

The
NERDY
and the
DIRTY

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b. t. gottfred

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(As part of the agreement with Penelope and Benedict that allowed me to publish this novel, I agreed to let them write the dedication.)

*This book is for anyone who ever is, was, or will be nerdy or dirty.
That should pretty much mean this book is for anyone ever born.*

—P & B

“I’m invisible.”

—*Penelope Lupo*, 16

“I am the center of the universe.”

—BENEDICT PENDLETON, 16



— 1 —

BENEDICT MAXIMUS PENDLETON

“I’M VERY HANDSOME. I DON’T REALLY THINK this is a question of opinion. I am objectively handsome,” I said to Robert, who was staring at his roast-beef sandwich. He always stared at his sandwiches. This made it difficult to have conversations. I’ve talked to him about it. He’s working on the problem.

“I agree, Benedict,” Robert said to me. Toward the roast beef but to me.

“Of course you agree. You are a logical person. I am six feet one inch tall, slender but not skinny because I do fifty push-ups every morning and every night. My eyes and nose are proportional. My ears might be slightly large for my head, but my thick head of hair, which I style every day, should more than compensate. I also dress very well. Not trendy. I dress with sophistication.”

“I like how you dress,” Robert said.

“Thank you. I know you do. Sport jackets are woefully under-represented in the wardrobes of today’s teenagers. Do you know why I am telling you this, Robert?”

“No.”

“I am telling you this, Robert, because I think it is time I get a girlfriend.”

“You’ve never had a girlfriend.”

“I know! Obviously. But only because my dad told me I could not date until I was sixteen. He wanted me to concentrate on school. This was great advice.”

“Your dad is very smart.”

“He is. Obviously. But I turn seventeen in six days and not one girl has expressed interest in me the past year, and though some of the fault must lie in the female student population of Riverbend High School, I must also admit that, with my having been on the proverbial sidelines of the dating scene until a year ago, they might not be aware of my availability and interest.”

In the several seconds it took Robert to respond, Evil Benny started talking in my head. Evil Benny is not real. I’m not crazy. It’s just self-doubt. I call this voice, this self-doubt, Evil Benny because I want to make sure my better self differentiates itself from my lesser self. And Evil Benny, obviously, is my lesser self. It is easier to ignore Evil Benny if I make him a separate person. I don’t actually think he’s a separate person. That would make me crazy, which I have already stated I am not. I just make him separate in my head. Evil Benny says very untrue, very destructive things like “You don’t have a girlfriend because you are very unlikable.” So, obviously, destructive thoughts are not productive. That’s why he’s Evil Benny and must be ignored. I will expunge him, and self-doubt entirely, from my head someday soon. I am sure of it.

“I’d like a girlfriend,” Robert said, which made me happy since it was easier to ignore Evil Benny when I could talk.

“Robert . . .” I started, but then stopped. I was about to tell him that he was not objectively handsome. Robert wouldn’t have minded me telling him this. He enjoyed that I was always honest with him. But I fear my practice of being blunt with Robert since we were twelve has led me to be blunt with others, which may be a third reason for my current lack of girlfriend. Girls, see, prefer that you lie to them. So I have decided to start lying to Robert about certain things. As practice for when I have a girlfriend. Thus I said to Robert, “Yes, I agree. You and I both should get a girlfriend.” Though, obviously, I would get a girlfriend first, and then my girlfriend would provide one of her less attractive friends for Robert to date.



pen

Let's say I was writing a book about my life.

I'm not. My real life is boring and all the crazy fantasy stuff in my brain should never, ever, ever, ever be public. So no way would I ever write a book.

But, because I read a lot and can't help thinking about this sometimes, let's say I was. And I had to figure out a way to start the book, a totally honest/unique/mind-blowing opening that would make some sixteen-year-old girl like me want to read the whole thing after they downloaded the sample on their phone. But I also had to figure out a not-too-girly beginning so boys would want to read it too, even though they're usually too lazy to read books not assigned for school. Oh, and I guess it couldn't be too honest or sexy or anything that would make parents burn my book before any kid even saw it.

So . . . never mind. I can't think of anything that could do all that. All I guess I could say was, "My name is Pen. I pretend I'm normal. The end." So, yeah, NEVER MIND. This is a stupid thing to think about.

I'm stupid.

I'm boring.

Stupid.

Boring.

Oh, and fake.

So fake. Not fake like you see on TV where the girls are all snotty yet saying nice things like "You are so pretty" even though it's clear the girls hate everyone including themselves. No, fake because I wish I could be real. I wish I could just come out tell everyone who I really am. I could just come out and say stuff like:

I masturbate a ton.

I would never, ever, ever tell anyone that. NEVER. But I wish I could. Every inch of my stupid/boring/fake body wishes I could. If I was a guy, talking about how much you masturbate would be pointless to mention. But I'm a girl in high school, so maybe it's interesting. As far as I know I'm the only girl at Riverbend who masturbates. I wish I wasn't. I wish all my friends masturbated as much as me because then I wouldn't feel like a freak.

So, yeah . . . I guess if I was going to write a book, I'd write a book about anything or anyone but me. I'd make it about someone who's actually interesting. Someone so interesting even boys would want to read my book.

So maybe it should be about a boy.

A really, *really* interesting boy.

Probably too interesting for someone boring and fake like me, but at least he'd be fun to write about. Not that I'll write anything ever. I don't even know why I'm thinking about this. Other than because math class is even more boring than thinking about how boring my life is.



BENEDICT MAXIMUS PENDLETON

JUST AS I WAS CONVINCED ROBERT COULD BE a good ally in helping me find my first girlfriend, he said, “I want to date Pen Lupo.”

“Robert, please, we have to take this seriously.”

“What’s wrong with Pen?” He actually put down his sandwich to say this. Having all his attention on me made me uncomfortable. For only a moment. I can handle almost any confrontation. Obviously.

I explained, “Penelope Lupo is not even in the top one hundred of class rank. In fact, she’s probably in the bottom one hundred. We should set up rules for our girlfriend search. And one of the rules, obviously, is that they are smart.”

“Pen is very smart.”

“Robert!” I yelled. Sometimes I yelled when people were not logical.

“She is, Benedict. We used to talk all the time in seventh grade.”

“Robert . . .” I calmed myself. I was good at calming myself most of the time. I had been enduring him talking about Penelope Lupo

since we were in junior high and I had been, understandably, dismissive of his interest. But if I were going to get a girlfriend, I would have to learn to be patient with a girl's irrational thinking. Though Robert was usually very smart, he was not smart at all when it came to discussing Penelope Lupo, which meant he could be a good practice subject on this issue as well. Thus I stated, "I know you and Penelope—"

"No one calls her Penelope anymore."

Do not yell at him Benedict! I didn't. It was very difficult. "Fine. Pen. I know you two were lab partners in seventh-grade science class, but you haven't spoken since we got to high school."

"She always says hi in the halls."

"But you haven't actually discussed anything at length, correct?"

Robert shook his head and picked up his roast beef again.

I continued, "That's because you have nothing in common anymore. You and I are among the top ten smartest kids at Riverbend." Technically, he was twelfth in class rank. I was third. Being third, it's my duty to be generous in praise of those lower than me. "Both of us will attend nationally ranked universities." I'll attend Northwestern. My dad went there. He's famous. I would, obviously, get into Northwestern even if my father were not a famous legacy. I would get into an Ivy League school if I wanted! But that's not important right now. What's important is, "Penelope—"

"Pen."

"Pen, sorry, is a stoner and a loser. She might not attend college at all. She will drag you down to her level. And you being my best friend, if you were dragged down to her level, you might then drag me down. We have to protect each other from making bad choices." Obviously, I just needed to protect Robert. I didn't make bad choices.



pen

"Penelope, why aren't you taking notes?" Mr. Bravier asked me. I didn't answer because even though I heard him, I didn't really hear him. Maybe because he was using my real name (which I hate) but more like he was a television show on in the background that I could ignore. Except he wasn't. He was my algebra teacher. He talked like an over educated zombie. "Penelope?" he said again. Oh yeah. I heard him again. But really heard him this time. Guess I should say something.

"Yeah?" I never speak in class. Just one-word answers like that. I don't speak much in life either. I don't know how to think like normal people, so I shouldn't try to talk like them. I'm quiet. So quiet. Always. Really.

"Take notes," said Mr. Bravier.

"Yeah," I said, then put my pen to my notepad. Chances of me taking actual math notes? Zero. But Mr. Bravier didn't need to know that. It wasn't his fault somebody was stupid enough to pay

him seventy g's a year to teach kids stuff they don't care about. It wasn't my fault either. I'm bored thinking about how boring algebra is—can you imagine how boring it would be if I actually paid attention?

I have a boyfriend. His name's Paul. Paul and Pen. Pen and Paul. We've been dating since eighth grade. We're juniors in high school now. So we've been dating so long we're practically married. But not really married. He's great. And hot. And nice. And he never once has mentioned my scar. Also, I should mention he's Catholic. So am I, I suppose. But he's really Catholic. We still have sex. But he hates himself after every time we do it, so we don't do it that much. Which is fine with me. I'd rather masturbate. I don't tell Paul I masturbate. He's Catholic, remember? Really Catholic. A Catholic girl who masturbates is like Satan. So I don't tell anyone I do it. Except when I have conversations with myself. Like now. I'm probably crazy. But no one knows I'm crazy because I can fake being normal so well.

So fake.

So, so, so, so fake . . .

But, you know, I'm tired of faking it. Yeah. I'm tired of it. . . .

Shit. I just had a revelation, didn't I? Or a proclamation. Or maybe I had a revelation about making a proclamation. Here it goes: "I, Pen Lupo, will no longer fake being normal. On this day, Tuesday, December 17, I will cease pretending I'm like everyone else. I'm going to be a freak. I've always been a freak. But I'm not going to hide being a freak anymore. The end."

Interesting. I guess I'm having that day old people look back on and say, "That was the day my life began," but I'll never say it like that since that's a boring, normal-person way to say it. So I'll say it this way: "That was the day I told the world to accept me for who I am or go fuck itself."



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BENEDICT MAXIMUS PENDLETON

WHEN ROBERT LOOKED UP FROM HIS SANDWICH, I knew he wasn't going to say anything intelligent. I know when people aren't going to say intelligent things because of how intelligent I am. His eyes were also red. My dad says no one has ever said anything smart when they're being emotional. Then Robert said, his voice cracking, "I think I love Pen, Benedict. I think about her all the time."

"ROBERT!" Darn it. I yelled again. He was being so difficult! "I now must remind you that she has a boyfriend. A BOYFRIEND, Robert. You hate when I mention Paul, so I try not to, but I'm very tired of talking about Penelope—"

"Pen."

"PEN! YES, PEN! Pen . . ." I paused. It was a good idea to pause. We were, as we were every lunch hour during the winter, in the SAC, which is short for Student Activity Center. A public place. One must always be in control when in a public place. "I'm sorry for yelling. It's just that I am very serious about getting a girlfriend. If you are going to help me, if we are going to help each other, I need you to be serious too."

And Pen is not a serious person. So please tell me you will stop talking about her.”

Robert took a moment to accept I was right, nodded, then took a bite of his sandwich. Mustard fell down his chin.

“I’m glad you agree.”

“But . . .” he started.

Darn it. “But what?”

“Will you at least admit that Pen is pretty? I’ll never mention her again if you just admit she’s really pretty.”

No, Pen was not pretty. The most obvious imperfection was the scar on her left cheek. It made her look like she got in a knife fight with a homeless person. I never bring up the scar to Robert because I just don’t. But that’s only the first problem with her. Pen also only wore black clothes. Every day. Maybe this was in preparation for her life as a waitress at a nightclub. I don’t know, but it was depressing. She also had a nose ring. A *nose* ring. That alone would disqualify anyone from being considered attractive. Pen dyed her already dark hair even blacker, which looked cheap because, as my dad has pointed out, dyed hair always looked cheap. Pen also had strange eyes. I never talked to her. She never talked to me. But when I passed her in the halls, she would look at me with these strange eyes. It wasn’t the heavy mascara she wore, though that didn’t help; it was her pupils. There was a light in them. A tiny sparkle. No, that makes it sound like a good thing. It wasn’t. Her eyes just seemed to contain . . . madness. Yes, madness. She acted normal enough, for a stoner that is, but I promise you that behind those eyes was an insane person.

Thus, obviously, Penelope Lupo was not a pretty girl. But it was also obvious that Robert could not be convinced of this, no matter how effectively I laid out the facts. And, since I needed to practice how to lie to girls, I lied to Robert. “Yes, okay, Robert, Pen is pretty.”