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A Girl Like You

Written by Gemma Burgess

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GEMMA BURGESS

A Girl Like You

AVON

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For Paul
Because you rock.

February. (This year.)

I never thought I'd spend hours crying on the floor of a hotel shower.

The weird thing is that underneath the hysteria, I'm completely aware how dramatic-yet-amusing this is. I'm crying for a soul-shakingly horrible reason, my contact lenses are flipping over in my eyes from the tear-water onslaught and I don't have the strength to get up, turn off the shower and reach for a towel . . . but I can still see that this is a teeny tiny bit funny.

Is it normal to feel so detached from reality after a heartbreak? Is this heartbreak? God, I don't know.

And as usual, my mind is wandering. I can't help but notice how nice the shower gel is, and how I wish I had a dinner plate showerhead at home, because crying under the pathetic trickle in my skinny white bath is *so* depressing.

Home, oh God, home.

Then reality hits me and I start sobbing again.

I wonder how my black eye is coming along, but I can't bear to look in the mirror. I swear my jowls droop when I'm this tired. On top of everything else that life has landed me with (inability to tell right from left, inability to tell lust from love, inability to drink whisky without becoming really drunk), that's just not fair.

The sick feeling I've had for days just won't go away. I wonder if it ever will.

I think I'll make the water a little bit hotter and curl up on the floor. There. I'm almost comfortable. The shower is huge, taking up about half the bathroom, which, like the rest of the hotel room, is dark and sexy with a dash of chinoiserie, and flattering lighting that whispers *five star* in a posh accent. Hey, if you're going to have a breakdown, you may as well have it in the Mandarin Oriental in Hong Kong, that's what I always say.

Perhaps I should call my sister. Sophie. She is always good at being comforting. That's the best thing about little sisters: they spend so much time wishing they were elder sisters (when they're waiting to go to big school, waiting to get a bike without training wheels, waiting to get their ears pierced, though wily Sophie got her ears pierced the same day as me, despite the fact that I'd been begging for YEARS and I was 13 and she was only 11) that in the end they're far wiser than the elder ones could ever be. She's in Chicago right now, so that's only . . . Oh, I can't figure out time differences.

I don't even know what time it is here. Late afternoon?

It feels like the sun hasn't properly risen in Hong Kong today. It's grey and humid and thunderstormy. I love it when the weather matches my mood.

I think I'm almost sick of being in the shower. Perhaps I should go and lie on the floor of the hotel room again. I spent a good two hours crying next to my open suitcase earlier. I estimate . . . Wait. Was that the door?

I stare into space, listening intently.

Another knock, very loud and impatient. Not like the soft knock of the hotel staff.

Maybe it's him! Who else could it be? Yes! It must be! It's him!

I scramble up and turn off the shower, shouting 'coming!', wrap the bathrobe around myself and hurry to the door, my

hair dripping water all over my face. I knew he'd find out I was here, I knew it was a mistake, I knew—

I'm stunned. It's not the man I was expecting.

'What are you doing here?' I finally croak.

'What are *you* doing here?' he retorts angrily. 'And Christ, what the fuck happened to your face?'

'I got in a fight,' I say sarcastically, as he barges in and slams the door behind him, pushing me through into the bedroom.

'We have to call Sophie and your parents, *now*,' he says.

I sigh. 'Why?'

'Because you've been gone for almost two full days? Because you flew halfway across the world and didn't tell anyone where you were going or what you were doing? Because you turned your fucking phone off?'

'It ran out. Of juice,' I say, very sarcastically, in a way that I know will annoy him. I see his eyes light up with anger and feel a jolt of joy that I'm making someone else feel as bad as I do right now. (Is that evil?)

'Do you have any fucking idea what you've put us through?' he shouts.

'What do you mean "us"?' I reply. I'm so exhausted and miserable that I don't care if I sound like a brat. 'They're my family, my friends! How dare you stalk me like this?'

He stares at me for a second, and then says flatly: 'You stupid bitch.'

'SHUT UP!' I shout. 'Just SHUT the FUCK UP!' I know I'm hysterical, but I'm so tired, and I feel sick, and I can't stop crying. I don't want to be here anymore, and nothing is how it should be, and my life will never work out, because I don't know what I want or how I'd get it if I did, and as I think this I scream so loudly that tiny lights dart in front of my eyes.

Then, to my shock, he slaps me sharply on the cheek . It's not hard, but I'm so stunned that I immediately shut up, mid-wail. He *slapped* me?

I sit down on the bed. Wow, that was dramatic. Especially for me. I've never been a drama queen. More of a drama lady-in-waiting.

He sits down next to me, trying to get his breath back as I stare at him, my mouth still open in surprise. He looks tired, I notice. It must be Friday by now. Is it? What day did I leave London? I can't remember. My throat hurts.

I suddenly can't go on. I can't bear this. I can't bear any of this. So I flop on the bed, curl up in a little ball and start weeping.

Again.

It's so pathetic, I know, but I can't stop myself. How can I possibly have any tears left? Oh, God. I want my mum.

The wrong man puts a big paw out and starts stroking my head, clearing the wet hair off my face and making soothing 'shhh' noises.

'I'm sorry,' I sob. 'Thank you for finding me. You were right. I saw them . . . and my face, my face . . .'

'He's not worth it. I'm sorry I slapped you, I'm so sorry . . .'

He keeps talking, but I can't hear him, because I really can't stop crying now, and I just wish I'd never come here. What on earth was I thinking? I cry and cry until I finally cry myself into exhaustion. The last thing I think, as I go to sleep, is thank God he found me.

Chapter One

September. (Last year.)

This is it. My first ever date.

Not many people have their first date at 27, and I'm not saying I'm proud of it, but it's true, and it's one of the things you should know about me. Another is that I'm nervous. My stomach hurts from nerves. Perhaps I'm coming down with something. God, then I won't be able to snog him. Will I snog him? I don't know. How do you snog someone for the first time? Do people even still say 'snog' at the age of 27?

I haven't had a first kiss since I was 20, for fuck's sake. I've probably forgotten how.

I'm meeting my date at a place called Bam-Bou at 8 pm, and I'm on the tube. In fact, I'm 40 minutes early. Typical.

It's not like I think he's that amazing, or even – ahem – remember him that well. Perhaps my sister was right. I should have picked someone I didn't like at all for the first date. 'Sharpen your tools on someone blunt,' was her exact suggestion.

I wonder if I even have any tools to sharpen.

I'm not a recovering nun, by the way. I've just been in a relationship forever. I mean I *was* in a relationship. I'm not used to using the past tense. I've only just stopped saying 'we' when I talk about things I've done. As in, 'we loved that movie', 'we went there for dinner'. That's what happens when you have one

boyfriend from the age of 20 until 27-and-a-half. I left him in July and here I am, just over two months later. Officially single. And officially dating.

Paulie – my date – is the first guy to ask me out. Not the first guy to ask for my number, mind you. One of the things I've learnt in the past two months of singledom is that guys sometimes ask for your number and then don't call, even though you think they will, and you'll work yourself up into a nervous frenzy every night waiting.

I stop for a drink at a bar called The Roxy, to kill time and check my makeup. A double gin and tonic will take the edge off. Possibly two edges.

I met Paulie last weekend and though he didn't take his sunglasses off (well, it's been an unusually sunny September, and Plum and I were standing around outside a pub trying to smoke and flirt, or 'smirt' as it's apparently called) I definitely had the impression he liked me.

He gave me his card at the end of the night and told me to email him. So I did.

And here I am. Losing my dating virginity.

It was surprisingly easy to get asked out, after all the obsessing, I mean light discussing, I've been doing with Sophie, Plum and Henry for these past two months. Everyone had different advice, of course.

'Just laugh a lot,' said my sister Sophie (the only one in an actual relationship). 'It always worked for me.'

'When a guy talks to you, touch his arm and flick your hair,' said Plum (last relationship: depends how you'd define 'relationship'). 'It's subtle body language, and those signals show that you're interested.'

'Why do you keep asking me this shit? Get drunk and jump on him. It would do it for me,' said Henry (last relationship: never).

'I thought you were confident?' said my mother in dismay

(married to my father forever, has hazy understanding of modern dating due to serious period drama box set addiction).

So they weren't much help.

Anyway, I always thought I *was* confident. Ish.

But being single and being confident is a whole different thing to being in a relationship and being confident. It's *easier* in a relationship. Peter, my ex-boyfriend, was an ever-buoyant life-vest of reassurance. I didn't have to make new friends, I just had a handful of old ones and shared his. If I couldn't talk to anyone at a party, I talked to him. If I found a group intimidating, he would talk for me. And so on.

So, the first time I found myself being chatted up by a moderately good-looking guy in a bar, I felt sweatily self-conscious and couldn't wait to get away. (He seemed to feel the same way about me after about 45 seconds.)

Confidence is a stupid word. It's not like I think I'm worthless or anything. Sometimes I just have trouble thinking of something to say. And then, when I say things, I sometimes wonder if they sound a bit shit. I talk to myself a lot, in my head. But everyone does, right?

Perhaps it's not confidence, perhaps there's simply a knack to being chatted up. I think I'm getting better at it. Maybe. I like bars and drinks and what do you know, so do men.

And so here I am. On a date. High five to me.

I wonder how Peter is. We broke up in July, he moved in with his brother Joe, took a sabbatical from work and went on a year-long backpacking trip. He said it was one of the things he felt he missed out on by being in a relationship with me for the whole of his 20s.

I wonder what I missed out on.

I guess I'm about to find out.

Breaking up with him was the hardest thing I've ever had to do. There isn't much in books or music or films that helps you leave someone who is very, very, nice but just not quite right.

He's not mean, you're not miserable, no one cheats. It's just a sad, slow process of ending it.

Peter's such a reasonable guy that he didn't even disagree when I said, 'I don't think we're right for each other, I think deep down you know it too. So I think we should break up.' He just nodded. He would have gone on living with me for years, without questioning if we actually had a good relationship or just a functioning one. All Peter really wanted was an easy life. And – wait, why am I *still* thinking about my ex-fucking-boyfriend? I'm almost on a *date*. Stop it, Abigail.

Gosh, my palms are clammy. Perhaps I'll need Botox shots in them. They do that, you know. I wonder if my armpits are sweaty too. Fuck. I can't tell. I'll just have to keep my arms down all night.

Oh, look, I've finished my drink. May as well have another.

Thank hell I'm finally going on a date. For the six months before we broke up, the flip side to the thought 'I'm not happy, I want to leave Peter,' was the thought 'but then I'll be single, and I'll have to meet new men, and go on dates, and I don't know how.'

For a while, that thought – that *fear* – was enough to keep me from leaving Peter. Fear of never having anyone think I was pretty, fear of never being asked out, fear of never falling in love again, in short: fear of getting Lonely Single Girl Syndrome, of never finding the right person and dying alone. Why take the risk?

Pretty standard stuff, right?

And yet, the last two months of singledom have been infinitely more fun than the last year (or three) of my relationship. After I dealt with the inevitable emotional fallout and guilt from ending my old life (my advice: move out as fast as you can, so your new surroundings match your new state of mind, and get a haircut, for the same reason) I immediately started structuring a new one. Work is the same, obviously, so the focus has been on my

previously neglected social butterfly skills. Dinners and drinks and lunches and parties: you name it, I'm doing it. Other nights I rejoice in time alone, reading chicklit in the bath or going to sleep at 8 pm covered in fake tan and a hair mask.

I love it.

I love my new flatshare, too. It's in the delightfully-monikered Primrose Hill. I'm renting a room from Robert, a friend of my sister's fiancé. I haven't seen him much since I moved in a month ago. When we do meet, in the kitchen or the hallway, we make polite small talk and that's about it. Which suits me just fine.

My bedroom is on the top floor of the house. It's small and quiet and best of all, it's mine, all mine. It's not perfect, of course – the ensuite bathroom is poky, and the wardrobe is tiny, but my clothes have adjusted very well to the transition. They're such troopers.

I look down at my black peep-toes. Yes, you, I think. You're a trooper.

What, like you've never talked to your clothes.

OK, it's 7.50 pm. I can walk to Bam-Bou now. I'm sure Paulie will be early. Men are always early for dates, right? I don't know! God. How did I end up being the only 27-year-old I know who's never ever gone out on a date?

Now I'm nervous again.

Could I have a boyfriend called *Paulie*? It sounds like a budgerigar. Right. Here we are. Bam-Bou. He said he'd meet me in the bar on the top floor.

'Hi!' I say, grinning nervously, when I finally reach the sexy, dark little bar. Paulie is sitting on a stool in the corner, wearing a very nice dark grey suit. He's hot, though a bit jowlier than I remembered.

'Ali,' he says, putting down his BlackBerry and leaning over to give me a doublekiss hello. Cold cheeks. Sandalwoody aftershave.

'Abi . . . gail,' I correct him. 'Abigail Wood.' There's nowhere

for me to sit. Never mind. I'll just lean. Oh God, I feel sick with nerves.

'Right,' he says, going back to his BlackBerry. 'Pick a drink, I've just got a work thing to reply to . . .'

I nod, and looking around, pick up a drinks menu and start reading it. What shall I pick? I'm puffed! How embarrassing to be panting this much. Why would you have the bar on the fourth floor of a building with no lift?

I choose a martini, and as he orders it, I try to look composed, like I date all the time. Who me? I'm on a date. Who him? He's my date.

'So. How was your day?' I ask, when Paulie returns. Is that a good question? I don't know. My mum would ask it.

'Scintillating,' he replies crisply, leaning into me. Cripes, he is definitely hot. Very dashing eyebrows.

'What do you do?' I am trying to smile and look interested and nice and pretty, all at the same time.

'I work for a branding agency,' he says. 'I'm head of account management.'

'Oh, how interesting!' I say. Wow. I really do sound like my mum. 'Where is your office?'

'Farringdon.'

'How long have you been doing that?' But I can't seem to stop.

'About seven years. I started my own company straight out of university, managing chalet bitches, as that was what I loved,' he pauses, and grins to himself for a second. 'You know. But that got tired after a couple of years, so here I am.'

'Golly,' I say brightly. 'That *does* sound interesting.' Why do I feel like I'm at a job interview?

'It was,' he nods, his smile faltering slightly.

'Where was the chalet company based?' Is this normal?

'Verbier.'

'Do you speak French?' Stop asking questions.

'I can hold my own.'

'Are you from London originally?' But what if there's an awkward pause in conversation?

'I am,' he says. 'Though I left when my parents split up. My mum moved to Devon and I moved with her. I haven't seen my dad in twenty years.'

'Oh, I'm . . . sorry . . .' Shit.

He smiles at me, slightly less enthusiastically than before. Perhaps talking about his mum and dad makes him sad. I'll change the subject. Is it hot in here? My face feels so flushed.

'So, have you eaten here before?' I ask. I wonder if he can see me sweating.

'Yeah, it's great,' he nods. 'The pork belly is historic. In fact, our booking isn't for another 45 minutes, but I bet we could get settled early. Shall we?'

'Yes!' I exclaim, getting up and following him down the stairs. 'I'm so hungry! I had a sandwich from Pret for lunch and I swear they're basically carbs and air, I am always hungry mid-afternoon, so then I had a chocolate bar, which I know is . . .' Oh, my fucking God, I'm babbling absolute shit, and he's not even listening. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up, Abigail.

'Oooh! What shall we order?' I ask, as we sit down at our table. Paulie doesn't say anything. Shit, we can't just sit here in silence. Without even thinking, I start reading the menu out loud. It's not something I've ever done before, but nerves are enough to make a girl a little, you know, antsy.

'Steamed edamame! They're lovely. Saigon-style crepe, hmm, not sure about that . . . Har gau, they're a favourite of mine. Soft-shell crab! I love crab, my sister hates it, she once had food poisoning in Singapore. I'm not—'

'Excuse me, I think we're ready to order some wine,' interrupts Paulie, gesturing towards the waitress at the door.

'Wine! Great,' I say, and take a deep breath. You're being a dickhead, Abigail, I think firmly. Sort it out. But I can't. I'm a

rolling snowball of nerves and stupidity, gathering momentum every second. 'I seem to be impervious to alcohol recently, since I left my, uh, in the last few weeks. I mean, I drink, you know, a lot, but I don't get hangovers lately. It's like I'm an alcoholic goddess!' Did you just say that Abigail? You absolute idiot.

'Cheers to that,' says Paulie, and drinks half his glass in one gulp.

I take a deep breath and smile, and drain half my martini in the next sip. Please God. Let this be over soon.