

I recognized her by her nails. She always had such perfect nails. Carefully clipped, colorfully polished with the cuticles pushed back—even on that day. So that was how I realized it was her. I was unloading the box of apples into the bin one Sunday afternoon when this young woman came over and interrupted my process. She was taking forever, and I was standing there thinking *bitch, pick your goddamn apples already* when I noticed her bright purple nails. I took a quick glance at her face, and my heart gunned it to 200 miles an hour as I realized who she was. Without thinking much about it, I ditched the apples and bolted across the ACME to the bread section. I watched her—it was definitely her—as she picked only one apple and strode off.

I suppose I met her the first day of 7th grade, but I don't remember that. It felt to me as if suddenly she was just there. She was of an unremarkable height and build with stringy, dirty blond hair and big, bug eyes. She had one of those mouths where, when she smiled, you could see a great deal of her gums, and she always wore such boxy clothes. Really the only thing she had going for her were her nails which were always polished, a new color every week or so. I remember once asking my mom if I could get my nails painted like that, but she told me that “only prostitutes have their nails painted.” I thought about repeating that to her, Miss Perfect Nails, but I decided against it. I said a lot of things to her, but that one seemed like it would somehow be more embarrassing for me.

I went back to my apples and dumped them rather carelessly in the bin worried she might change her mind and decide to come back for more. When I finished, I briefly entertained the possibility of going to find her somewhere in the vast expanse of the supermarket. Maybe I would find her in the chip aisle and say... What would I say? What did I have to say? And so, instead, I opted to take the empty box of apples to the trash room and hide out there for a while.

Sunshine was her name. Personally, I think that was the root of her problem. Why not just name your child Bluebird? Or Easter Bunny? What a cloying, earnest name for a cloying, earnest girl. Because, really, there wasn't much else wrong with her. She wasn't poor; she wasn't gay; she wasn't a different race than the rest of us. There was something about her that was just a little bit off somehow. She was always so eager, so talkative, and almost sickeningly sweet. She always had a million compliments for everyone, even the teachers, without being prompted. And she could be so ditzy and awkward sometimes. I think Emily just picked up on those things. I think sometimes when people show you their flaws, it just makes you want to attack them even more.

But...no...wait, actually, it actually wasn't even Emily that started it. She didn't even notice Sunshine until the boys began to dislike her. I think it annoyed them how much Sunshine talked and the way she would drag class out longer by chatting with the teachers and asking questions about the assignments. Kyle and Sam and Brett and a few others—they just didn't like that. And she just wasn't very pretty either. Everyone knows that if you're a girl, and you're not pretty, you better be quiet, or boys won't be nice to you. She should have figured that out by 7th

grade. So when Emily saw those boys snorting at everything Sunshine said and mocking her behind her back, it was like chum in the water.

But I don't want you to get the idea that she was some sort of saint, ok? She was incredibly irritating and so interruptive. Every time me and Emily and our friends turned around, there she was with an opinion or a question. We couldn't get any space. And she was dull as paint. She could go on for ten minutes with the most pointless story. And those nails...I think she thought she was so much better than me because she went with her mom and her older sister to get her nails done practically every weekend. She always showed them off to us as if getting us to like her nails would somehow get us to like her. She was just too much. Sometimes I think it was kind of her fault what happened.

After about 20 minutes in the trash room, my coworker Janine found me huddled next to the bins, scrolling on my phone, and reminded me that I was supposed to be on register 4 after I finished with the apples. I figured enough time had probably passed and took my post at the register. I was exhausted from getting only 2 hours of sleep due to the couple next door to me having a screaming match all night. So I stood there trying to fight the desire to crawl onto the conveyor belt and take a nap, when, naturally of course, Sunshine got in line for my aisle.

At first, all we really did was laugh at her. If Sunshine got a question wrong in class, we snickered. If she tripped and dropped her books, we turned and cackled. Sometimes all it took was her walking into first period in a terrible outfit to make us lose it. But other than that, we really were nice to her to her face. In fact, I'm not even really sure she felt mistreated then. We were just being kids. Things didn't escalate until January when Kyle Neery and his friends found her YouTube channel.

I'm not sure how they found it or why; I guess they were just bored. It was full of videos of her singing songs and performing skits. They really were pretty embarrassing. I don't know why she thought she was good enough to film herself. But I'll admit some of them were from when she was really young; her parents must have made those. The boys thought the channel was the funniest thing in the world. They asked her questions about the videos and teased her endlessly. Emily and Viv and Jody and I joined in by making fake accounts and commenting on the videos. It really wasn't that big a deal; I'm not sure she even saw them. But then Emily came up with a new idea: making her own little videos of Sunshine—clips of what she was doing each day: eating, answering a question in class, running around in P.E. Then Emily would post them on social media.

I didn't have an iPhone in 7th grade, so I couldn't join in the filming the way other people did. I asked my parents for one, but my dad felt that renting my busted-up laptop from the middle school already cost him too much. When my mom tried to point out that I might need one for safety reasons, he yelled at her and then she yelled at me and sent me to my room, and that was the end of that conversation. I told Emily and the other girls that I didn't have one because I got in trouble for sneaking out at night too much. In reality, I didn't start doing that until freshman

year. So, without a phone, all I could do was more comments. And I really didn't see much harm in it. It was real life; it was all real stuff she was doing. I guess maybe it did take things too far.

All she had in her basket at the end of my aisle was the apple, a bag of Doritos, an iced tea, and some chapstick. As I began to scan the items, I tried to keep my face turned down as much as possible so that she wouldn't recognize me. "That's the best brand of chapstick," she said in a voice that was deeper than I remember. All I could manage was a quick nod. When it came time to scan the apple, I realized with horror that there was no sticker on it. Desperately, I spun it in my hands like a globe, but it was not anywhere on the skin. I tried to type in the product number, but, for the life of me, I couldn't remember what it was for apples.

"Is there a problem?" she asked with concern.

"Uh, yeah, this apple doesn't have a sticker."

"Should I go get another one?"

"No!" I said quickly. "I'll just buzz my manager."

I quickly hit a button on my walkie-talkie and kept my face angled down as much as possible.

The last time I saw Sunshine was in March of 7th grade. It was an ugly, gray, rainy day. We had P.E. that afternoon, and Sunshine made the preposterous decision to point out to our gym teacher that Emily wasn't wearing the gym uniform shorts for class. For some reason, that was a big deal—especially because this was Emily's third time doing it—and Ms. Kelly gave Emily a detention. I'm not sure why Sunshine did that. I guess she knew about the videos and the YouTube comments by then, and this was her revenge? It was a rather unkind decision, in my opinion. It wasn't really any of her business what shorts Emily was wearing. And Sunshine had to have known Emily would respond in kind. Maybe not the way she did, but she should have known something was coming. And so, after class, Emily, whose locker was pretty close to Sunshine's, secretly propped up her phone and filmed Sunshine changing. She posted the video that night.

Sunshine wasn't naked in the video, just so you know. She was still wearing a bra and underwear. Emily posted the video to her private story, but, like all the videos, it rapidly got sent around. Emily must have known that would happen; she wasn't stupid. I think that she just honestly believed she was justified. I was appalled, of course. And I didn't post a comment on it like other people did. The boys especially thought it was hilarious. People must have been messaging Sunshine, sending her the video and harassing her. I guess it got to be too much for her because the next day, while her parents were at work, Sunshine tied a belt to her ceiling fan and hung herself.

It didn't work. I think the fan broke or her parents got home in time. She had to be in the ICU for a while, but she lived. She never came back to school, though. Emily was expelled. There was talk of Sunshine's family pressing charges against her, but nothing ever came from it. I heard a rumor that Emily's parents settled with Sunshine's family. I never heard anything about that from Emily. All she ever did was insist that everyone was overreacting and "of course she

didn't want Sunshine to kill herself." Viv and Jody got suspended for two weeks after the school found some of the videos of Sunshine they had made. I only got a couple of days for some of my old comments. My parents were so mad they made me stay in my room the entire time. Plus, I had to go to every single service our church offered on those days and have a meeting with our pastor too. I couldn't tell you what we talked about; it was too boring to pay attention.

Sunshine's family homeschooled her for the rest of middle school. Then, for high school, she went to a different one in our town. I think she had a pretty normal experience there. When I first started working at the ACME sophomore year, there was a girl from Sunshine's high school. She told me Sunshine was "fun."

Emily's family moved to California. I'm still friends with her on Instagram. She went to some fancy university out there. Sunshine went to college too—a small one in Massachusetts. Her Instagram is public (imagine that), so I stalk her sometimes. She lives in Boston and has a cute boyfriend she's been with for two years. I bet she's told him about me and Emily and everything that happened in middle school. I bet they were lying there one night, and she bared her whole soul. And I bet he was really sympathetic and sweet about it all. Meanwhile, no boy I've ever been with has ever cared to hear about my life.

My boss came over and typed in the number for the apple quickly. "You're supposed to have these numbers memorized, Mal," he growled. I jerked at the mention of my name. Sunshine didn't seem to notice, though. She just thanked him and dug for her wallet to pay. As we stood there in silence, something within me, deep in my stomach, urged me to say something to her: a hello, an acknowledgment of our connection, an apology. But no matter how hard I tried, the words couldn't link together in my head. What would I say? What could I say? And perhaps even more terrifying: what would she say in return? The possibilities spun through my brain like balls in a Bingo cage, and the words refused to climb out of my throat.

She finished paying and reached to grab her bag. In a panic, the only thing I could think to say tumbled out of my mouth: "I like your nails!" I half-shouted at her. She looked at me with her same big, bug eyes in surprise. "Thanks." She smiled and left.

So, you see, I actually think it all worked out rather nicely. I said enough. It really wouldn't have been worth it to dredge all that stuff up again. It was almost ten years ago. Who knows how she would have reacted—it could have been an overreaction, and that would have been humiliating. I'm a different person now, and I'm sure she is too. And, if you think about it, she's sort of the lucky one in the end. She doesn't have anything to feel bad about. Meanwhile, I'm the one who sometimes lies in bed late at night ruminating on everything that happened. What does she have to worry about?