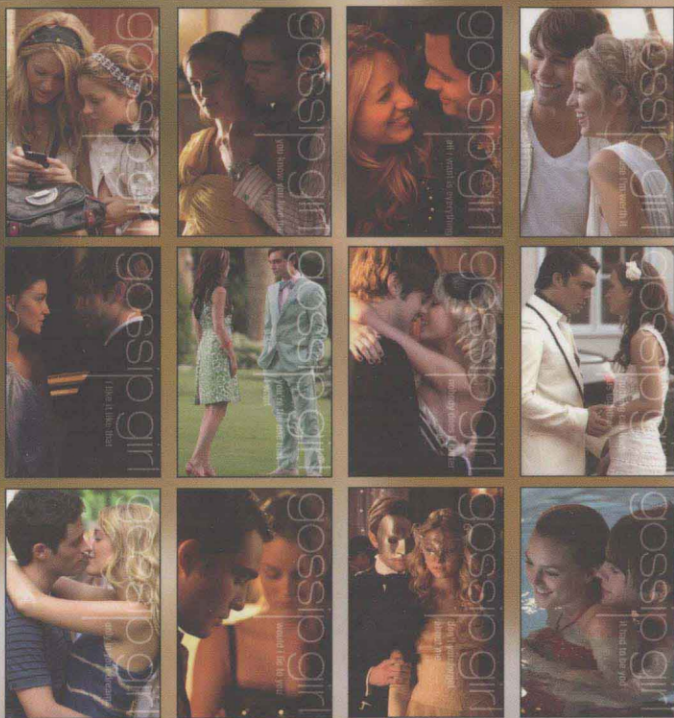


because i'm worth it

roses
in
oil

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poppy

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New York Boston

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It makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch. . . .

—Ernest Hemingway
The Sun Also Rises

Disclaimer: All the real names of places, people, and events have been altered or abbreviated to protect the innocent. Namely, me.

hey people!

February is like the girl at that party I threw when my parents took a “second honeymoon” in Cabo last week (I know: sad). You remember—the girl who puked all over the Spanish marble floor in the guest bathroom and then refused to leave? We had to throw her Dior sandlebag and Oscar de la Renta embroidered sheepskin coat into the elevator before she finally got the message. Unlike most places in the world, though, New York refuses to fall into a February-induced depression and become a cold, gray, dismal wasteland. At least, *my* New York does. Here on the Upper East Side we all know the cure for the drearies: one of Jedediah Angel’s crazy-sexy party dresses, a pair of black satin Manolos, that new “Ready or Not” red lipstick you can only get at Bendel’s, a good Brazilian bikini wax, and a generous slathering of Estée Lauder self-tanner, in case your St. Barts tan left over from Christmas break has finally faded. Most of us are second-semester seniors—at last. Our college applications are in and our schedules are light, with a double free period every day during which we can catch a Fashion Week runway show or head back to a friend’s penthouse apartment to drink skinny lattes, smoke cigarettes, and help pick out the evening’s screw-homework party outfit.

Another redeeming thing about February is my all-time favorite should-be-a-national-no-school-holiday, Valentine’s Day. If you already have a sweetheart, lucky you. If you don’t, now’s the chance to put the moves on that hottie you’ve been drooling over all winter. Who knows? You might find true love, or at least true lust, and soon every day will feel like Valentine’s Day. Either that or you can just sit at home IMing sad, anonymous notes to people and eating

heart-shaped chocolates until you can't fit into your favorite pair of Seven jeans anymore. It's up to you. . . .

Sightings

S and **A** holding hands and wandering slowly down **Fifth Avenue** to the bar at the **Compton Hotel**, where they can be seen most Friday nights, quaffing **Red Bull** and **Veuve Clicquot** cocktails and chuckling to themselves with the heady knowledge that they are without a doubt the hottest couple in the room. **B** refusing to go inside **Veronique**—a maternity store on Madison—with her glowingly pregnant mom. **D** and **V** wearing matching black turtlenecks, their legs intertwined as they watched that twisted, depressing **Ken Mogul** film downtown at the **Angelika**. They're two morbid, artistic, weirdo peas in a pod—so insanely perfect for each other, you want to shout at them, "Hey, what took you so *long*?!" **J** on the Ninety-sixth Street crosstown bus, carefully studying a billboard for breast-reduction surgery. I'd definitely go for it if I were in her double-D cups . . . um, I mean shoes. The ever-adorable **N** playing a stoned game of ice-hockey golf with his buddies at **Sky Rink**. He doesn't seem to mind being girlfriendless. It's not like he'll have any trouble finding a new one. . . .

And finally: *Who's getting in early?*

This week an annoying little group of us is going to find out whether or not we got early admission to the top colleges in the country. This is it. There's no more time for our parents to build another new wing on the library. No time to bribe another esteemed alum into sending the dean of admissions a letter of recommendation. No time to star in another school play. The envelopes are already in the mail.

I'd like to take a moment to point out that the decision is completely arbitrary because basically we're all perfect specimens. We're gorgeous, intelligent, well mannered and eloquent, with influential parents and perfect transcripts (except for the occasional blip, like getting kicked out of boarding school or having to take the SATs eight times).

I'd also like to give a word of advice to those of us who *do* get in early: Try not to talk about it *too* much, okay? The rest of us have a couple

more months of waiting to do, and if you want to get invited out with us, you'd better not even mention the words *Ivy League* in our presence. Our parents do that quite enough already, thank you very much. Not that it's a sore subject or anything.

I think it's safe to say we're all suffering from late-winter waiting-to-hear-from-colleges cabin fever. It's time to run a little wild! Just think, the later we stay out, the quicker the days will blur by. And believe me, every wicked thing we get up to will be glamorized, dissected, and blown totally out of proportion right here by yours truly. Have I ever let you down?

You know you love me.

gossip girl

b bonds with j over breast size

“Just a few fries and some ketchup, please,” Jenny Humphrey told Irene, the one-hundred-year-old bearded lunch lady behind the counter in the basement cafeteria of the Constance Billard School for Girls. “Just a *few*,” Jenny repeated. Today was the first day of peer group, and Jenny didn’t want her senior peer group leaders to think she was a total pig.

Peer group was a new program the school was trying out. Every Monday at lunchtime the freshman girls were to meet in groups of five with two senior girls to discuss peer pressure, body image, boys, sex, drugs, alcohol, and any other issues that might be bothering the freshman girls or that the two senior peer group leaders deemed important enough to talk about. The idea was that if the older girls shared their experiences with the younger girls and started a sympathetic dialogue, the younger girls would make informed decisions instead of stupid high-school-career-damaging mistakes that might embarrass their parents or the school.

With its beamed ceiling, mirrored walls, and birchwood modernist tables and chairs, the Constance Billard School cafeteria looked more like a hot new restaurant than an institutional dining room. The dingy old cafeteria had been

redone last summer because so many students had been going out for lunch or bringing their own that the school had been losing money on wasted food. The new cafeteria had won an architectural prize for its appealing design and high-tech kitchen, and it was now the students' favorite in-school hangout, despite the fact that Irene and her mean, stingy, grubby-fingernailed old cronies were still the ones serving the food from the cafeteria's updated, nouvelle American menu.

Jenny wove her way through the clusters of girls in pleated navy blue, gray, or maroon wool uniform skirts, picking at their wasabi-smoked tuna burgers and Red Bliss pommes frites and chatting about the parties they'd been to this past weekend. She slid her stainless steel tray onto the empty round table that had been reserved for peer group A and sat down with her back to the mirrored wall so she wouldn't have to look at herself while she ate. She couldn't wait to find out who her senior peer group leaders were going to be. Supposedly the competition had been fierce, since being a leader was a relatively painless way of showing colleges that you were still involved in school activities even though your applications were already in. It was like getting extra credit for eating fries and talking about sex for fifty minutes.

Who wouldn't want to do that?

"Hello, Ginny." Blair Waldorf, the bitchiest, vainest girl in the entire senior class, or maybe the entire world, slid her tray into the place across from Jenny and sat down. She tucked a wavy lock of dark brown shoulder-length hair behind her ear and muttered at her reflection in the wall of mirrors. "I can't wait for my haircut." She glanced at Jenny, picked up her fork, and raked it through the dollop of whipped cream on top of her chocolate angel food cake. "I'm one of the leaders for peer group A. Are *you* in group A?"

Jenny nodded, clutching the seat of her chair as she stared gloomily down at her plate of cold, greasy fries. She couldn't believe her bad luck. Not only was Blair Waldorf the most intimidating senior in the school, she was also Nate Archibald's ex-girlfriend. Blair and Nate had always been the perfect couple; the ones destined to stay together forever and ever. Then, strange as it might have seemed, Nate had actually dumped Blair for Jenny after meeting Jenny in the park and sharing a joint with her.

It had been Jenny's first joint, and Nate had been her first love. She'd never dreamed of having an older boyfriend, let alone one as gorgeous and cool as Nate. But after a couple of too-good-to-be-true months, Nate had gotten bored with Jenny and had proceeded to break her heart in the cruelest way by ditching her on New Year's Eve. So now she and Blair Waldorf actually had something in common—they'd both been dumped by the same boy. Not that that made any difference. Jenny was pretty sure that Blair still hated her guts.

Blair knew perfectly well that Jenny was the balloon-boobed freshman whore who'd stolen her Natie away, but she also knew that Nate had dumped Jenny flat on her ass after some extremely embarrassing pictures of Jenny's bare butt in a thong had been posted on the Web just before New Year's Eve. Blair figured Jenny had already gotten her comeuppance, and she really couldn't be bothered with hating her anymore.

Jenny looked up. "Who's your coleader?" she asked timidly. She wished the other members of the group would hurry up and get there before Blair tore her head off with her perfectly manicured opalescent-pink fingernails.

"Serena's coming." Blair rolled her eyes. "You know her. She's always late." She combed her fingers through her hair, envisioning the cut she was going to get when she went for

her appointment during double free period. She was going to have them do a mahogany rinse to get rid of the copper-colored highlights, and then she wanted it cut short, in a modern, superstylish sort of way, like Audrey Hepburn in *How to Steal a Million*.

"Oh," Jenny replied, relieved. Serena van der Woodsen was Blair's best friend, but she wasn't nearly as intimidating, because she was actually *nice*.

"Hi, guys. Is this peer group A?" A gangly, freckled freshman girl named Elise Wells sat down next to Jenny. She smelled like baby powder, and her strawlike blond hair was cut in a chin-length bob with thick bangs masking her forehead, exactly like the haircut Nanny gave you when you were two. "I'm just going to tell you now that I have a problem with eating," Elise announced. "I can't eat in public."

Blair nodded and pushed her slice of chocolate cake away from her. In peer group leader training the health teacher, Ms. Doherty, had told them to *listen* and try to be *sensitive*, putting themselves in the younger girls' shoes. Ms. Doherty should talk. All she ever talked about in ninth-grade health class was the boyfriends she'd had and all the sexual positions she'd tried. Still, Ms. Doherty was one of the teachers Blair had hit up for an extra recommendation to send to the Yale admissions office, and she really wanted to stand out as the best peer group leader in the senior class. She wanted her peer group freshmen to like her—no, *adore* her—and if one of them had a problem with eating in public, Blair wasn't going to sit there gorging herself on chocolate cake, especially not when she'd been planning to throw it up as soon as the bell rang anyway.

Blair pulled a pile of handouts out of her red Louis Vuitton bowling bag. "Body image and self-esteem are two of the issues we'll be discussing today," she told Elise and

Jenny, trying to sound professional. "If my coleader and the rest of our group ever decide to get here," she added impatiently. Was it physically possible for Serena to *ever* be on time?

Apparently not.

Just then, in a flurry of dove-gray cashmere and shimmering pale blond hair, Serena van der Woodsen slid her shapely, tanned butt into the chair next to Blair. The three other peer group A freshman girls were trailing her like baby ducklings. "Look what we suckered Irene into giving us!" Serena crowed, slapping a heaping plate full of greasy onion rings down in the middle of the table. "I told her we were having a special meeting and we were *starving*."

Blair glanced sympathetically at Elise, who was glowering at the plate of onion rings with blond-lashed blue eyes that would have been pretty if she'd tried using a little dark brown Stila lengthening mascara. "You're late," Blair accused, passing out the handouts to Serena and the other three freshmen. "I'm Blair," she told them. "And you are . . . ?"

"Mary Goldberg, Vicky Reinerson, and Cassie Inwirth," the three girls responded in unison.

Elise nudged Jenny's elbow. Mary, Vicky, and Cassie were the most annoyingly inseparable threesome in the freshman class. They were always brushing each other's hair in the hallways, and they did everything together, including pee.

Blair glanced down at the handout and read aloud, "Body image: accepting and embracing who you are." She looked up and smiled at the freshmen expectantly. "Do any of you have a particular body image issue you'd like to talk about?"

Jenny felt the blood creep into her neck and face as she boldly considered telling them about the breast-reduction consultation. But before she could get the words out, Serena

crammed an enormous onion ring into her delicate mouth and interjected, "Can I just say something first?"

Blair frowned at her best friend, but Mary, Vicky, and Cassie were nodding eagerly. Listening to anything Serena van der Woodsen had to say was so much more interesting than any stupid body image discussion.

Serena plunked her elbows down on top of the handout and rested her perfectly chiseled chin in her manicured hands, her enormous dark blue eyes gazing dreamily at her idyllic reflection in the mirrored wall. "I'm so in love," she sighed.

Blair clutched her fork and dug into the piece of chocolate cake again, forgetting about her no-eating solidarity with Elise. Serena was so goddamned insensitive. First of all, the guy she was apparently "so in love" with happened to be Blair's new pseudohippie, guitar-playing, dreadlocked stepbrother, Aaron Rose, which was just *so absurd*. And second of all, even though Nate had dumped Blair way back in November, Blair was *still* not over Nate, and the mere mention of the world *love* made her want to blow chunks. "I think we're supposed to get *them* to talk about *their* problems, not talk about *ourselves*," she hissed at Serena. Of course, if Serena had actually bothered to show up for peer group training, she would have known that herself.

Serena had blown the training off so she could go to a movie with Aaron, and, like a gullible idiot, Blair had covered for her. She'd told Ms. Doherty that Serena had a migraine but that she would personally go over all the major points they covered in training when Serena felt better. It was so typical. Whenever Blair did anything nice for someone else, she usually regretted it.

Which kind of explained why she was such a bitch most of the time.

Serena shrugged her halter-top-perfect shoulders. "I think love is a much better topic than body image anyway. I mean, we all talked body image to death in ninth-grade health." She glanced at the freshmen seated around the table. "Right?"

"I just think we should follow the handout," Blair insisted stubbornly.

"It's up to you guys," Serena told the younger girls.

Mary, Vicky, and Cassie waited, ears pricked, for the scoop on Serena's love life. Elise reached out and poked a greasy onion ring with a trembling, chewed-on fingernail and then snatched her hand away again as if she'd been burned. Jenny licked her winter-chapped lips. "Since we're supposed to talk about body image, I guess I have something to say," she told the group, her voice wavering. She looked up to find Blair nodding and smiling at her encouragingly.

"Yes, Ginny?"

Jenny looked down at the table again. Why was she even telling them this? *Because I need to tell someone*, she realized. She forced herself to keep talking despite the furious red-hot blush of embarrassment burning her face. "This weekend I almost had a consultation for a breast reduction."

Mary, Vicky, and Cassie scooted forward in their chairs to listen. Not only was peer group going to be *the* place to pick up the latest fashion trends from the two coolest girls in school, it was going to be a major resource for gossip!

"I made the appointment," Jenny continued, "but then I didn't go." She pushed her plate away and took a sip of water, trying to ignore the curious stares of the other girls. The group was riveted, and stealing the spotlight from Blair and Serena was no easy feat.

Elise picked up an onion ring, took a tiny bite, and

dropped it on the plate again. "What made you change your mind?" she asked.

"You don't have to answer that," Blair interrupted, remembering something Ms. Doherty had said in their training session about not pushing the members of the group to open up before they were ready. She glanced at her coleader. Serena was busy examining her split ends with a dreamy, far-away look, as if she hadn't heard a word anyone had said. Blair turned back to Jenny and tried to think of something reassuring to say so Jenny wouldn't feel like she was the only one in the group with breast-size issues.

"I always wanted bigger breasts. I've seriously considered getting implants." It wasn't a total lie. She was only a B cup and had always aspired to a C.

Who hasn't?

"Really?" Serena demanded, drifting back to earth. "Since when?"

Blair took another angry bite of cake. Was Serena purposely trying to sabotage her leadership skills? "You don't know everything about me," she snapped.

Cassie, Vicky, and Mary kicked each other under the table. This was so exciting! Serena van der Woodsen and Blair Waldorf were having a fight, and they were witnessing every word of it!

Elise combed her chewed-on fingernails through her thick blond bob. "I think it was really, um, amazing of you to tell us about that, Jenny." She smiled shyly at Jenny. "And I think it was brave of you not to do it."

Blair scowled. Why hadn't *she* said something about how brave Jenny was instead of making that outrageous statement about wanting implants? Who knew what these stupid freshmen were going to say about her once the group broke up?

Then she remembered something else Ms. Doherty had gone over in their training session.

“Oops. I think we were supposed to say something about confidentiality before we started. You know, like, nothing we say here will be repeated outside the group, or whatever?”

Too late. In a matter of minutes every girl in the school would be discussing Blair Waldorf’s upcoming breast-implant job. *I heard she’s waiting until the day after graduation . . . etc., etc.*

Jenny shrugged. “It’s okay. I don’t care who you tell.” It wasn’t like she could hide her enormous boobs anyway. They were just *there*.

Elise bent down and picked up her beige Kenneth Cole backpack. “Um, there are only eight minutes left before the bell rings. Is it all right if I go out and buy a yogurt now?” she asked.

Serena nudged the plate of onion rings towards Elise. “Have some more of these,” she offered generously.

Elise shook her head, her freckled face flushed pink. “No, thanks. I don’t eat in public.”

Serena frowned. “Really? That’s weird.” She winced as Blair elbowed her in the arm, *hard*. “Ow! God, what was that for?”

“Maybe if you’d actually gone to peer group leader training, you’d get it,” Blair growled under her breath.

“Can I go now?” Elise asked again.

It occurred to Blair that the peer group freshmen would really love her if she let them all go early. She could use the extra eight minutes to get to the hair salon on time anyway. “You can *all* go,” she said, smiling sweetly, “unless you really want to stay and listen to Serena talk about *love* for the rest of the period.”

Serena stretched her arms over her head and grinned up at the ceiling. “I could talk about love all day.”