

Good Girls, Bad Girls

Prose — Macy Petty

I am obsessed by the dichotomy of good girls and bad girls, as a writer, as a reader, and as a girl myself. What I mean is, I like writing cat fights – an attention-seeking, pretty girl and demure, sweet girl loving the same guy. The bad girl is demanding and wears him out. The good girl asks for nothing, and he finally comes to his senses. I watched a dozen movies like this on Disney channel as a child. My favorite was *Another Cinderella Story*; Selena Gomez - down to earth, unloved by her adoptive family - falls for a pop star who happens to be her vindictive sister's ex-boyfriend. The worst were the Barbie movies – pastel, blonde princesses who went up against gothic witches. Odile in *Barbie of Swan Lake* was the most memorable, played by Maggie Wheeler, who lent the grating voice of Janice from *Friends* to the black swan. This came full circle for me the other day when I read a Pinterest post that went something like “Don’t worry ladies, you’ll find your Chandler. He’s just busy with Janice right now.”

These stories persisted for me when I really began to pay attention – the virginal Christine Daaé murdered by Meg the ballerina turned prostitute in *Phantom of the Opera* sequel *Love Never Dies*, cunning Morgana targeting kind Guinevere in BBC’s *Merlin*. While other fans studied the femme fatale, I was always more interested in the boring, one-dimensional love interest. Only opera gave me some food for thought with morally shady but ultimately good characters like Violetta, the martyred courtesan from *La Traviata*.

I did not fully recognize the problem with these narratives until I tried to write one of my own. It went something like this – plump country girl Grace moves from Georgia to Baltimore to attend law school and takes a room in a boarding house with Jenny, frigid and alluring. Jenny looks down on Grace as undesirable and awkward, so she is surprised to one day find Grace in bed with Dr. Abernathy, an older man who Jenny had been pursuing herself. Jenny goes off the rails, dressing like Grace, bleaching her hair the same blonde, trying to discover what Abernathy sees in the other girl. By the end of the story, Jenny is fantasizing about killing Grace.

I tried to make the story sound less like a high school drama to a friend who was workshopping it for our writing class. I said that being with Abernathy was Grace’s reward for being a good girl,

after years of feeling like no one wanted her. She told me that was messed up. “It makes it sound like she’s getting all her validation from a guy,” she said.

Since that conversation, that abrupt reframing of the narrative, I have been constantly asking “why?” when it comes to the stories that I tell myself. Why do I always write blameless heroines who have to be rescued from mean girls? There’s a very important rule somewhere about not pitting women against women, especially over a man. Worse yet, I do it in my own life. I compare myself to others, and always manage to make myself the sensitive one, the blameless one, bargaining for what she has and what I have: “She is a better singer, but I am nicer, I don’t demand attention, I don’t need to be seen.” The whole point of Jenny was that she was jealous and I relished her envy – someone finally wanted something from a girl like me, a fat girl, a girl who does not know how to talk to men, a girl who belly laughs and dresses like a grandma sometimes.

I suppose I am really the jealous one. And in my quest to be a precious, blonde protagonist, I might be tempted to let my favorite trope make me feel like a horrible person. But then I remember myself as a little girl, hair bobbed off because it was easier for my mom to fix, already growing chubby, wandering around the playground wanting to play with the girls I had deemed “pretty” and “cool”, girls who were tall and skinny with long hair and could do bridges and cut cartwheels. They looked like princesses and I felt like a troll, never being admitted into their circle that huddled on the asphalt and told scary stories. I even asked my teacher to make them play with me once, and she told me if they did not want me around, I should just find someone else to play with. *They are pretty but I’m smart*, I would say. I liked reading and history class and singing hymns in the choir. I was already falling in love with my title of “old soul” and my mind was always filled with the chorus of *I am, I am, I am*.

For a long time, I thought you could only be pretty or smart, never both. Maybe I still do. But who first told me I was not pretty? Or that I had to fill in the space with something else – smart, good, kind?

Who told me I had to be anything at all?

“The world is made up of two types of girls,” says Carrie Bradshaw says to her girlfriend over a cosmopolitan, while her ex, Mr. Big, celebrates his engagement to another woman across town, “the simple girls and the Katie girls.” She is talking about a movie I love to watch with my mother, *The Way We Were*, and is doing nothing to help my condition.