



Authentic
Beauty

the shaping of a
set-apart young woman

Leslie Ludy

UPDATED AND EXPANDED

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MULTNOMAH
BOOKS

AUTHENTIC BEAUTY
PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS
12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921
A division of Random House Inc.

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ISBN 978-1-59052-991-1

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Ludy, Leslie.

Authentic beauty : the shaping of a set-apart young woman / Leslie Ludy. — 1st ed.
p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59052-991-1

1. Young women—Religious life. I. Title.

BV4551.3.L83 2007

248.8'43—dc22

2007003587

Printed in the United States of America

2007—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*A*UTHENTIC BEAUTY may very well be one of the rarest earthly treasures today. It holds a magnetism far beyond the loveliness of a properly painted face, and it possesses a charm that towers over the enchanting grace of a sweet personality. It is not ever to be discovered in the pomp and polish of high society, nor in the silk and satin of those conformed to popular culture. Rather, it emerges only rarely in each generation, and that in the life of a young woman—a young woman who is deeply loved by the Prince of her soul.

Authentic
Beauty

Introduction to the Revised Edition

*W*HEN I FIRST began putting words to the message of this book, I pretended that you and I were sitting together in a quaint little coffee shop. We were sipping on our steaming, foamy concoctions, looking each other in the eye, and having a heart-to-heart conversation. For hours and hours, as other customers entered and exited the little shop, we continued talking. We were unaware of time and oblivious to our surroundings. As our coffee mugs slowly emptied, you told me your story. And I told you mine. You shared your questions, struggles, fears, and victories. And I shared mine.

I felt an amazing connection with you as my mind's eye saw us sharing and listening and laughing and crying together. It was the image of our unforgettable time in the cozy coffee shop that inspired the words and style of this book. I pray that as you read each page, you will not feel as if you are reading an impersonal documentary or clinical theory written to the masses. Instead, it is my desire that you will feel as I did when I wrote it—that we are simply two friends, sitting in a coffee shop, having an open, honest, heartfelt talk.

Many of the most poignant examples of cultural influences over my femininity happened at a young age—in high school, middle school, or even younger—so in this book I share quite a few stories from the growing-up years of my life. You may be well past those years of your life as you read about them. You may have experienced things differently than I did growing up. But I hope that the truths and principles illustrated through the stories shared in these pages will speak to you no matter what your age or history. Most of all, it is my prayer that this message will stir within you a longing for Jesus Christ like you have never known before. My hope is that this book will lead you closer to Him than you ever thought you could be. My desire is that the message of this book will impact your life as profoundly as it has mine.

Here are a few details for you to be aware of as you read this book: For the sake of simplicity, when this book refers to our Prince or heavenly Lover, those references are meant to encompass *all* persons of God—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore, when I present the concept of Jesus being our Lover and Prince, I am referring to a principle clearly presented throughout Scripture of Christ as a Bridegroom and believers as His bride. Indeed, the entire book of Song of Solomon is a poetic expression of this amazing truth.

I am aware that some in our modern times have attempted to pervert this concept into a carnal, twisted, and fleshly idea—referring to an intimate relationship with Christ as if it were a physically sexual relationship rather than a holy spiritual communion. Because of this abuse, some Christians have begun to shy away from the idea of approaching Christ as a Lover or Bridegroom. But to ignore a truth can prove just as dangerous as twisting a truth. If we ignore the Bridegroom attribute of our Lord, we will miss out on the fullness of what it means to have real intimacy with Him.

I hope that, through this book, you will be able to see Jesus Christ in the Lover of your soul, not in a fleshly or physical way, but rather

at the spiritual depths of your being, with all reverence and respect. As the great preacher Charles Spurgeon said,

The music of the Song of Solomon belongs to a higher spiritual life, and has no charm in it for unspiritual ears. The immature may find their carnal and sensuous affections stirred up by it towards Jesus, whom they know “after the flesh” rather than the spirit. The Song occupies a sacred enclosure into which none may enter unprepared. The only ones who can truly understand this love story are those who have attained deep, familiar intimacy with the great Bridegroom.¹

Let me mention a few practical things before we begin our conversation. Though it is impossible to truly describe the “God experiences” that have taken place in my own life, I have written about them here as if they were actual, word-for-word conversations in hopes of helping translate the concept of interacting with the Spirit of God into simple, everyday language. Additionally, whenever this book uses paraphrased scriptures to make their messages easier to grasp, the actual translations of those scriptures are provided in the endnotes. Also, when necessary, the names of people, places, and some minor details have been altered in order to protect privacy. I should also mention that much of what is shared in these pages is quite candid and thematically mature, so I suggest parental guidance for younger girls who might want to read this book.

Authentic Beauty was first released several years ago, and I have been so incredibly humbled and blessed since then to hear from thousands of young women around the country and the world who have been shaped and inspired by the message of this book. I am especially excited about this new edition, which includes three bonus sections from Eric (my wonderful husband) called “Studying Manhood.” Most of us,

as young women, have spent a good deal of time in a state of perplexity about the confusing subject of guys, and I have thousands of e-mails and letters from young women to prove it! Why do guys think the way they do? Why do guys treat us the way they do? Why is modern-day manhood so mediocre? These are crucial questions that need to be examined as we seek to discover set-apart femininity.

Eric, like me, has a huge desire to see Christ-centered femininity restored in this culture. He also longs to see Christlike manhood resurrected. And he is convinced that we, as young women, are a vital part of that process. So at three strategic points in the book, we have inserted material from Eric in which he offers his perspective on some of the most common “guy issues” we as modern young women face. These sections are meant to help you understand the world of guys and help transform modern male mediocrity into heroic, Christlike manhood. I hope you will be inspired by them as much as I was.

Several times in this book you will be asked to visit the Web site www.authenticgirl.com. This site includes additional tools you may find helpful, including some bonus material to help you take the message of *Authentic Beauty* even deeper. I would encourage you, if you are able, to take advantage of the valuable resources on this Web site, which have been designed to make the message of this book even more real and practical in your life.

Finally, I would encourage you to use the new companion to this book, *Authentic Beauty: Going Deeper*. This discussion and reflection guide was designed for groups and individuals who want to take this message to the next level in personal application and explore the biblical foundation of the truths discussed within these pages.

I am truly excited to share this journey with you, my friend. So grab your coffee mug, fill it with your favorite drink, pull up a comfortable chair, and let the heart-to-heart adventure begin!

PART I

the first
step

understanding

the

crisis

facing

modern-day

femininity





The Erosion of a Feminine Dream

*I*T HAPPENED WHEN I was six.

Somewhere between my encounter with the breathtaking heroine in Walt Disney's *Sleeping Beauty* and my introduction to Malibu Barbie (who came complete with five evening gowns and a hot-pink convertible), I made my decision. Somewhere between watching the lovely Sugar Plum Fairy twirling around on stage during a local production of *The Nutcracker* and trying on my mother's satiny wedding dress, I decided beyond a shadow of a doubt exactly what I wanted to be when I grew up...a beautiful princess.

The fact that princesses were unheard-of in modern-day America did not bother me. I was convinced that somehow, someway, someday

I would become one. It was not that I considered myself especially beautiful or princesslike. In fact, staring into the bathroom mirror one morning at my stringy hair and crooked teeth, I decided that the only remedy was a makeover, which I skillfully applied after digging in my mom's makeup drawer. (The story of my memorable venture out into public that day with my bright pink cheeks, dark green eyelids, and vibrant orange lips is quite an unfortunate tale.) That was the end of my makeup escapades for the time being, but I held out hope that one day I would grow into a dazzling beauty like Cathy Henderson (my all-time favorite baby-sitter), with her supercool, neon pink nail polish and Barbie-like locks.

But much more than polished nails and eternally good hair days, it seemed to me that the *really* necessary requirement for becoming a princess was to find a noble prince: a knight in shining armor who would consider me the most desirable girl in the world, sweep me off my feet, rescue me from peril, carry me away to his castle, and cherish me forever. Sleeping Beauty had Prince Charming. Malibu Barbie had Ken. The Sugar Plum Fairy had the Nutcracker. The Beautiful Bride (a.k.a. my mother) had the Handsome Groom (a.k.a. my father). Even Cathy Henderson had the curly haired Scotty Darnell wrapped around her finger. Finding a prince of my own seemed like a reasonable goal.

It was a childish dream, a girlish desire that budded in my heart long before I knew anything about the real world. But for some inexplicable reason, it was a dream that I longed to come true more than I had ever longed for anything in my entire life. I desperately wanted to become a princess. It was a dream that I treasured, even as I grew older. It was a desire that remained rooted deep within my heart long after Malibu Barbie and her convertible were packed away in Styrofoam peanuts up in the attic. But things were about to change, and change dramatically. In my early childhood innocence, I had no way

of knowing the weighty price that would soon be demanded of a young girl who dares to enter the real world holding on to the foolish dream of becoming a princess...

✿ THE DREAM BEGAN to fade when I was ten. I was standing by the water fountain with Mandy and Katie, my two fifth-grade bosom buddies. We were deeply engaged in an animated discussion about the many virtues of Sour Patch Kids, the latest candy craze to hit Crestview Elementary since Nerds had come on the scene a year before. Then, seemingly from out of nowhere, a small group of fifth-grade boys surrounded us, laughing obnoxiously and jolting Mandy out of an awe-inspiring tale of her recent attempt to eat *five* Sour Patch Kids all at the same time. Katie rolled her eyes and looked at the boys in annoyance.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

The ringleader, Andy Archibald, only smirked at Katie. Andy was a loud, skinny kid in baggy Levi’s who brought three or four Twinkies in his lunch nearly every day of the week. (I had noticed this fact with great envy, since my mom was a health nut, and the “treats” in my lunchbox were usually carrot sticks and sugar-free granola bars.)

“Go *away!*” Katie ordered in an irritated voice. Andy didn’t budge. His sly grin grew wider. He stepped a little closer to her. The rest of the boys began to snicker.

“Timmy *likes* you,” Andy finally announced triumphantly, as the snickering grew louder. Timmy immediately shoved Andy against the water fountain, protesting loudly with a swear word. I quickly looked around to see if any teachers had heard him. Fifth graders were not allowed to cuss in school (we were told that once we reached middle school we would be grown up enough to say whatever we wanted in the halls). I expected the Cussing Police to come rushing over, grab

Timmy by the earlobe to drag him off to the principal's office, and force-feed him a bar of Dial. But no adult was anywhere in sight. I found myself strangely disappointed that Timmy's great sin had not created more of a scandal.

My thoughts on this were short-lived, however, because Andy had recovered from Timmy's outburst and seemed to be gaining momentum. "Timmy thinks you're a *babe*," he crooned to Katie in his grating, prepubertized voice, as Timmy yelled, "Shut *up*, dude!"

Katie's face had turned bright red, and she was staring at the floor.

"Yeah," piped in Jason Smits, a squirrely kid with oversized glasses, "Timmy thinks you're hot, cuz you're *de-vel-op-ing*!" He pointed at Katie's chest. "You have to wear a *training bra*!" At this, the entire group of boys burst into wild, uncontrollable laughter. Katie pursed her lips together in humiliation and hugged her science book tightly against her chest. Mandy glared at the boys but remained speechless. I looked around the hallway again, realizing that there were still no adults anywhere near us to come to the rescue. I decided it was up to me to defend Katie's honor.

"Leave her alone, you jerks!" I burst out. I immediately wished I had kept my mouth shut. The hyper group of boys suddenly turned their full attention on me, and I went from feeling like Wonder Woman to Minnie Mouse in a matter of seconds. Andy curled his lip cynically and looked me up and down.

"Hey," he said, nudging the kid next to him, "check out *this* ugly chick—she's flatter than the plains of Kansas!" The boys howled. Jason quickly opened his mouth to outdo Andy's insult, but before any more verbal abuse could occur, our teacher decided to appear.

"Okay, boys and girls, let's get back in line. Our break is over. It's time for our science lesson!" she called out happily, oblivious to the drama that had just unfolded. The snickering group of boys quickly

dispersed, and we were herded into the classroom to learn about the exciting process of metamorphosis.

While Miss Thompson began her lecture on the larval stage of a caterpillar, I was vaguely aware of new, confusing emotions dancing around in my heart. Since I was only ten, I hadn't had much experience being scrutinized, criticized, and discarded by members of the opposite sex. It was a strange sensation, and it created a knot in my stomach that seemed to linger there all afternoon. Andy Archibald's words rang over and over in my ears. It wasn't supposed to work this way, I told myself in bewilderment. There was a marked difference, I noticed, in the way Andy Archibald had treated *me* and the way the beautiful princess was treated by her prince in all the stories I had grown up with. The men in the fairy tales treated women as valuable treasures, to be prized and cherished. The "men" in the fifth grade at Crestview Elementary seemed to treat us the same way they treated their soccer ball—like something to be roughly kicked around for fun, then tossed unnoticed into a corner of the playground.

The longer I sat thinking, the more I found it hard to believe that boys actually *noticed* which girls were wearing training bras and which were still wearing pink cotton undershirts, like me. I had never been insecure about it until that day; in fact, I had never really given it much thought. My friends and I were usually too busy discussing Sour Patch Kids and Care Bears to obsess over our bodies. And until that day by the water fountain, the boys in my class had always spent most of their energy trading baseball cards and telling the latest Pee-wee Herman jokes. But now, they seemed to have found a new, more exciting pastime—tormenting us about how we looked.

Boys like Andy, Timmy, and Jason had always tried to irritate the girls by flipping their eyelids inside out or cracking all their knuckles at once. But now, overnight, they seemed to have realized that they could get a far bigger reaction from us by brutally teasing us about the

fascinating new phrases they had learned last week from Miss Thompson in health class. They had started using new words like *developing*, or Katie's most recent downfall, *training bra*. Though Miss Thompson had emphatically explained that these matters were nothing to giggle or be ashamed about, the boys hadn't seemed to catch the part about not laughing. As for not being ashamed about it, I found myself suddenly wanting to ask Miss Thompson how a ten-year-old was *not* supposed to feel embarrassed while facing a group of boys howling about the fact that she had not yet developed. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that Miss Thompson and our new workbook called *My Body* were partly to blame for this strange and unwelcome change that had come over the Crestview Elementary fifth-grade boys.

Another possibility I considered might somehow be related was the magazine that Andy Archibald had discovered under his older brother's bed. I had heard Andy telling Jason Smits all about it during Susie Montgomery's oral report on the planet Jupiter a few days before. From what I could tell, it was a magazine with nothing but pictures of women who apparently were not wearing very many clothes, and the boys used the word *babe* repeatedly as they whispered to each other about it. It sounded like a boring magazine to me. I couldn't understand why Andy and Jason were so excited about it. But it had seemed to awaken them to this new idea of studying all the girls and deciding whether or not they were hot.

Whatever was causing the boys to act this way, I knew one thing for sure: being subject to their cruelty was *not* getting me any closer to becoming a princess. In fact, I was beginning to feel more like one of Cinderella's ugly stepsisters than the lovely girl with the glass slipper. A seed of doubt had entered my mind—maybe my dream of becoming a beautiful princess and being cherished by a noble prince was simply not possible for someone like me. Maybe it only happened

for girls like Snow White or Malibu Barbie. Maybe men would always see me as ugly and undesirable. Maybe I was not pretty enough, or talented enough, or vivacious enough. Maybe in order to be found attractive...*I* needed to change.

❁ BY THE TIME I was thirteen, thoughts of becoming a princess had all but disappeared from my mind. After three years filled with hundreds of moments like the one by the water fountain at Crestview Elementary, listening to the taunts and barrages of snickering boys who examined and criticized nearly every part of my anatomy, I was tired. Tired of trying to convince myself that someday I would be beautiful. Tired of hoping for a noble prince to rescue me and carry me away to his castle. My desire to be loved and cherished by a gentle knight had not diminished, but had only grown more intense. Yet I had begun to question whether such a fairy tale could ever happen to me. I had innocently stumbled into the real world while holding tightly to my girlish ideals. In response, the world had laughed at my tender heart, mocked my deepest desires, and trampled on my treasured dreams.

Instead of wasting my time looking for a fairy tale, I finally determined that, in order to avoid as much painful rejection as I could, my energy would be better spent on making myself as desirable as possible to the opposite sex. After enduring one too many cynical jabs from greasy-haired boys like Andy, I knew I could not survive that way much longer.

Thankfully, I had become a little more—*ahem*—endowed than in my days at Crestview Elementary. I had also learned a few things by watching other girls around me as they interacted with guys. I decided it was time to put these new tricks into action.

By now the guys had designed a new way of interacting with girls'

bodies that went far beyond examining them from a couple feet away. In addition to continually scrutinizing and graphically describing our bodies, they had also developed the habit of attempting to grab, touch, and tickle anything feminine that ignited their hormones. How a girl responded to these gestures often determined the way she was treated from that point on.

One morning during my first week of eighth grade, as I was rummaging through the chaos in the bottom of my bright orange locker, I had an eye-opening experience. My friend Ashley had the locker next to mine, and she was passionately describing to me the horrors of Ms. Vickers (her militaristic English teacher) as she tried to shove a notebook into her already overflowing backpack. Suddenly, she was cornered by Matt Montoya and Tyler Pierce, two wiry basketball players with spiked hair and oversize shorts that showed off a good five inches of their boxers.

“Hey, babe, how about a quickie in the bathroom?” Matt panted into Ashley’s ear as Tyler stood behind her and unhooked her bra through her Hard Rock Café T-shirt.

I pretended to be captivated by the cover of my social studies book, but I watched the scene closely out of the corner of my eye. Instead of staring helplessly at the floor with a red face or angrily protesting in the name of sexual harassment, Ashley had a different and surprising reaction.

“Ma-a-tt!” she squealed, playfully pushing him away and giggling. Then she spun around with an affectionately annoyed smile at Tyler, who was just beginning to tug at the back of her jeans.

“*Stop* it,” she whined in a cute, lighthearted voice, looking up at him seductively as she skillfully rehooked her bra.

Matt was not to be ignored. “Come on, Ash,” he crooned, sliding his hands down past her belt, “just five minutes—you and me?”

At that moment, the bell shrieked loudly from a speaker above us,

and the steamy dialogue dissolved. With one last pinch near Ashley's back pocket, Matt slung his backpack over his arm, and he and Tyler strutted down the hall, laughing obnoxiously as they glanced back over their shoulders at Ashley, who was grinning back at them.

I learned quickly. It seemed to me that the girls who responded to guys the way Ashley did knew exactly what they were doing. Instead of getting ridiculed and mocked by guys, they got drooled over, touched, and propositioned. Maybe this wasn't the ideal kind of male attention. Still, it was far less painful than complete humiliation and rejection, which is exactly what a girl would get if she showed any sign of resistance to their constant sexual attention. We had been taught in health class about the importance of standing up to sexual harassment and were told that we should not hesitate to come to any adult if we were being verbally assaulted at school. But this advice was so pathetically impractical, it was quickly tossed aside. What girl wanted to invite even more ridicule and torment by drawing attention to the fact that she was upset by the way the guys were treating her?

I soon mastered Ashley's technique—laughing carelessly when guys attempted to unbutton my shirt during boring class lectures, flirting playfully when they tried to touch me in the hall, joking back effortlessly when they made sexual comments to me on the bus—although none of it came naturally. But soon I was giggling, teasing, and seducing right along with the best of them. Ashley had taught me well. And she was right—this new approach was ten times better than silently enduring the cruel taunts of greasy-haired boys or trying to fight back with their sarcastic laughter ringing in my ears.

There was another apparent advantage as well: whenever a guy like Matt or Tyler would hover around my locker, sliding his hands into the back pockets of my jeans or toying with my bra strap, I felt a newfound freedom from a nagging fear. It was a fear that had haunted me since that unforgettable moment in the hall with Andy

Archibald during my fifth-grade year. I was finally able to convince myself that maybe, just maybe, I wasn't ugly or undesirable after all. No matter how different Matt and Tyler were from my childhood dreams of a knight in shining armor, at least through their flirtatious attention I could dull the longing that had started in the fifth grade: to be found attractive in the eyes of the opposite sex.

🌸 I HEARD IT first from Vinny Rigaletti, a short kid with red hair and braces who wore black Umbros and Body Glove T-shirts every single day of the year.

“Brandon’s breaking up with Stephanie. He’s gonna ask you out tonight,” he whispered conspiratorially over my terminal in the computer lab. I gazed back at Vinny with all the steely indifference of 007, but my heart was hammering inside my chest like the Energizer Bunny after five Mountain Dews. Without realizing it, Vinny had just announced the beginning of a significant new chapter in my young life.

It was the middle of my eighth-grade year, and it seemed I had finally reached a new level. Instead of my merely being a sex object toyed with in the halls, now a guy actually *liked* me. Brandon was a tall, blond-haired, blue-eyed athlete with an irresistible smile. (My friends said he looked almost exactly like Vanilla Ice, which at that time was actually a compliment.) The fact that Brandon apparently liked *me* enough to break up with Stephanie—a dark-haired beauty who looked like a walking Gap ad—completely baffled me. It amazed me. It flattered me.

That night when the phone rang and I heard Brandon’s soft voice declaring his unfailing love for me, a faltering hope entered my heart. It was a hope that I hadn’t entertained for years, and even now it was only a flicker. Could it possibly be that my childhood dream

to be cherished by a noble knight in shining armor was about to come true?

For the first few weeks of my relationship with Brandon, it seemed like the answer to that wondering was a resounding yes. Brandon treated me the way no other guy ever had—like I was truly valuable to him. He wrote me romantic notes nearly every day, then stuffed them into my locker or my notebooks for me to find. He waited for me after almost every class and tenderly wrapped his arm around me as we walked down the hall together. Every night, Brandon would call me as soon as he finished dinner and remind me how much he was in love with me. The girlhood dream of becoming a beautiful princess, treasured by an adoring prince, began to reawaken in my heart.

In the fairy tales, when a princess was cherished by a valiant prince, she gave up everything to follow him to the ends of the earth. Snow White gave up her cute little cottage with the cute little dwarfs; Sleeping Beauty gave up her comfortable bed, pj's, and never-ending slumber; and the Little Mermaid gave up her mer-family, her special fins that allowed her to race with the dolphins, and her extremely cool underwater caves—all for the men of their dreams. In every story, the princess and her prince lived happily ever after. Now that I had finally found a prince who loved me and found me beautiful, I knew that in order to keep his devoted love, I too would have to give him something. And I knew what that something must be—my heart.

It wasn't a hard task. Since most of the time I was walking on a cloud, basking in the amazement of Brandon's adoration for me, giving my heart to him came effortlessly. As the months raced by, I began to build my life around him. He was the first person I would rush to meet the moment I got to school, the one I would spend every spare moment of my day with, the occupation of nearly all my thoughts and daydreams, the last voice I would listen to before drifting off to

sleep, and the face that would appear in my mind as soon as I awakened in the morning.

Soon it became unusual for me to walk alone through a crowded hallway, it felt strange to eat lunch without him sitting next to me, and I became unsettled and restless if a night ever passed without hearing his voice on the other end of the phone. The week Brandon came down with pneumonia and couldn't be with me every waking hour of my day or remind me of his affection by phone at night, I realized with startling clarity that I could not live without him. Brandon had become my life. Since Brandon had made it clear that I had become *his* life, giving my heart to him completely did not seem like a sacrifice. Surely he would always cherish it. I was finally on my way to becoming a princess.

❁ WHEN THE FAIRY tale began to crumble, it was almost too subtle for me to notice that it was happening. It was just a handful of little things here and there—catching Brandon's gaze lingering on a pretty girl in the hall or walking into the cafeteria to find him in a lively tickling match with a couple of cute cheerleaders. I soon had the sickening suspicion that his love was slipping away from me. The devastating realization that if he left he would take my heart with him began to gnaw at me day and night.

My solution was not to guard what was left of my heart, but rather to give him every remaining shred of it in a last-ditch effort to entice him to stay. I wrote him desperate letters baring my soul, made him romantic gifts that declared my undying love, and even allowed him to take nearly everything I had to give of my body. Nothing worked. He was shattering my dream, and I was powerless to stop him.

The pain of Brandon's rejection was far more intense and over-

whelming than Andy Archibald's fifth-grade cruelty. Brandon had been my salvation, a prince who had finally rescued me, allowing me to believe that my lifelong dream of becoming a princess was coming true. And then, like a shocking horror movie in which the hero morphs into the villain, he had transformed from a prince into a monster. He had destroyed my delicate heart—a gift I had willingly and trustingly offered him. The fairy tale had taken a nightmarish turn. I racked my brain but could remember no example of a time something like this ever happened to the princesses in my childhood stories.

When the tumultuous waves of our breakup began to subside, I discovered that I had drastically changed. I was left emotionally bleeding, desperate, and helpless. Before Brandon, my longing to be a cherished princess was simply a fading childhood dream. But strangely, now that my young heart had been trampled and crushed, this childhood longing became an unquenchable thirst. I knew that from that point on, I simply could not survive without finding it. It was the only way to ease the unbearable pain I now carried with me daily. I felt like a delicate flower that had been plucked from its life source. I knew I was on the verge of withering up and dying if I did not quickly find something to nourish my exposed heart.

I looked for it in other relationships. My status as Brandon's ex-girlfriend had elevated me to the popularity level where other guys started showing interest in me. So I gave myself to one after another. Though my parents' advice, conventional wisdom, and even the lovely ladies in the fairy tales had always taught me that men preferred women who allowed the *guy* to be the aggressive one, that was not the message I received from the world I lived in. Guys in my world seemed to value only girls who initiated relationships, flirting, and sex—girls who had absolutely no boundaries around their hearts or bodies. At the age of fifteen, I found myself being molded into the kind of girl the world expected me to be.

The next season of my life was the most hellish I have ever experienced. My desperate searching for a prince who would cherish me forever had become my demise. I had listened to the voice of the culture and become the young woman it convinced me to be, hoping that the result would be the discovery of a happily-ever-after tale. Instead, my heart was mercilessly trampled time and time again. My body was used for the animalistic gratification of guys who were as far from being gallant knights as Gumby is from being the Incredible Hulk. One by one, my precious dreams were shattered beyond recognition.

🌸 I WAS NOT the only girl surviving this kind of miserable existence. I became aware of this fact through many experiences, such as the night I was lounging on a brown shag couch with a supersize package of Starbursts in Jody Smith's basement. Seven or eight girls were sprawled on the floor or on couches, and I was silently listening to their midnight banter as I unwrapped a strawberry cube and let it slowly dissolve in my mouth. (Chewing was out of the question, due to my orthodontist's twisted pursuit to tighten my braces beyond the point of cruel and unusual punishment.)

"Kelly, just answer one question—why the @#\$\$! did you fool around with Nathan last night? You *know* he's totally in love with Elizabeth Yates." The blunt question was posed by Amy Wilhelm, a hyper volleyball player with an unyielding, and often annoying, curiosity streak.

Kelly was a blond cheerleader with a perpetual tan. She ripped open a bag of Doritos and rolled her eyes. "I don't give a \$#@ who he's in love with—he's hot!" Kelly replied passionately, shoving two chips into her mouth and crunching down on them loudly. "And he's a really good kisser," she added between bites. Kelly would know—

she had slept with nearly every varsity football player, fluttering from one to the next like a honeybee in a flower garden. I always admired her couldn't-care-less attitude every time she got dumped by a guy who had just used her. She seemed to be able to shut off her emotions like a light switch.

But now, as I watched her go through an entire bag of Doritos in three minutes, I saw something in her eyes I had never seen before. Hopelessness. I realized that Kelly was seeking the same thing I was—to be loved and cherished unconditionally. Like me, she had been hurt too many times to believe it was possible. But maybe every time she was in the arms of a new guy, if only for a night, she could pretend she was valued. Though I wasn't exactly a one-night-stand kind of girl, I could relate to that feeling.

“Hey, did you guys hear that Laney Jackson tried to kill herself?” piped up Jody suddenly.

“Who's Laney Jackson?” Kelly asked in a bored voice.

“You know, that girl in our geometry class—the one who was dating Alex Chamberlain?” Jody reminded her, reaching for a can of Pepsi.

“Oh yeah, I know who you're talking about! Didn't she, like, try to OD on her mom's painkillers the day he dumped her?” Amy charged back into the conversation, clearly excited to be chewing on this succulent new morsel of gossip.

I thought about the abyss of despair I had spiraled into when Brandon broke up with me. I could almost imagine the devastation Laney felt when Alex smashed her heart into thousands of pieces. I could picture her hopeless face as she slowly opened the bottle of little white pills. Another princess who had been rejected by the prince she thought would always love her.

I looked around the room at the girls. They weren't much different from the hundreds of girls I encountered every day at school or

even at church. There seemed to be a remnant of shattered princess dreams in each of them. And none of them seemed remotely close to having that dream come true.

Amy was animatedly chattering about the Alex-Laney scandal, and I started to wonder if her obsession with the juicy details of other people's lives was a front to keep us from asking any questions about her own. I had heard from Jody that Amy's father had molested her from the time she was seven. It occurred to me that Amy's dream of becoming a princess was most likely annihilated by her father before it ever really began. So here she was, creating drama wherever she could find it, focusing on other people's pain so she would be too busy to feel her own.

"Oh, #\$\$%!" Jody suddenly swore. "How many Pepsis have I had? Man! I *cannot* have any more calories this week or there is no way I'll be able to do the swimsuit shoot on Saturday!" She shoved the half-empty Pepsi can away in disgust.

"Jody, *please*. You haven't eaten a meal since Thursday," Kelly said impatiently. "If you stay on this pathetic lettuce and grapefruit diet, you're gonna start passing out in the hall every other day like you did last year."

Jody, in her spare time, was a teen model who frequently appeared in local department store ads in the weekend newspapers. She had an avid male following at our school, and she was terrified of losing her modeling status and, thus, the devoted attention and approval of so many guys. Her room was covered with posters of Victoria's Secret models and pinups from *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issues to constantly remind her of what she needed to look like and, presumably, motivate her not to eat. She was tall and elegant, but painfully thin, and her new goal was to drop from a size 4 down to a 2. Jody had been hospitalized twice for anorexia. She must have convinced herself that in order to receive the kind of love and approval

she had always wanted, she couldn't stop until she withered into the body of a wraithlike supermodel.

Later that night, as the final credits from the latest Hollywood chick flick danced across Jody's big-screen television, we lay on the floor sighing and talking wistfully. The movie's brave and sensitive hero was the epitome of our ultimate knight-in-shining-armor fantasies. But that's all it was—a movie—and we knew it. I realized we had all surrendered to the fact that the only place that we could ever hope or expect to find a noble prince who would truly love and cherish his princess was in the comforting unreality of Hollywood. If no other girl had found even a hint of what I had been after since childhood, then it was time to stop kidding myself. My dream of becoming a princess would never come true.