tour with her band, it would be kind of lonely and boring living all alone in the apartment, especially without him to keep her company.

For a fleeting moment Dan was so overcome with regret he felt like grabbing a pen and writing a tragic breakup poem using the words cut or shaved, but then his newly shorn neck began to burn and prickle, and he remembered why he'd called Vanessa in the first place.

"I just had a quick question." He took several quick puffs of his cigarette and then absentmindedly dropped it into a vase of daisies wilting on Jenny's desk. "You know when you shave your head? Is there like, a certain kind of razor you use? Like a certain blade?"

Vanessa's first impulse was to warn him that with a shaved head he'd look like a skinny seven-year-old leukemia patient who'd just been through chemo, but she was tired of protecting him from his own mistakes, especially now that they were "just friends." "Wahl blade number ten. Look, I gotta go."

Dan picked up his beard trimmer. It was from CVS and didn't have a blade size. Maybe he'd be better going to a barber. "Okay. See you at my gig tomorrow night though, right?"

"Maybe," Vanessa replied breezily. "If I get this roommate thing figured out. Gotta go. 'Bye!'"

Dan hung up and picked up the beard trimmer once more. "Crack me like an egg!" he shouted, holding it in front of his chin like a microphone. He whipped off his t-shirt and struck out his pale, skinny gut, trying to look saucily bored and rebellious, like a shorter, thinner, less-fucked-up Jim Morrison. "Crack me like an egg!" he wailed, falling on his knees.

His dad, Rufus, suddenly appeared in the doorway, wearing a cigarette burned gray Old Navy sweatshirt and the pink terrycloth headband that Jenny used to keep her hair back when she washed her face. "Good



thing your sister's too busy to hang out with us after school anymore. She might not be too thrilled to find you stripping in her room," he commented.

"I'm rehearsing." Dan rose to his feet with as much dignity as he could muster. "Do you mind?"

"Go right ahead." Rufus stood in the doorway, scratching his chest fingering the unfiltered Camel tucked behind his left ear. He was a work-at-home single dad, the editor of lesser-known Beat poets and esoteric writers no one had ever heard of. "I think if you put the emphasis on every other word, it might be more effective/"

Dan cocked his head and handed Rufus the beard trimmer. "Show me."

Rufus Grinned. "Okay but I'm not taking my shirt off."

Thank the Lord.

He held the beard trimmer away from his face as if worried that it might turn on by itself and buzz off his famously unkempt beard. "Crack Me like an Egg!" he howled, his brown eyes gleaming. He handed the trimmer. "Try it."

Of course Dan's dad had sounded just exactly the way Dan wanted to sound. He tossed the trimmer on to Jenny's bed and pulled his shirt back on. "I have homework to do," he grumbled.

Rufus shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, I'll leave you alone." He winked at his son. "Decide where you want to go next year yet?"

"No," Dan answered hollowly, then shuffled out of Jenny's room and back into his own. His dad was so gung-ho about the whole college thing, it was seriously annoying.

"Columbia's close!" Rufus called after him. "You could live at home!"

As if he hadn't already mentioned that a thousand times.

Alone in his room, Dan found a rubber band in his desk drawer and tied his hair up into a stubbly ponytail, leaving the shaved part exposed. He picked up the beard trimmer again. "Crack Me like and Egg!" he whispered, imitating his father as best as he could. He grimaced. There just wasn't enough gristle in his voice to sound convincing.

Trading the trimmer for the pile of college catalogs he'd been thumbing through for the past three months, he flopped down on his bed. Only one more week to choose between NYU, Brown, Colby or Evergreen. He flipped to a picture of a tweedy, intellectual-looking Brown student, his back propped against the trunk of a giant elm tree, scribbling away in a notebook like a young Keats. He looked exactly as Dan had envisioned he'd look himself next year- before he'd been discovered by the Raves and before he'd just shaved the back of his head.

He ran his finger over the shaved part of his head and glanced down at his outfit. He'd have to go shopping, because none of his clothes went with his hair anymore.

And you thought that was something only girls worry about.

If only Jenny were there to help out, Dan thought grimly. But his little sister was too busy being a

supermodel to go through his closet with him and tell him what was lame and what was acceptable. Dan picked up a cup of Folgers instant coffee that had been cooling on the floor since that morning and took a sip. He grimaced at his reflection in the mirror, and for an instant he could almost envision himself up on stage, giving the audience the same annoyed, pissed-off grimace. Maybe, just maybe he could pull this off, without his sister's help.

Or maybe not.

## V TAKES THE ROOM OUT OF ROOMATE

Fireeater: I keep a pretty sick schedule, like I sleep all day and work at night

Hairlesskat: What do you do?

Fireeater: duh, I'm a performer

Hairlesskat: you really eat fire?

Fireeater: I'm working on it. Mostly I dance with my snakes.

Hairlesskat: snakes?

Fireeater: yea I have four snakes

Fireeater: you're okay with pets right?

Fireeater: you still there?

Fireeater: yo, hello?

"Nice try, loser!" Vanessa Abrams logged off her computer and went over to her closet. She'd taken off her hot and hideous maroon wool Constance Billard School winter uniform- the only uniform she owned- two hours ago and hadn't bothered to change into anything else. Even though the girl Vanessa was supposed to interview in three minutes had sounded cool in her e-mail that morning, she probably wouldn't be psyched if Vanessa greeted her at the door in her black cotton Hanes underwear. Vanessa pulled a folded pair of pants off the top shelf in her bedroom closet without even looking. Everything in her closet was black, and she was a strong believer in shopping in duplicate. If you owned six pairs of straight-legged black stretchLevis , you never really had to think about what you were going to wear, and you only had to do laundry once a week. She pulled the jeans up around her pale and slightly pudgy hips, yanked her black long-sleeved V-neck tee down over them and ran her hands over her shaved, dark head. She might have looked odd to all the so-called "normal" girls she went to school with, but the girl she was about to meet sounded more interesting than they could ever hope to be- well, at least she had online.

The downstairs buzzer rang, just as she'd anticipated. Vanessa went over to the window and pulled aside the curtain, which was really just a black poly-blend Martha Stewart Everyday bed sheet she and her sister Ruby had bought at K-mart last Halloween. On the street two floors below, a drunk homeless guy was shouting at empty parked cars. A little boy with green spiked hair and no shirt on sped down the sidewalk on a mountain bike that was way too big for him. The crumbling cement block that served as Vanessa's front stoop was empty. The Prospective roommate was already on her way up.

"Please be normal," Vanessa murmured, not that she actually like normal girls. Normal girls, , like the girls in her class atConstance , wore pink lip gloss and different versions of the exact same pair of shoes and were religious about things like highlights and pedicures. In her e-mail application this girl Beverly had said she was an art student at Pratt, so she was older, for one thing, and was probably kind of alternative. Hopefully she'd be as cool as she sounded.

Vanessa opened the door to the apartment just asBeverly mounted the top of the stairs. And to Vanessa's complete surprise,Beverly wasn't a she, she was a he.

Vanessa had sort of forgotten to specify that she was looking for a girl roommate in her web posting.

A deliberate mistake?

"Bet you thought I was female, right?"Beverly asked, extending his hand for Vanessa to shake. "The name is totally old-fashioned and totally misleading. Don't worry I'm used to it."

Vanessa tried not to look surprised, which wasn't hard for her. She'd mastered the unexpressive stare long ago while eating alone day after day in theConstanceBillardSchool cafeteria, turning out the senseless babble of her beautiful, bitchy classmates. She tucked her fingers into the back pockets of her jeans and nonchalantly led the way into the apartment "I was just IMing with this weirdo chick who dances with snakes. You don't have any snakes, do you?"

"Nope."Beverly pressed his palms together in praying position and surveyed the starkly decorated apartment. The walls were white and the wood floors were bare. The kitchen was tiny and opened onto the living room/ second bedroom, which was furnished with a futon and a TV. The only decorations were framed stills from the dark, morose films that Vanessa notoriously made in her spare time.

"Whose work?"Beverly asked, gesturing at a black-and-white photograph of a pigeon pecking at a used condom inMadisonSquarePark .

Vanessa discovered she was staring at Beverly's firm, round buttocks and quickly averted her eyes. "Mine," she replied Horsley. "It's from a film I made earlier this year."

Beverly nodded his head, keeping his palms pressed together as he examined the other photographs. Vanessa loved that he didn't start babbling about how offbeat or depressing the were, the way people usually did. Just the way he said, "whose work?" made her feel like a real artist.

"Would you like a beer?" she asked. Her fridge was uncharacteristically full of beer from her eighteenth-birthday party two weekends ago, and she'd take any opportunity to get rid of it. "Sorry, I don't have much else except water."

"Water would be fine," Beverly replied and Vanessa found herself liking him even more. Ask any high-school boy if he wanted a beer and he'd down a whole six-pack in three seconds flat. All Beverly needed was a little water to whet his palate, and a place to live- for instance, with her.

Whoa..... Slow down, Nellie! What about the interview?

Vanessa went into the tiny open kitchen and got out a vintage Scooby-Doo glass and some ice and a pitcher of filtered water from the refrigerator. She filled the glass slowly, surreptitiously studying Beverly as she did so. His small, intense eyes were pale blue, and his short, tousled hair was nearly black. The palms of his hands and his fingernails were stained black with some sort of ink he must have been using in his artwork, and his drab green t-shirt was flecked with what looked like sawdust. His black pants were just the sort of loose black cotton poplin slacks she would have worn everyday if she were a guy, and on his feet were a pair of those thin orange rubber flip-flops you can buy at the drugstore for ninety-nine cents. He was so not like the people she went to school with, Vanessa couldn't help but feel kind of excited.

Could that have anything to do with the fact that he's a guy?

She walked around the counter and handed Beverly the water, already envisioning what it would be like to stay up late and watch movies together. She could bring him water and he would nod his head at her in that thoughtful, sexy way of his. And then they would dissect Stanley Kubrick's work, film by film.... Naked.

Vanessa took a seat on the futon sofa and Beverly sat down beside her.

"So, I'm kind of between places right now," he explained. "I was in a dorm and now I'm in this group work-live arrangement with a bunch of artists in this warehouse space down by the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It can get pretty crazy there sometimes, though." He chuckled. "I just need a place to crash where I don't have to worry about my fingers getting hacked off while I'm sleeping- you know, for someone's "body parts" sculpture or something?"

Vanessa nodded happily. She knew exactly how he felt.

Really?

Of course, she'd never expected to share an apartment with a guy- other than Dan- but she was eighteen now, an adult, able to make her own decisions and mature enough to have a guy roommate and no intention of jumping his bones.

Right.

"The thing is," Beverly continued, "it would be kind of weird living with someone I'd never even breathed the same air with before, you know?"

Vanessa's big brown eyes widened. So he didn't want to live with her? "I guess so," she replied glumly.

"I wondered if we could hang out for a few weeks first. Do stuff. Get to know each other. See if it could work out," he added.

Vanessa sat on her hands feeling embarrassingly like one of those so-called normal girls she hated after some hottie had asked them to a prom or whatever they called those ridiculous dress-up parties they were always going to because it gave them the opportunity to buy a new dress. Beverly did want to live with her. He just wanted to get to know her first. How refreshing and exciting to finally meet someone so intelligent, creative, cool- and hot!

"Well, I am interviewing other people," she responded, not wanting to appear too eager. "But that sounds like a good idea. I mean, you're right. It's important to know who you're about to move in with."

"Exactly." Beverly polished off the water, stood up and carried the glass to the sink.

Wow, he even cleans up after himself.

He flip-flopped back into the living room. "We could do something this weekend or--"

Suddenly Vanessa had an idea. What better way to show Dan that she'd moved on and had a life of her own beyond him and his selfish self than to bring a guy to his first gig? "Actually an old friend of mine is singing with the Raves tomorrow night. Want to go?"

Thankfully Beverly was mature enough not to jump up and down and freak out about the fact that she knew someone who sang with the Raves. He pressed his palms together and nodded his head in that sexy, monklike way of his. "Sure. I'll call you tomorrow to make a plan."

Vanessa walked him to the door and then rushed to the window, following his nice ass with her eyes as he flip-flopped his way down South Sixth Street and then disappeared into the maze of old factory warehouses that made up Williamsburg's landscape. Saturday mornings she and Beverly would sit by that window, making use of its southern exposure to make their art. He would work silently at his canvas, smearing black ink all over it with his hands while she filmed him. And both of them would be.... Naked.

Of course.

How exciting to live with an artist. Of course, Dan was a poet, but that was different. All he did was scribble in notebooks all day, drinking bad coffee and getting shakier and more neurotic by the hour.

Of course she would continue to interview other people- at least Instant Messenger- until everything was worked out. But she was already pretty sure she'd found what she was looking for, the perfect mate.

Wait. Doesn't she mean roommate?

## B CAN'T STOP RUNNING AWAY FROM HOME

"Excuse me. What are you guys doing?" Blair demanded. Eleanor Waldorf and Blair's stepbrother, Aaron Rose, were standing on the bed in Blair's makeshift bedroom, thumb tacking some sort of large map on the wall. Blair stood in the doorway with her arms folded, awaiting an explanation.

"Don't tell," her mom whispered excitedly to Aaron. Eleanor was wearing a bizarre Versace outfit that had had sample-sale purchase written all over it. The outfit consisted of an orange-and-black vertically striped halter top attached to green-and-black horizontally striped pedal-pushers by way of a mess of gold chains and buttons. The pedal-pushers even sported gold fringe.

Why is it that the mom population is always drawn to designer's biggest mistakes?

Not only was Eleanor's outfit ugly, but in another fit of postpartum depression she'd done something dreadful to her hair. That morning it had been shoulder-length and blonde. Now it's dyed dark red and cropped close to her head, like Sharon Osbourne's. Needless to say, it was sort of hard for Blair to look at her.

Aaron pushed the last tack into the corner of the map and hopped down from the bed, his wannabe Rastafarian mini dreadlocks banging merrily against his hollow vegan cheeks. "I hate to break it to you, Ma, but this is going to require a wee bit of clarification." He shot Blair an apologetic look. "Sorry, sis, we wanted to surprise you."

Blair liked her stepbrother Aaron okay- much more than she liked his fat loser of a father, Cyrus Rose- but totally infuriated her when he called Eleanor Ma or her sis. After all his father and her mother had only been married since Thanksgiving, so Eleanor was definitely not his mom and she was very definitely not his sister. Despite the existence of her little brother Tyler, who was a boy, and Yale, who was only a baby, Blair had always identified herself as an only child, except for those rare occasions when she and Serena were getting along so well it felt like they were sisters.

Eleanor scooted off the bed, grabbed Blair's hand, and dragged her over to the sage-colored wall to look at the map. It was a detail of Australia and the Pacific Ocean, and there were four red circles drawn around four pinpricks in the sea between Vanuatu and Fiji. Underneath the circles, written in black ink in Eleanor's loopy cursive, were the names Yale, Tyler, Aaron, and Blair.

Padonnez-moi?

Blair twisted her ruby ring around and around on her finger. "What the fuck, mom?" she demanded impatiently.

Eleanor was still holding Blair's hand and she squeezed her daughter's fingers tightly with manic delight. "I bought you an island, sweetie, and named it after you. Each of my four little darlings has their own Pacific Island! And next year, when they print the new maps, your names will appear right there next to Fiji! Isn't that fantastic?"

Blair stared at the map. Fiji had always sounded sort of exotic to her, but the island of Blair probably consisted of a scrappy shrub on top a piece of reef riddled with spiny sea urchins and kelp.

Tyler's already planning our Big South Pacific Christmas trip next year," Eleanor rattled on. "He's researching which of the islands have the best surf."

"And your mom's buying each of us a board," Aaron informed her. "Except for Yale."

Blair's noticed that Aaron's toenails were painted black.

"It's a band thing," he explained, noticing her noticing. "We were bonding over the fact that, at the moment, none of us has a girlfriend."

Big surprise Blair thought. If he wasn't careful, Aaron was going to become one of those pale, skinny, asexual, vegetarian old men like Morrissey, fading into the ether without anyone remembering that he'd ever been there. Aaron and Serena had hooked up and even been in love for a fleeting moment that winter, but Aaron wasn't exciting enough to hold Serena's attention for more than five minutes.

Than again, who was?

Blair wasn't all that interested in what Aaron and his loser Bronxdale Prep band mates did to amuse themselves, or in her mother's insane need to buy random, completely pointless things like islands and alpacas and surfboards, but she did want to know what Kitty Minky, her Russian Blue cat, was doing digging around in the sumptuous pile of silk-covered bolsters, pillows, and throws at the head of her bed.

"Meow-meow?" Blair playfully addressed the cat in the made-up cat language she'd used with Kitty Minky since she was nine years old.

All of a sudden Kitty Minky let loose a stream of disgusting smelling cat pee.

"No!" Blair shouted, hurling a putty-colored leather Monolo sandal at him. Kitty Minky leapt off the bed, but it was too late: Blair's rose-colored silk bedspread and throw pillows were soaked through.

"Oh my!" Eleanor exclaimed, wringing her hands and looking like she was going to cry. "Oh dear me, what a mess," she added despairingly, her mood shifting abruptly from high to low.

"Don't worry, Blair. You can sleep with me and Tyler in our room until Esther cleans this place up," Aaron offered.

Tyler and Aaron's room smelled like beer and feet and tofu hot dogs and those foul herbal cigarettes Aaron was always smoking. Blair wrinkled her nose. "I'd rather sleep on the floor in Yale's room," she responded miserably.

Eleanor wrung her hands. "Oh, but baby Yale's in quarantine for the next few days. She picked up some sort of terrible face rash at the pediatrician's office when she was there for her checkup yesterday. Apparently it's very contagious."

Ew.

Blair's small blue eyes narrowed. She adored her baby sister, but she wasn't about to risk getting a rash, especially not a face rash. Which left a particular question unanswered: Exactly where the fuck was she supposed to sleep?!

The penthouse was clearly uninhabitable, and while the Archibalds' house had seemed like an obvious choice only an hour ago, it had since turned into an after-school program for sixteen-year-old Nate-worshipping stoners. Serena's door was always open, but Serena's parents were kind of old-fashioned, and they probably wouldn't like it if Blair had a boy in her room with the door closed or whatever.

Like Serena never had a boy in her room with the door closed?!

Besides, Blair had already tried living with Serena for a few days that spring and they'd fought the whole time. Of course that was when Blair had been trying to seduce Serena's brother Erik in order to lure Nate away from that drugged-up lumber heiress he'd met in rehab. Still, now that she and Serena were friends again, it was best not to risk it.

As if they wouldn't find something else to fight over.

Blair pulled open the top drawer of the cruelty-free mahogany dresser. She had a credit card, and there were lots of nice hotels nearby. She grabbed a pair of clean white cotton Hanro underwear and a white tank top. The one benefit of wearing a uniform to school was packing light. And the benefit of packing light was that undoubtedly she would need something that she didn't have and would therefore have to buy at one of the three Bs: Bendel's, Berfdorf's, or Barneys.

"Want to come see what Tyler's found out about our islands?" Aaron offered. "he's downloading a whole bunch of stuff right now."

"The man I spoke to said the temperature on the islands is consistently between seventy-five and eighty-five degrees all year round," Eleanor added gleefully. She glanced at her gold Cartier chain-link wristwatch. "Phooey. I'm five minutes late for my Red Door makeup appointment." She giggled conspiratorially and clapped her hands together like a little girl. "Cyrus is taking me out to the four seasons tonight. I can't wait to surprise him with his present."

Blair didn't even want to think about what her mom could have dreamed up to buy Cyrus. A whole country?

"I'll probably be back to pick up a few things," she informed her mother. "And we're definitely need a



new mattress, pillows, and sheets for this room. But I'm not sure if I'll even be coming back, you know, to live."

Eleanor blinked dazedly at her daughter. After seventeen and a half years of being Blair's mother, she still didn't quite know what to make of her.

"Just in case there's a civil war on your island or you new shipment of French underwear comes in, exactly where might you be reached?" Aaron demanded with an annoying wise-assed smirk.

Blair smirked back. "The Plaza?"

And preferably a suite.

## N IS EASILY LED OUT TO SEA

The roof terrace atop Nate's four-storey town house wasn't high enough for a real view, but it was still nice to sit up there and suck hits out of Jeremy's giant green glass bong and reminisce about all the wild shit they'd gotten up to when they were young and carefree- before they had stuff to worry about like college and future.

As if they were worried.

"Dude. Remember that time in Latin when you were so baked you thought you were in French?" Charlie Dern drawled, blowing smoke out of a tiny gap in the side of his wide, clownish mouth. "You were just babbling in French like a fucking lunatic and Mr. Herman the she-man was like, "I beg your pardon, Mr. Archibald. Although all romance languages find their roots in Latin, I never did master French."

Anthony Avuldsen and Jeremy Scott Tompkinson began to crackle as they remembered that legendary day.

"I was speaking fucking perfect French, too," Nate observed. "I think maybe for a moment there I thought I was French. Like a native speaker."

"Right," Charlie agreed sarcastically. "Man, you know you could barely even talk."

Lexie floated by in her tie-dyed dress, barefoot and waving her hands in front of her face. "She'd drawn flowers on her fingers and toes with a glow-in-the-dark pen she'd found on Nate's desk, and they glowed neon green in the deepening twilight. A ponytailed boy named Malcolm was playing the guitar and singing an ancient James Taylor song.

'You just call out my naaaame  
And you know where ever I aaam  
I'll come runnin' to see you again.'

"I wish we were all at the beach." Jeremy sighed and traced his index finger along the rim of the bong. "Everything would be perfect if we were at the beach."

Nate nodded his golden brown head in agreement. "We will be soon. My parents'Hamptons booze cruise is in a couple weeks. Boat's already docked down in Battery Park. You're coming right?"

The junior boys on the roof terrace looked up, wondering hopefully if Nate was addressing them.

Fat chance.

"Everyone's coming," Anthony Avuldsen responded, making the juniors feel like even worse dweebs. "It's like the kick-off to the whole freaking summer."

"Blair's class is doing their senior cut day the next day," Nate mused. He realized vaguely that Blair had never made an appearance on the roof terrace. Maybe, she was still in the shower, or maybe she'd kissed him good-bye and gone home? He honestly couldn't remember. If she was still in the shower, he might steal downstairs and surprise her. The thought of her wet and naked made him smile deliciously.

Charlie pulled a marijuana-stuffed Ziploc from out of his khaki pants pocket and began loading it up on the bong. "You said the boat's in the harbor?"

Before Nate had a chance to respond, his cell phone rang. BLAIR flashed up on the phone's little screen

Speak of the she-devil.

Nate pressed answer and put the phone on to his ear without actually saying anything.

"Guess where I am?" Blair gushed happily. "The Plaza. So get your ass over here right now. I have a suite."

The Plaza was only about twenty blocks away. Nate gazed in the general direction of downtown. It seemed very far away, but it would be nice to lie on a big white hotel bed and watch lots of movies and order room service. He was pretty hungry.

Not exactly what Blair had in mind.

"Just bring your toothbrush. I've got everything else covered," she added coyly.

Meaning the three Cs: Champagne, caviar and condoms.

"Sounds good," Nate responded gamely. "See you in a minute." He clicked off and Jeremy shoved the bong at him.

"So what I'm thinking is," he told Nate with the intense face of a seriously stoned person. He'd pick the green alligator away from his Lacoste shirt, and it dangled from his chest like a partially removed scab. "We all head down to your parents' boat. It's stocked with booze, and the crew's probably doing the tourist thing in town and won't even notice if we take it out for a spin, right? You sail like a master. Why not go on a little pre-Hamptons excursion to, say-

"Bermuda!" Charlie piped up.

"Fuck, yeah," Anthony agreed.

The three boys looked at Nate. They knew they were asking to do something completely outrageous, but they could tell by the interested glimmer in Nate's eye that he was sort of into it.

Nate's mind was racing in a blurry, zig-zaggedy, stoned way. Sail the boat to Bermuda? Sure, why not? They were seniors they could do whatever they wanted. Blair could come too, and they could drink mimosas and make love on the beach under the warm sun. She was always talking about going away together.

Lexie came over and sat down in Nate's lap. She smelled like amber incense and goose-liver pate. The tip of her jet-black ponytail just grazed the sun, moon and the stars tattoo on her shoulder blade. "Alors, what's next?" she yawned, taking the bong from Nate.

Nate waited until she was done with the bong to pushing her out of his lap and hoisting himself to his feet. He clapped his hands together like a stoned camp counselor. "Come on, everybody, we're going on an adventure."

The junior boys began to murmur excitedly. Not only had they gotten to party at Nate Archibalds' town house, he was taking them somewhere- probably somewhere cooler than they had ever been before.

"Anyone who pukes on boats should probably stay behind!" Jeremy warned.

"No fucking way," whispered a St. Jude's junior whose name happened to be Nate Lyons, and who mimicked his namesake down on the color of his navy blue Brooks Brothers socks. There was a mass rush to the exit. Nate Archibald, the coolest senior boy on the Upper East Side, was taking them out on his boat. It was their big fucking day!

Nate followed the rest of the boys downstairs with good-natured amusement, completely forgetting what he's been about to do before the topic of a sail to Bermuda even came up. Behind him, his cell phone lay forgotten on the roof terrace, its little screen flashing the name BLAIR as it rang every two minutes for the next half hour.

'Winter, spring, summer, or fa-waall  
All you have to do is ca-waall  
And I'll be there!

Yeah. Right.

#### ANOTHER WASTED PAIR OF LA PERLA UNDERWEAR

"Nate's on his way over," Blair announced to Serena smugly over the phone. She'd called Serena just to brag about being at the Plaza, feeling guilty as she dialed but getting over the guilt by the time the phone began to ring. She leaned toward the massive gilt-framed bathroom mirror and applied another coat of Chanel Vamp lipstick. It was dark red and she usually only wore it in winter, but when you were locked in a sumptuous hotel suite with your boyfriend having constant sex, who cared what season it was?

"Don't be mad," Blair pleaded with her best friend. "We can hang out in my suit tomorrow afternoon or something, okay?" she flashed her reflection a sexy, knowing grin. "After Nate and I wake up."

"you two are ridiculous," Serena scoffed without the slightest note of jealousy. Blair had confessed to finally losing her virginity to Nate the morning after it happened, but she'd resisted too much detail and Serena resisted asking too many questions. After all, Serena and Nate had lost their virginities together, so sex with Nate was kind of an awkward subject.

"I have to go to this new Yale student party," Serena responded. "Not that I'm going to Yale," she hurriedly corrected herself. Her acceptance to Yale was an even worse subject. "My parents signed us up though, so I have to go."

"Oh." Blair pouted her lips and turned around to examine her butt in her new black silk La Perla underwear set. Of course she wasn't exactly into Yale yet, but she was on the fucking waiting list- they still could have invited her.

"I was hoping you'd come with me," Serena added. "Since you're more likely to go to Yale than I am."

Blair readjusted her bra straps. Nate was into Yale too, but he hadn't mentioned any Yale party. And if he wasn't going, she certainly couldn't go. They might be... other-wise engaged.

Uh-huh.

"It's not until seven," Serena prompted. "You guys should be ready to venture outside by then."

"Can I call you about it tomorrow?" Blair asked dubiously.

"Whatever." Serena didn't mind going to parties by herself, since she was never by herself for very long. Boys buzzed and hovered around her like flies at a picnic. "Have fun tonight. 'Bye, sweetie."

Blair hung up just as the bellboy arrived with the bottle of Dom Perignon and the plate of caviar and toast points she'd ordered from room service. She slipped into one of the Plaza's thick white terrycloth robes and answered the door.

"Over by the bed," she commanded, loving how Joan Crawfordishly jaded she sounded. She tipped the guy and waited until he closed the door. Then she slipped out of her robe, flopped down on her side on the massive California king bed, and reached for the remote. Within seconds she'd found AMC - American Movie Classics, the channel that regularly played all her favorites like 'Breakfast at Tiffany's', starring Audrey Hepburn, and 'My Fair Lady' also starring Audrey Hepburn.

To her disappointment, 'Dirt Dancing' was playing. Since when was anything made after 1980 a true classic? Blair wondered. All of a sudden she felt odd. But then, that seemed sort of appropriate, considering she was about to have a hot-and-heavy liaison with her lover in a sumptuous hotel suite. Where was Nate anyway? A cab away from his house to the Plaza would only take seven minutes. If she were Nate, she'd have made it in five. She dialed his cell without even looking at the buttons on her phone, but there was no answer. Maybe he was showering and putting on his very sexy black Calvin Klein boxers in preparation for their rendezvous, she mused.

Or maybe not.

Blair stood up, removed her robe, and dimmed the lights. Then she spread a little caviar on one of the toast points and stood watching herself in the over-sized gilt-framed dressing mirror as she ate it. On the TV screen behind her, "Baby" was trying to look innocent after spending all night having big sweaty sex with Patrick Swayze, the dance instructor at the summer resort where her family was vacationing. Baby's dad was so seriously pissed off at her; Blair wondered fleetingly how her own dad would feel if he knew she'd moved into a hotel suite just so she could have a little privacy with Nate. Not that her gay, French-chateau-living, pastel-argyle-socks-and-baby-blue-Gucci-sunglasses-wearing dad and Baby's responsible doctor dad in 'Dirty Dancing' had anything in common. She dialed Nate once again and when he didn't answer, she made herself another caviar toast point sandwich and called her dad's number in southern France, where he'd been living since he and Eleanor split up over his gayness almost two years ago.

"Bear? Is everything okay? Did you hear from those fuck-head at Yale yet? Are you in? Her father demanded as soon as he heard her voice.

Blair could picture him perfectly, naked except for a pair of royal blue silk boxers shorts, his sleeping lover- Francois or Eduard or whatever his name was - snoring softly beside him. Harold Waldorf, Esq. used to be managing partner at a major corporate law firm, married to society hostess Eleanor and living in a penthouse with his two lovely children, Blair and Tyler. Now he bottled his own wine from the vineyards surrounding his chateau, shopped at cute French boutiques that catered exclusively to tanned gay men, and swam laps in his pool while his tanned gay lovers attended him with fresh towels and

glasses of cognac.

It was a luxe life, indeed.

"Guess where I Am?" Blair boasted in the same tone she'd used to talk to Serena. In fact, talking to her dad was exactly like talking to one of her girlfriends. He didn't mind that it was almost two in the morning in France and she had totally woken him up.

"Paris?" her dad asked hopefully. "I'll send a car for you. You'll be here in an hour."

"No, Dad," Blair whined, although she honestly wouldn't have minded being in Paris - as long as she could bring Nate and her suite at the Plaza with her. "I'm at the Plaza. I'm living here now. In a suite."

"You go girl!" her dad exclaimed. "I guess the penthouse might be a little crowded with the new baby and all."

In the background Blair heard the sound of him pouring something into a glass. He was so into his latest batch of white wine, he probably kept a bottle chilling next to the bed exactly for occasions like this.

In 'Dirty Dancing' Land, Baby's bitchy sister was performing in a stupid talent show, wearing a bikini top that was way too small for her. Blair muted the TV, spread another blob of caviar on a toast point, lit a cigarette and sighed dramatically. "It's just that I'm almost graduating and I need space- you know, to do my work and think about next year and..."

All of a sudden she had a very clear image of herself as a sort of reclusive Greta Garbo- like movie star who rarely left her hotel room, communicating with the outside world only through the roles she decided to play. The staff would pick through her trash and steal her clothes, and tourists would stand on Central Park South opposite the hotel, just waiting to catch a glimpse of her. She'd be the talk of the town.

As if she wasn't already.

"Oh, I'll bet your working," her dad scoffed between sips of whatever it was that he was drinking. "I bet that hunky boyfriend of yours is massaging your feet as we speak."

If only.

Blair giggled and scarfed down another caviar sandwich between drags on her Merit Ultra Light. "Actually Nate's on his way over," she admitted. She contemplated the bottle of champagne she'd ordered, still chilling in its silver-plated ice bucket. Nate wouldn't mind if she opened the bottle and had one tiny glass before he arrived, would he?

Or course not.

"I thought as much," her dad replied knowingly. "But you deserve it sweetie. You deserve to have it all."

As if she didn't already know that.

Blair grabbed the bottle of champagne and held it between her bare knees, expertly untwisting the wire keeper from around the cork and then inching the cork out of the bottle's neck, slowly...slowly... until...

Pop!

"Oh. My. God. You are totally having a party!" her father exclaimed. "On a school night?" he added, pretending to be horrified, as if he were a strict parent who actually cared about things like that. "Let me talk to that hunky boyfriend of yours right now."

Blair filled the champagne flute, guzzled the entire contents, and then refilled it. On screen Patrick Swayze was face-to-face with Baby's dad. "Nobody puts baby in a corner," Blair mouthed the words, even though the TV had been muted. It was the cheesiest movie, but she still fantasized about Nate defending her in such a determined, angry way. Nate was seriously hot when he was angry, which was just about... never.

It's hard to get riled up when your stoned all the time.

"I told you, Dad," Blair corrected, "Nate's not here yet." She gritted her teeth and took another gulp of the champagne. Although who knew what was taking him so goddamned long. "Anyway"- she pouted her lips for the mirror or the camera or whatever happened to be spying on her through a telescope from the treetops in Central Park- "if I deserve to have it all, then how come stupid Yale hasn't let me in yet?"

"Oh, Bear," her dad sighed in his manly-but-motherly voice that made both men and women fall in love with him instantly. "They will, dammit. They will let you in."

Blair reached for another toast point and discovered she'd eaten them all. Over the phone she heard someone mumble something in sleepy French.

"look, sugar bear, it's late. I have to go." Her dad spoke over the mumbling. "You're okay though, right? You just enjoy yourself."

Blair looked askance at the half-empty bottle of champagne and the crumbs of caviar scattered on the white china plate. 'Dirty Dancing' had ended. "Good night, Dad," she replied, feeling a little sad. She hung up and dialed Nate's cell phone again. No answer. She dialed his house line. No answer, just his admiral dad in the answering machine, reading from the actual instructions the machine came with that no normal person ever used: "You have reached the Archibald residence. Please leave a brief message and we will return your call as soon as possible."

A streetcar Named Desire, starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh, was about to start. Another old favorite. Blair put the white terrycloth bathrobe back on a fluffed up the pillows on the giant bed. Then she dialed room service again. "A hot fudge sundae, please. And a pack of Merit Ultra Lights."

She sank back on the pillows and closed her eyes. When she left his house, Nate had been partying with a bunch of stoners, including an annoying French hippie chick named Lexique. That stupid, lazy asshole who so didn't deserve to go to Yale probably hadn't even noticed that Blair had left. Tears seeped out from under her closed lids. Nate hadn't changed. Nothing had changed- except the status of her virginity. She bit her lip and fought back an angry sob. Well, so what? Nate didn't deserve sex. Besides, eating a hot fudge sundae in a Plaza hotel bed while plotting her revenge on her asshole-of-a-loser-soon-to-be-ex-boyfriend was even better than sex.

Way better.

## K AND I TAKE THEIR JOBS SUPER-SERIOUSLY

Dear Seniors,

We are so excited for next Friday, which as you know is Senior Cut Day, now known as the first day of SENIOR SPA WEEKEND!!!! Yes, it's a school day. Unfortunately we'll be too busy getting ready for our hot-stone facials and seaweed body wraps to remember to show up! Please don't be worried about getting into trouble- not that you really are. Senior Cut Day is an ancient Constance Billard School tradition, and no one's ever been expelled or even punished for it.

So here's what's happening.

Thursday night at 6:30 P.M we'll board the Archibald family's big sailboat, which is docked at Battery Park City . The Archibalds are having their annual benefit cruise to the Hamptons , and they have generously offered us a ride. As soon as we dock in Sag Harbor, we'll be picked up by a fleet of limos, which will whisk us off to Isabel Coates's totally amazing beach house, where the biggest, bestest girls-only slumber party will take place. NO BOYS ALLOWED. In the morning we'll have breakfast by the pool, catered by... TBA (we're working on getting the chef who helped Julia Roberts lose all that weight after having her twins). After that, a day of treatment brought to us by Origins. And everyone will get an Origins gift bag valued at three hundred dollars to take home wither totally refreshed and revitalized new self!

Dress: Resort casual. Towels, hairdryers, bath, and beauty products galore will be supplied. No dogs, please even if they are really small. And NO BOYS!

Let's heard it for an amazing weekend of bonding with the girls!

Big Smoochies!!



Love,

Your classmates Kati Farkas and Isabel Coates

P.S We put a suggestion box in the senior lounge, so your ideas are welcome, not that we haven't already planned the most perfect day!

P.P.S Two, four, six, eight, only one month till we graduate!!!

 Gossipgirl.net



## **HEY PEOPLE!**

### **SOME RECENT OBSERVATIONS**

#### **THE CASTAWAYS**

I honestly don't know what's gotten into a certain group of people lately. I mean is it okay to just, like, disappear?? Apparently a bunch of boys we all know and love (at least most of the time) have hijacked a very large, well-appointed sailboat and are headed into the Atlantic . It could be just another senior prank, except that half the boys on the boat are juniors. It's kind of random time to take off, especially when all of us girls could use a little entertainment. Just who do they think they are- Christopher Columbus?

#### **YOU HEARD IT HERE FIRST**

They have their choice of guys, but for whatever reason, models can't get enough of guys with guitars. Rumor has it the latest couple of the moment is a certain blond-hairedFifth Avenue -dwelling senior girl and the lead guitarist from the Raves. How, when, and where they met is a complete mystery, but talk about a perfect couple!

#### **TO GAP OR NOT TO GAP?**

Don't even try to pretend it was someone else: I saw you sneaking into the Gap on Eighty-sixth and Madison and actually trying on a plum-colored Juicy Couture terrycloth zip-up hoodie in the kids' section. Okay, I'm a snooping bitch. But the reason I'm ratting you out is I tried the very same hoodie on, and, unlike you (although I know you wanted to), I bought three of them! Why not? They're cute, and we're going to need lots of terrycloth cover-ups to wear apres le pool this summer. Plus we'll probably

spill Campari or creme de menthe or something equally devastating all over ourselves, so we'll need more than one. Besides, terrycloth is terrycloth, and what better way to show off your white new jacquard Gucci bikini than with a cute plum-colored hoodie? Think of it as a get-out-of-jail-free card: you're still not allowed to buy jeans there - heaven forbid- but you can now have my permission to purchase certain necessary items at the Gap.

### YOUR E-MAIL

*Q: Dear GG,*

Are you ever going to tell us where you're going to college next year? Have you even decided?  
-qrs

*A: Dear qrs,*

That's for me to know and you to find out. But let me ask you this- do I strike you as the indecisive type?  
- GG

*Q: Dear GG,*

I heard Damian Polk from the Raves used to live in the same building as that blond model you're always talking about. They've known each other since they were babies and they used to hook up in the elevator in the middle of the night, while the =doorman was napping.  
-ob-v-us

*A: Dear ob-v-us,*

That's a great story, but I heard Damian's family lived in Ireland until he was thirteen. Hence his funny accent and the reason why he's always seems a little drunk.  
-GG

*Q: Dear GG,*

I run the crew on a sailboat that belongs to a prominent New York family. The son, who I hear has been in lots of trouble before, took off in the sailboat yesterday evening and hasn't returned. I'm afraid his ass will be grass whenever he gets back, because his dad is kind of tough.  
-captain

*A: Dear captain,*

His ass is already grass, for more reasons than that!  
-GG

### SIGHTINGS

S and an unidentified blond hunk- possibly her brother or possibly that guitarist from the Raves- at the Central Park Zoo, feeding left-over sushi from lunch at Nicole's to the sea lions. B buying two La Perla nighties at Barneys. She seems to have developed an addiction to lingerie, but what else can one wear while lounging alone in a Plaza Hotel suite, waiting for one's boyfriend to turn up. D at Yellow Rat Bastard on lower Broadway, trying on every hat in the store. V purchasing a new lip ring - ew! - at a piercing place in Williamsburg . J in Barneys Co-op trying on every pair of Seven Jeans in the store ignoring the salesperson's suggestion that she'd have better luck finding jeans that fit in Bloomingdale's children's department. K and I at Jackson Hole again, scheming again. N- not. Where in the hell is N anyway?

Don't worry I'll find him.

You know you love me,

Gossip Girl

## MODELS WHO DATE ROCK STARS

"How come no matter what I wear I always look like a cartoon character" Jenny complained to her friend and Constance Billard School classmate Elise Wells. It was Saturday night and they were getting ready for Dan's gig with the Raves at Funkiton, a new music venue in revamped fire station on Orchard Street. Jenny glanced at Elise. "And you always look so normal."

The two girls regarded their reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of Jenny's closet door. Jenny was wearing a stretchy red top with cap sleeves and a plunging U-shaped neckline that made her breast look gargantuan. She was barely five feet tall, and her very first pair of seven jeans had always been too long for her when she bought them at Bloomingdale's, so she had the lady at the dry cleaner's on Broadway and Ninety-eighth shorten them about ten inches. Now she noticed that the purposely "antiqued" spot on each leg where her knee was supposed to be fell at mid-shin. The only acceptable part of Jenny's body was her head. She liked her big, far-apart brown eyes, her clear whiter skin, her red lips, and her curly brown hair with its straight, severe nags across the forehead. As Serena once told her, she looked like a Prada model- with oversized breast implants and stumps for legs, although Serena would never have said that part.

Elise's body was totally the opposite. She was seven inches taller than Jenny, with long skinny legs, long skinny arms, and a flat chest. Nothing was ever too tight on her, except maybe in the belly region, which had sort of a doughnut roll around it. But that was easily hidden beneath a shirt. There was really nothing Jenny could do to hide her chest. Then again, Elise was covered in Freckles- there were even freckles on her eyelids- she had chin length straw-yellow hair that was so thick and so coarse, she could barely fit it

into a rubber band.

Well nobody's perfect. Except for maybe a very select few of us.

"Let's trade tops," Elise suggested. She pulled off her black V-neck T-shirt and handed it to Jenny.

"Okay," Jenny responded dubiously, and pulled off her red one. Elise's shirt was from Express, and hers was from Anthropologie, which was slightly nicer, but Jenny didn't want to hurt Elise's feelings by saying anything. Besides the results were astronomical. Jenny's chest looked almost modest in the black top, and the red top made Elise's hair gleam with strawberry highlights neither of them had ever known she had.

"I bet Serena van der Woodsen doesn't even look at herself before she goes out," Jenny declared. She dropped down on her knees and started crawling around the room. "She probably doesn't even have to try stuff on, except for maybe shoes."

Elise put her hands on her hips. "What are you doing?"

"Wearing in the knees on my jeans," Jenny replied, still crawling. "Did you hear about Serena and Damian from the Raves?"

Elise nodded. Everyone had heard.

Jenny crawled across the matted pink carpet to her closet to select a pair of shoes. Of course, Serena never had to crawl around like a dog in an attempt to make her jeans look normal. "I don't know how she does it." She pulled her new Michael Kors gold toe-ring sandals and slid them on. Her dad said the sandals looked like something a belly dancer would wear, but she'd gotten them for free at the W photo shoot, and they were the nicest pair of shoes she owned.

How strange that she'd had that little moment of superstardom- that photo shoot with Serena- and now she was back to being plain old her, a fourteen-going-on fifteen-year-old girl with big ambitions and an even bigger chest. It wasn't like her life's ambition was to quit school at the age of fourteen and become a super model, but it would have been kind of nice if someone asked her to.

Jenny stood up and brushed off the knees of her jeans. They were completely, disappointingly unfaded and, except for the wonky placement of the distressed part of the denim, completely uninteresting-just like everything else in her closet. Serena's clothes were always so perfectly frayed, faded and worn, belying the colorful and mysterious history of their wearer. Jenny couldn't help but wonder whether her own clothes would fade and develop character too if she got kicked out of Constance and sent to boarding school.

"Ever thought about going to boarding school?" Jenny wondered out loud.

Elise made a face. "Eat school food three meals a day and live with your teachers? No way."

Jenny frowned. That wasn't how she pictured boarding school at all. In her mind boarding school meant freedom: from her manic-depressive Mr. Poet Rock God brother, from her manically overprotective and embarrassingly unkempt dad, from Constance Billard's horrendous school uniforms, from her dusty old bedroom, and from the everyday boringness of doing the same old same old now and for the next three years. It also meant opportunity: to live and go to school with boys, boys, boys and to be- the girl no one could stop talking about.

Rufus poked his head in the door, not even thinking about the fact that Jenny was no longer five years old and might be completely naked or something. His unruly hair was tied in a ponytail with a piece of the bright blue plastic bag the New York Times was delivered in every morning. "You girls want me to help you get a cab?" he asked with cheerful concern.

Jenny could tell her dad was dying to go to Dan's gig with them, but tonight was his monthly anarchist writers' workshop- the only thing he took as seriously as raising his children, even though none of his writing had ever been published.

"That's okay, Dad." Jenny smiled sweetly, daring him to say something rude about her sexy gold sandals. "Ready?" she asked Elise.

Elise smeared an extra layer of Jenny's favorite MAC Ice lip gloss on her already shiny lips. "Ready," she responded.

"You two look so..." Rufus tugged on his straggly beard, struggling for the right adjective. "Grown-up," he said at last.

Yeah, but we're not exactly models-who-date-rock-stars material, Jenny thought as the two girls contemplated their reflections in mirror. Elise had on way too much lip gloss, and Jenny kinda wished that her Kors sandals weren't totally flat, so she'd at least appear taller. After all, she wasn't going to the gig to see Dan. She wanted to meet Damian Polk and the rest of the band, and she wanted to make an impression.

Jenny stood on tiptoe and then eased her heels back into her shoes again. "Lucky we're on the guest list," she sighed, "or they'd never let us in."

Actually with a chest like that she could probably get in anywhere. But let her find out for herself.

"What the fuck?" Vanessa demanded. How had she missed them after all these years she had no idea. She twisted her head around and checked her reflection in the bathroom mirror once again. They were, four big brown moles, all lined up on her neck behind her ear like some kind of fucked-up constellation. She felt like a girl in a Clearasil commercial, panicking because she'd gotten a zit right before going out on a date. Zits were temporary, though. The moles were there to stay. Who in her right mind would keep her head shaved with moles like that on her neck?

She yanked open a drawer beneath the bathroom sink, looking for some of that skin-colored cover-up crap her sister Ruby put under her eyes when she'd been up all night. She found a stick of something called Peekaboo that was a little pinker than her natural skin tone but good enough. She dabbed some over the moles, rubbed it in, and examined the results. Now she looked like she had poison ivy, or poison neck. She considered pasting a Band-Aid across the whole area, but she didn't have one big enough to cover all four of the moles, and a Band-Aid would only draw attention to the problem. She washed off the cover-up and then dug around in the drawer, looking for something that might distract Beverly from the hideous deformities on her neck.

As if the still-healing lip piercing on her upper lip wasn't distracting enough. Beverly had been polite enough not to mention it before, but now that they were getting to know each other, he might ask if the crusty sore beneath that silver D-ring actually hurt.

And why would Beverly even want to check out her neck? They were only going to the Raves gig together- just hanging out to see if they'd mind cohabitating, as in roommates, not lovers who looked at each other's necks. Besides, Beverly was an artist. He might think her moles were cool.

A sample vial of perfume called Certainty was rolling around in the bottom of the messy vanity drawer. It sounded like a name of a tampon or a pregnancy test, but Vanessa eased the little black cap off the vial and dabbed some perfume on her wrists and temples anyway. Certainty smelled musky and powerful and might be so distracting to Beverly that he wouldn't even notice her disgusting configuration of neck moles. Maybe it would even work some sort of magic. She would walk into the club where Dan and the Raves were playing; Dan would turn purple with a mixture of desire, regret, and mad jealousy; and Beverly would feel immediately certain about wanting to live with her. As a friend, of course.

Of course.

## IT SUCKS WHEN YOUR MOOD AND YOUR OUTFIT DON'T MATCH

"Sure you're all right, man?" Damian asked for the second time through the locked bathroom stall door.

"Yep," Dan called back from the other side of the door, praying that Damian and the rest of the band would think this was just his usual pre-gig behavior and go back to playing poker and knocking back Stoli shots or whatever they were doing backstage.

"All right, then. See you in a few," Damian replied. "Nice shoelaces," he added before leaving the bathroom.

Perched on top of the toilet seat lid, Dan stared woefully down at his new sneakers and the absurdly wide pant legs that nearly covered them. Yesterday he'd wandered into 555 Soul on Broadway in SoHo and let a sales guy talk him into a completely new performance wardrobe. Big yellow-and-black two-tone T-shirt, insanely huge and baggy gray rip-stop pants with drawstrings and toggles and pockets all over them, black canvas Converse sneakers with yellow laces, and a khaki-colored truckers' hat with a picture of yellow YEILD sign on it. That hat kept his wild, shaggy hair under control and revealed his shaved neck, making him look more menacing than he'd ever thought possible. In fact, with his new outfit, he kinda looked like a shorter, skinnier Eminem. Which was not really the look he wanted at all.

None of the guys in his band had commented on his outfit when he showed up, but then again he hadn't really given them time. One look at the huge line forming outside the club and the instruments and microphones set up on the stage inside had sent him rushing to the bathroom to puke his guts out. He'd been locked in a stall ever since.

If only he had a lucky talisman like a handmade silver belt buckle or a shark tooth necklace the way most legendary rock singers probably did. He could don his lucky whatever-it-was, his nervousness would disappear, and he'd perform with complete abandon, driving the crowd insane. Instead, he just sat on the toilet in the club's garish pea-green-painted men's room and smoked his lucky Camels- about forty of them- feeling progressively sicker and sicker.

All of a sudden the men's room door creaked open and the scuffed toes of Damian's black work boots appeared under the stall door once more. "have a taste and you'll be all right," he advised, shoving an upopened bottle of Stoli under the door.

Dan took the bottle. If he was going to perform tonight he'd need to feel as fly as his outfit. He opened it and took a swig. His stomach felt so bottomless and endless, it was like pouring a teaspoon of vodka into an empty well. He took another swig and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

"See you in a few then, yeah?" Damian said again. "You might want to lose the hat, though," he added gently before leaving the men's room.

The Raves were all about not having a look and not trying too hard. Most of them still wore clothes their moms had bought them in prep school- Lacoste polo shirts, Brooks Brothers khakis- paired with something cool and absurdly expensive, like a custom-made kidskin trench coat from Dolce & Gabbana. But Dan's mom had fled to the Czech Republic with some balding, horny count before he'd even started high school, so he didn't even own any polo shirts or khakis, only the clothes he picked out for himself and paid for with the barely adequate clothing allowance Rufus gave him. He could feel his panic mounting. Who was going to want to listen to a sick, skinny high-school kid with a shaved neck wearing fashion-disaster yellow-and-black shoes?

You'd be surprised.

YOU'RE BEAUTIFUL AND YOUR MOTHER DRESSES YOU FUNNY

Skirt, shirt, bra, underwear, shoes, watch, pearl choker, pearl earrings- Serena stared at the clothes her mom had laid out neatly on the end of her canopy bed. Everything her mom had chosen was gray or navy blue, which just happened to be Yale University's colors.

Hello, dorkdom! Did she really need her mom to pick out her clothes? How old was she, anyway- five?

Her parents were in their suite of rooms, getting ready for Yale's University Yale Loves New York party for incoming freshmen from New York City at Stanford Parris III's apartment on Park Avenue and Eighty-Fourth Street. For them it was just another cocktail party- a chance to mingle with the parents of the children their own children had gone to school and tennis lessons and SAT prep with for most of their lives. No one would know each other intimately, but everyone would know everyone. People like the van der Woodsens thought of everyone in their circle as their dearest friends, but how intimate did you really want to be with someone like Stanford Parris III?

"Are you almost ready, dear?" Serena heard her mother call out to her.



"Yeah," she called back, feeling stubborn and grumpy and annoyed. After all, she could have been on her way to the Raves gig right now instead of to another totally boring and useless party with her parents. Ignoring the outfit her mother had selected for her, she sat down in front of her IMac and logged on. Most of the e-mails were from fashion houses like launch a signature fragrance or shoe, but a new message from someone at Brown topped the list, followed by a message from Harvard, and one from Princeton .

To: SvW@vanderWoodsen.com  
From: apainter@brown.edu

Carina Serena,

I used to paint faceless angels and hands without bodies. I used to be dead. Now my art has a face, and to have you here at Brown next year-oh living, breathing muse! -would be my resurrection.

I kneel at your feet.

Christian

P.S There is a rumor you are engaged to that madman lead guitarist in the Raves. My love, I pray this is only a rumor.

To: SvW@vanderWoodsen.com  
From: bboy@harvarduniversity.edu

Dear Serena,

I know you and I are cut from a different cloth, so to speak- I'm a jock from the boondocks and you're a goddess from New York City- but to quote a line from an old song, I just can't get you out of my head. When I think about you, the windows in my Jeep steam up and I can't breathe. I'm going to fail my finals because of you. I don't think they make you repeat grades if you fail a term in college the way they do in high school, but I wouldn't mind if they did, because then we'd be together for even longer. I know this is kind of crazy to say, but you're my girl, so you better come to Harvard next year. Here's to us for the next four years and forever.

Love,

Wade (your Harvard tour guide's roommate - remember me?)

To: SvW@vanderWoodsen.com  
From: Sheri@PrincetonTriDs.org

Dear Serena,

Just wanted to know that we can NOT stop talking about how you and Damian from the Raves are like THE perfect couple!! We are TOO excited to meet him, but first we have to take down all the pictures of him plastered all over our house- SO embarrassing! Give Damian a kiss for us, and tell him we love him too (even though we'd NEVER try to steal away your guy).

Love,

Your sisters, the Princeton Tri Delts

Serena winced and deleted all three stalkerish messages from her computer, hoping to delete the last one from her brain. There was nothing worse than a bunch of girls pretending to be your best friends when you didn't even know them, all gossiping about you and your new rock star boyfriend whom you'd never met. Way to make her not want to go to college at all!

She logged off without reading the rest of her mail and pulled her luxurious fair hair back into a messy ponytail with a plain white rubber band. Then she smeared her lips with Vaseline and opened her bedroom door to look for her parents.

The elder van der Woodsens had their own suite of rooms consisting of a large bedroom with a massive four-poster bed, two dressing rooms with huge walk-in closets, two full bathrooms, and a lounge with a wet bar they never used, a plasma TV they never watched, and a library full of rare books they never read, because they were always out at charity dinners or the opera or watching polo matches up in Connecticut. It could have been an apartment all by itself, but it took up only a quarter of the van der Woodsens' entire Fifth Avenue spread.

"Didn't you see the clothes I laid out for you?" her mother demanded, sweeping her dark blue eyes despairingly over her daughter. Mrs. Van der Woodsen was tall and fair like Serena, with the same symmetrical features, which had grown haughtily handsome with age. "Jeans with holes in the behind really aren't acceptable for this sort of occasion, don't you agree, dear?"

"They're not just nay old jeans," Serena said, looking down at her faded pants. "They're my favorites."

Actually, she owned around twenty pairs of jeans, but this particular pair of Blue Cults were this week's can't-live-without-them.

"The skirt and blouse I chose for you are just right," her mother insisted. She buttoned the jacket of her gold Chanel suit and glanced at the antique platinum Cartier wristwatch fastened to her slim, Santo Domingo- tanned wrist. "We're leaving in five minutes. Your father and I will be reading the newspapers in his study. Don't be difficult, darling. It's just a party. You like parties."

"Not this kind of party," Serena grumbled. Her mother raised her thin gray-blond eyebrows so fiercely she decided not to mention that she'd much rather see the Raves play than schmooze with a bunch of kids and their parents all gloating about the fact that they'd gotten into one of the toughest colleges to get into in the world.

Serena went back to her room and grudgingly changed out of her jeans and into the gray pleated Marc Jacobs skirt laid out on her bed, pairing it with a beaded aqua-colored t-shirt and her orange Miu Miu clogs instead of the boring navy blue blouse and baby blue suede Tod's loafers her mother had chosen.

And the pearls? Sorry, mom.

Her last effort was to pull out the messy ponytail and run her fingers through her pale blond hair. Then, without even a glance in the mirror, she strode out of her room and into the front hall.

If only we could all be so sure of our exquisite beauty.

"Mom! Dad! I'm ready!" she trilled, trying to sound excited about it. She'd give the party five or ten

minutes- just enough time for her parents to get involved in some supremely boring and involved conversation with Stanford Parris III or one of the other ancient dull Yale alumni who'd been attending these parties for centuries, than she'd slip out and head downtown to the Raves gig.

After all, if she was going to spend the next four years being intellectual, she needed to enjoy herself while she had the chance.

As if she didn't always enjoy herself.

## DRIFTING, DRIFTING, OVER THE OCEAN BLUE!

Jeremy, Charlie, and Anthony would not shut up about Bermuda, so when they got onboard the Charlotte, named after Nate's paternal grandmother, Nate did a search for ports in Bermuda on the boat's computer and then programmed Horseshoe Bay into the navigational system. He set the motor for .5 miles per hour. That meant they were headed to Bermuda very slowly. In fact, even though they'd left the dock in lower Manhattan nearly twenty hours ago, they were only drifting past Coney Island, in Brooklyn.

Friday night had oozed into Saturday night, and the sun hung low over Staten Island as the sailboat motored slowly southward. The air was cooler than on land and smelled like wet dog. Nate and everyone else on the boat remained stoned, sprawled on deck with their eyes half closed and their mouths hanging lazily open, or drifting languidly below decks in bare feet to replenish their stashes of beer and snacks.

It had dawned only recently that Blair wasn't onboard. He recalled that she'd called him last night from the Plaza, and that he'd sort of blown off meeting her. Of course he would have called her, but his cell phone was missing, and when he tried to use Jeremy's phone, he discovered that he'd only ever speed-dialed Blair from his stored address book, and he didn't even know her number. And when you've been stoned for almost twenty-four hours, doing something like calling information to find your girlfriends

number seems impossibly complicated.

Hello, lameness?

Nate and his father had built the Charlotte themselves, up on the Archibald compound on Mt. Desert Island, Maine. It was one-hundred-and-ten-foot ketch, huge enough to comfortably ferry one hundred-plus passengers from Battery Park City to the Hamptons, or seventeen high-school kids to Bermuda. In preparation for the upcoming cruise to the Hamptons, the kitchen had been fully stocked with artisanal cheeses, Carrs table water crackers, smoked oysters, Belgian beer, Veuve Clicquot champagne, and vintage scotch. The four bathrooms were equipped with hot showers, navy blue Frette towels, and handmade shell-shaped mini soaps with CHARLOTTE printed on them in gold. The cabin was equipped with the latest computer mapping and communication systems, and there were state-of-the-art sound systems both on deck and below decks.

After a dinner of beer, Brie, and potato chips, Nate passed up another session of bong hits with his buddies and climbed up into the crow's nest at the top of taller of the boat's two masts. He sat down and hugged his knees, contemplating the situation from up high. Since they were only drifting, he was pretty sure they weren't going to get farther than the New Jersey Shore before Monday, which was fine with him. He was also pretty sure he was just about to miss that Yale party he was supposed to go to with his parents. And he'd probably missed a whole slew of Blair's pissed-off, upset, and maybe even worried calls.

Probably.

Nate had the nagging feeling that his little foray onboard the Charlotte had been kind of a mistake. The crew would be frantic to find the boat missing, and his dad would be pissed as hell. But as long as they were back by the time the Hamptons cruise was supposed to start, there was no harm done, right? He lifted up his worn black T-shirt and checked to see if the hickey Blair had left on his belly the day before was still there. A shade lighter, but yes, still there. Just thinking about Blair eased his mind. Even if she was pissed off at him eighty percent of the time, they would stay together for always, and hopefully even go to Yale together. How good it was, he thought, as only a par-baked boy can, knowing you had someone's hand to hold when you were about to step into the big bad unknown.

"Peace, dude!" a girl's voice called up to him from the deck. "Alors, I found some Oreos for our desert!"

Nate peered down at Lexie. From where he was sat she looked very small and bright-eyed, like a little girl. All over the deck, groups of guys and a few girls were smoking and drinking blond Belgian beer out of crystal beer steins. In the aft of the boat the lazy music of one of Nate's mom's French jazz CDs wafted out of Bose waterproof speakers.

"Want one?" Lexie added. "I can climb up."

For a moment, Nate didn't respond. He shifted his gaze to the brightly lit Coney Island Ferris wheel, turning slowly round and round across the twinkling, greenish-brown water.

He was pretty sure he didn't want Lexie to join him in the crow's nest. First of all, there was hardly room up there for one person; second of all, if she did, the obvious thing would be for him to kiss her, because she was pretty and had that sexy tattoo, and because she so obviously had a crush on him.

But these days he really didn't feel like kissing anyone but Blair. After all, he and Blair were supposed to going to college together and getting married. They were going to spend their whole lives together.

Wait. Is he, like having some sort of epiphany?

Nate stood up and began to climb down out of the crow's nest. He couldn't sit up there all night, waiting for the boat to turn itself around. Not when Blair was waiting for him, not when he had his whole future ahead of him

He jumped down the ladder and Lexie handed him an Oreo. "The water makes me feel so free," she declared swaying slightly as the Charlotte drifted over a patch of rough water. Her tie-dyed dress had somehow loosened or gotten torn, and the cap sleeves drooped down over the tops of her arms, revealing her tanned shoulders and making the most of her tiny sun, moon, and stars tattoo.

Nate took an Oreo, pulled the two halves apart, and licked the white icing inside. Yes, he had his whole future ahead of him, but sometimes it's important to enjoy the simple things in life.

## THE ISLE OF B

"Will you be dining here tonight, or shall we have your food sent down to your rooms at the Plaza, miss?" Aaron asked in his best hoity-toity English butler voice.

Blair glared at the annoying dreadlocked head that had poked its way into her so-called bedroom. "Actually, I'm going out," she replied, yanking her never-worn Calvin Klein navy blue satin slip dress out of her closet. Nate was till MIA and she'd just had the humiliating experience of taking a cab home from the Plaza in her school Uniform, even though it was Saturday and there was no school.

Girls who must wear uniforms to school try their hardest not to be seen in uniform outside of school hours, and especially not on weekends.

Earlier that afternoon she's actually had a pair of Earl jeans delivered to her room at the Plaza directly from Barneys Co-op, but when the jeans arrived they were totally different style than the ones she was used to wearing- pencil straight and meant to ride so low that at least six inches of her butt crack would

show. Blair could barely get them over her knees. And, with only her school uniform, her La Perla underwear, and a white terrycloth Plaza Hotel bathrobe to wear, and nothing to do but watch TV for sixteen hours straight, she'd slowly been going insane. The Yale party Serena had mentioned would offer a welcome escape, as well as provide an opportunity to take revenge on Nate.

Roll camera.

She'd arrive at the party in a cloud of perfume and cigarette smoke, like some sort of genie, wearing something so adorably irresistible that all the incoming freshmen boys and even the stodgy old Yale alumnae at the party would toss back their scotches and fall on their knees at her immaculately manicured feet. She'd have a torrid, newsworthy affair with the handsomest, most influential one in the bunch, making sure Nate heard all about it, and then demand that the aforementioned alumnus secure her acceptance at Yale. Then she'd tell Nate to go fuck himself and go to Brown or someplace even further away, because she honestly never wanted to see his sorry face again.

"Nate's mom called. She was kind of snippy. She said she'd appreciate it if you and Nate showed up at the Yale Loves New York party tonight," Aaron informed her.

Huh?

Blair frowned down at the slip dress in her hands. It was a lovely shade of deep Yale blue, but not quite as come-hither as she would have liked. Unless she wore an outrageously sexy pair of strappy high-heeled sandals with it- of which she had many.

"I thought that party was only for people who were definitely going to Yale in the fall," Aaron persisted nosily. "You didn't get in already, did you?"

Ignoring him, Blair pulled one of those mini poncho things she didn't even remember buying from out of her closet. It was a sort of stripy blue-gray, one of Missoni's latest weaves. She held it against the dress to see if it would go, and it did, but it wasn't exactly the alluring you-know-you-want-me look she needed to get those Yalies hearts aflutter.

She threw Aaron an icy get-the-fuck-out-of-here-I'm-trying-to-get-dressed glance. "For your information, no I didn't find out- yet. However, I am confident that eventually I will get in, so I really don't see why I shouldn't attend this party." She walked over to the door, and gripped the doorknob, preparing to slam it in Aaron's face. He'd gotten into Harvard early admission. What the fuck did he care?

Aaron backed away, holding up his hands to show that he meant no harm. "No need to be so hostile."

Nothing makes a girl feel more hostile than being accused of being hostile.

Blair slammed the door. A few minutes later, she opened it again, wearing the royal blue slip dress and a pair of silver metallic three-and-a-half-inch Manolo sandals. She teetered down the hall to her old room. Baby Yale had the perfect notice-me accessory for her outfit. If Blair could just sneak into the nursery without anyone seeing...

Yale's room was decorated in shades of pale yellow and peach and was filled with plush toys and miniature wooden furniture. The crib was draped with thick white mosquito netting imported from India, so that it was impossible to see if Yale was sleeping inside it or not, but there was a hush about the room that suggested she was. It also suggested that the baby was still in quarantine.

Oops.

Blair tiptoed up to the buttery yellow antique armoire, slid open the top drawer, and removed a small white velvet jewelry box. Then closed the door and tiptoed over to the crib.

"I'll bring it back, I promise," she whispered to the blanketed bundle lying peacefully inside. She lifted up the mosquito netting and planted a kiss on Yale's soft pink cheek, too focused on her prize to notice that the baby was wearing little mittens on her hands to keep her from scratching her rosy, rash-ridden body.

Usually it's the younger sister who steals stuff from her older sister's room, but, as baby Yale will eventually find out, Blair isn't exactly your average older sister.

#### SPEAKING OF LITTLE SISTERS....

The Lower East Side was one of those lucky New York neighborhood that had been cool forever but was just out of the way had dirty enough to remain free of tourists and Starbucks, and to resist becoming the trendy neighborhood of the moment like the Meatpacking District had become. A line of girls in halter tops and pleated miniskirts and guys in jeans and polo shirts with the collars turned up had formed outside Funktion, the Orchard Street club where the Raves were performing.

Jenny gripped Elise's elbow, gloating inwardly at how cool it was not to have to wait in line with the others, worrying about whether or not the bouncer would let them in. she gave them her name, the velvet rope parted, and in they went.

Ta-da! Instant coolness.

Inside, Funktion was smaller than Jenny had envisioned, and even though it was new, it felt old. The club's floor was painted black and the walls were made of cement blocks painted red. It was crowded,

and instead of sitting at the black-and-white checkerboard tables, people crowded near the stage, standing up with beers in hand. The coolest and corniest thing about the club was the fireman's pole left over from when it had been a firehouse. The pole descended centre stage from the ceiling, providing a dramatic entrance for whatever was performing.

Jenny wondered if they should brave the bar and order drinks, or if they would have more luck if they just sat down, looking bored and sophisticated until a cocktail waitress came and took their order. Maybe they didn't need to drink at all. Every girl over the age of nine and under the age of twenty-nine was in love with the Raves. Just being in the same room with them, live, would be intoxicating enough.

She tugged on the strap of Elise's black sequined Banana Republic purse and led the way to the back of the club so they could sit down and focus on looking drunkenly bored, like the fashion models always looked in those candid pictures in the front pages of the New York magazine.

The Rave's drummer and bassist were already onstage, fiddling with their instruments and testing mikes.

"A, B, C, D, E, F, G," the drummer sang into his mike, his eyes closed and his face earnest, like he was singing the most heart-wrenching song ever written. "Tell me what you think of meeeee."

"He's cute!" Jenny whispered in Elise's ear.

"Who?" Elise demanded, peering at the stage. "The drummer? But he's, like, twenty-five years old!"

So?

"So?" Jenny retorted. "Aren't they all twenty-five?"

"But he's wearing overalls." Elise wrinkled her freckled nose in disgust. "The guitarist, whatshisname... Damon... no, Damian... the one Serena's dating? He's the cute one," she insisted. "He has freckles like me, and that accent!" she gushed. "And don't forget about your brother. He's not twenty-five."

Jenny rolled her eyes. Okay, so the drummer was wearing white painter's overalls, with a pink-and-Kelly-green-stripped polo shirt and new white Treton tennis shoes. It was a bizarrely innocent and preppy outfit for someone famous for breaking his drumsticks against his forehead during concerts. But that was part of his appeal, part of the whole band's appeal. The Raves were a perfect mixture of psychotic serial killer and loveable goofball mama's boys, like Marilyn Manson crossed with the scarecrow from 'Wizard of Oz'.

"I like him," Jenny insisted. She adjusted her chair so she was looking directly at the drummer. He winked in her general direction and she giggled, blushing furiously.

"A lotta pretty girls here tonight," the drummer drawled into his mike and then grinned right at Jenny. He had straight white teeth and a wide mouth, like Cheshire Cat, and his dark hair was short and neatly combed, like he'd just come from that old barber shop on Eighty-third and Lexington where all the Upper East Side boys go with their dads for their first haircuts.

"He reminds me of the fat guy from that movie," Elise observed, as if anyone would understand who she was talking about.

"he's not fat," Jenny shot back.



Elise pulled an unopened pack of Marlboro Lights out of her sparkly purse and threw on the table. "You can't really tell if someone's fat until you see them naked."

Jenny considered this as she stared at the drummer. She didn't even know his name, but she liked him. She just did. And she wouldn't have minded seeing him naked. After all, the total number of boys she'd seen completely naked in her lifetime added up to what- zero?

The club was filling up. Jenny even recognized a few people from the line outside who'd finally made it in. All of a sudden the lights went out, except for a single bare bulb illuminating the fireman's pole. Jenny grabbed Elise's hand underneath the table and squeezed it hard, barely able to contain her excitement. Then Damian, the Raves' lead guitarist, slid down the pole, his reddish blond hair sticking up like he'd slept on it funny. He was wearing a plain white T-shirt with a big black capital R on the front of it- the Raves' new promo T-shirt, which he'd designed himself.

If you call that a design.

The thing about the Raves was they could get away with wearing anything they wanted or doing anything they pleased because they were true Thoroughbreds- good kids from good Upper East Side families who'd gone to boarding school together and then formed a band instead of going to college. A few months back, Rolling Stone had even printed a piece describing how every member of the Raves had gotten into Princeton and how one fateful May night before graduating from boarding school, when they were performing in a Deerfield coffeehouse, a kid in the audience had just happened to be on the phone with his record executive dad, who'd sign them right then and there. The four boys decided not to go to college at all, because what better way to thank your parents for giving you everything you ever wanted than to buy you own car and house before the age of twenty? In the end, being rock stars would be much more profitable than getting a college degree in some completely useless subject like philosophy. Plus, the same record executive happened to be married to the director of a French modeling agency, which meant the band could hang out with beautiful French models all the time- a pretty decent perk.

Jenny looked on anxiously as Dan slid down the pole after Damian, landing painfully on his knees. His face was green, his hair was clumpy with sweat, and his eyes were sort of rolling back into his head. He also dressed like Mr. Way Into Hip-Hop, which totally clashed with the other Raves' grown-up-prep-school-boy ensembles.

"What's with the pants?" Elise asked, looking alarmed, as if she couldn't quite believe that she'd once allowed Dan to kiss her. "And what's with the hair?"

Jenny shrugged her shoulders. She had to admit Dan looked kind of weird, but she would much rather make goo-goo eyes at the Raves' drummer than try to deconstruct why her brother was suddenly trying to look like Eminem. The drummer smiled at her again and she batted her eyes, wishing her eyelashes were longer or that she'd worn more mascara. She also wished she had the nerve to go up to the bar and ask the bartender to buy the drummer a shot or something. It seemed like the kind of thing Serena would do. If only Serena were there. Or maybe it was best that she wasn't. After all, the drummer was smiling at her. If Serena had been there, Jenny might have gone unnoticed.

The crowd was noisy now and seemed to have doubled in size. Elise lit a cigarette and passed it to Jenny. No one had even offered to bring them drinks, but smoking in a room full of legal adults when you were only fourteen felt cool enough.

Damian twanged his guitar and the drummer banged out a drumroll. The anorexic, dark-haired bassist cracked his knuckles. Dan cleared his throat right into the microphone, a disgusting, phlegmy sound.

Gross.

"I guess I should start singing," he mumbled almost incoherently. The crowd tittered. Jenny thought Dan sounded exactly like he did the morning he'd woken up to find they'd run out of instant coffee and he'd become so weak he'd puked. Jenny had to run out to the deli, and it had taken four cups to revive him. She cocked her head to one side, inhaled, and blew a long stream of smoke into the air. Maybe he was just pretending to be out of it so everyone would be surprised when he started going nuts like he had at Vanessa's birthday party.

Or maybe not.

## EVEN V CAN'T WATCH THIS TRAIN WRECK

Beverly was waiting for Vanessa outside the club, wearing the same loose black pants and orange rubber flip-flops as yesterday. His black hair was parted down the middle and his pale blue eyes were shaded by small, round mirrored sunglasses. Very John Lennon meets Keanu Reeves.

"Hi," Vanessa greeted him, hoping she didn't seem too excited to see him again. "Nice glasses."

'Love the lip ring. You smell fantastic', she willed him to say in response. 'And with all certainty I've decided to move in with you!'

"Should we go in?" was all he asked instead.

The band had already started to play and the line outside the club had dwindled. Vanessa went straight to the front. "Abrams. I'm on the guest list," she told the bouncer. All of a sudden it occurred to her that Dan was about to see her with another guy for the very first time. If only she had the nerve to garn Beverly and make out with him right in front of the stage.

As if Dan would even notice.

The bouncer gave them the once-over and then unhooked the red velvet rope. Vanessa could hear people in line behind them moaning jealously as they went inside. Beverly didn't say anything, as if cool things like that happened to him every day.

Funktion was loud and crowded and smoky and hot, just the way clubs were supposed to be. The Raves were playing with their usual bravado, but the audience seemed to be singing louder than Dan was. Vanessa couldn't see him yet, but it almost sounded like Dan was choking on something.

'Crack me like and ehh!  
Burn a hole in my finger 'til I find myself  
Find myself losing you!  
Losing you and missing stuff  
Missing how you kicked my ass!"

Whoa, that song wouldn't be autobiographical, would it?

It was a new song, one that Dan had written only last week. Somehow the hard-core Raves fans had bootlegged a version from their practice sessions and had already memorized the lyrics. Now they were shouting them out, which was a good thing because Dan was barely audible.

Vanessa eased her way through the tightly packed crowd to the back of the club. Dan's little sister Jenny and her friend were seated at a table in the corner, smoking cigarettes and nodding their chins to the music with such studied boredom it was almost obvious they'd been practicing in front of a mirror.

Beverly pointed to a table near the fire exit where there was one free seat. "Go ahead," he told Vanessa. He perched on the table and indicated that she should have the seat. "I'm not sure how much more of this I can take."

Vanessa pressed her lips together and sat down. What was that supposed to mean? That he didn't like her? That he didn't want to live with her? This wasn't what she'd imagined. They were supposed to sit together in an intimate corner, accidentally knocking knees and touching elbows and getting more and more into each other, all the while pretending to listen to Dan sing.

But maybe that was part of the problem. Dan wasn't singing at all, only the audience was.

'Do you miss me? Do I miss you?  
I know, I know  
That's not the fucking point.  
We were kinda like mowing the grass-  
Looked good, smelled good  
But such a pain in the ass!"

Dan clutched his stomach, gasping into the mike, which he held in white-knuckled fists, his eyes red-rimmed and his sorry mouth gapping like a dying fish's. A fish dressed like the king of MTV Raps, in weird baggy pants and ugly sneakers, his hair all sweaty and gross and his neck shaved unevenly.

See what happens to you when we break up? Vanessa thought for a fleeting, gloating moment. Then again Dan looked so pathetic it was almost embarrassing to admit she even knew him. She glanced

atBeverly . He was biting his cuticles and wiggling his foot like someone waiting for a bus.

All of a sudden the distinctive sound of vomit rising to the surface blared over the speakers and Dan staggered offstage, taking the microphone with him. The band continued to play even louder still, with Dan retching miserably in the background.

Way gross.

Vanessa touchedBeverly 's elbow. "Maybe we should go," she offered apologetically. It felt sort of wrong to leave Dan retching backstage when they'd once been so close, but then again, he was the one who wanted to be a rock star. Besides, there was probably a gang of hot blond Raves groupies moping Dan's head with a cool, damp towel and spoon-feeding him mineral water at that very moment. He didn't need her anymore.

Beverly nodded and slipped of the table. "There's this party my Pratt friends are putting on that's been going on since March. Let's check it out."

He held out his hand, and Vanessa noticed for the first time that he was missing the last joint on the middle finger of his left hand.

Ew!?!

She tried not to stare and allowed him to pull her to her feet. If only Dan would come back onstage long enough to see her leaving with another guy. But the club was way too crowded for ex-girlfriend sightings, and besides, Dan was otherwise occupied.

Again the sound of retching came over the speakers, nearly drowning out the music.

A little advice, dude: We all know how attached you are to that mike, but next time you're gonna hurl, please leave it behind?!

Luckily for Dan, Damian and the other members of the band had enough confidence and humor not to get all uptight about the fact that their new lead singer was puking his guts out a few feet offstage. They'd played right through Dan's little episode, subtly cut the sound to his mike, and then segued into an old Raves song that Dan had never heard before:

'Babycakes, you make my eyes scream  
Lick the drips, then toss the come a-waaayee'

No wonder why they were looking for a songwriter.

The crowd went wild, singing the words with more passion than ever. Dan remained offstage with his head between his knees, trying to remember how he'd gotten himself into this situation in the first place. How on earth had he gone from reclusive high-school poet to the baggy-pants-wearing front man of a famous band when he so obviously lacked the mettle for it?

Before the gig started, he'd done what Damian had suggested and drank some vodka. Okay- he'd drunk close to half the bottle, but instead of relaxing him or giving him the courage to perform, it had made him feel totally toxic, especially when combined with an entire pack of cigarettes.

Well, duh!

The light was dim backstage, and the wooden floor was sticky with spilt beer and cigarette ash. Dan gritted his teeth as another wave of nausea gripped him, but he squeezed his eyes shut and fought it off. Suddenly someone tapped him on the shoulder. "Eet's all right, mon cher. 'Ave a seep of tonique et voila- you are better, yeah?"

Dan looked up to find a gorgeous girl in her early twenties standing over him with a little bottle of Schweppes tonic water and a glass of ice in her hands. She poured the tonic over the ice and squatted down beside him.

"Here. No lime, yeah?"

Dan didn't know what to say. He'd never drunk tonic without vodka, but at this point he'd try anything. The girl had long honey-colored hair and was deeply tanned. She was wearing a tight white tank top and a swishy green skirt that barely covered the tops of her long, tan thighs. Her eyes were olive green and she kind of smelled like pine nuts. He took the glass and put it to his lips, taking a tiny tentative sip. It would be just his luck for the sip to backfire on him, spewing all over the girl's beautiful hair. Miraculously, though, it didn't. He took another sip, and then another, and with each sip, his head cleared ever so slightly.

"Zat's enough," the girl told him firmly and took the glass away. She put it and the empty bottle on top of an unused amp and turned back to Dan. "When zee boyz are fineeshed, they vill make a party," she continued, her olive green eyes sleepy and confident. "And zen we vill talk."

Dan nodded obediently, as if she was making complete sense, he was pretty sure the girl was French, and when she said "And zen we vill talk," it almost sounded like she had more than a little polite chit-chat in mind. But how could she possibly find him attractive in his current state? Maybe his performance translated better in another language.

The girl stood in the wings, watching the ban finish up their song. "Zey will play two more songs et puis finis, yeah?" she declared.

Dan nodded again. That sounded about right. A tattoo encircled the girl's tanned ankle. At first glance Dan thought the tattoo was of a snake; then he realized it was a fox curled around her leg asleep.

Oh, the poems he could write about that fox if only he had a pen, a notebook, and a large container of extra-strength Advil!

He cleared his cigarette-abused throat. "I'm Dan," he croaked, extending his hand but not daring to stand up.

The girl smiled, a sexy little gap appearing between her front teeth. Then she walked over, grasped his clammy hand and bent down to kiss his clammy cheek. "I know who you are," she murmured breathily into his ear. "Et je m'appelle Monique."

Hmmm, Dan mused drunkenly. Was there even a word for foxy in French?