



Getting dumped at prom sucks.

I mean, getting dumped period sucks, obviously. But to have it happen in formal wear in front of hundreds of people adds a humiliating slap across the face that an I-just-want-to-be-friends text can't compete with.

It's basically the exact opposite of being voted prom king. In fact, it feels like the prom king decided to have you executed.

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It's not like there weren't warning signs that the night was going to be a disaster. I'd met my date, Jessica, during the second semester of my sophomore year of high school, when I was still going by my female birth name, Emerald. She was bi, and I was out as gay at the time. I never referred to myself as a lesbian, just gay. "Lesbian" would have implied that I was a girl who liked girls.

I knew that I was a boy who liked girls.

My friend Alyssa introduced me to Jessica—we were all in the same psychology class. Alyssa is the type of girl who likes to touch. She was always hugging me and holding on for just a little too long, but not in a flirty way. She's just physically affectionate. Jessica was a little more removed. She had this aloof, ice princess quality that I'd always thought was kind of sexy. Leading up to the prom, we'd never dated or anything, though; I was always too shy to ask her out. So when prom came around and her friends were all taking it way too seriously for Jessica's taste, with limo rentals and elaborate invitations written in soap on a prospective date's car, I was beyond psyched when she asked me to take her.

"We'll make it a good time," she promised me.

Oh, yes we will, I thought, imagining us slow dancing under swirling lights.

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I had started the very first steps of transitioning from female to male shortly after meeting Jessica. According to the standards of care within the medical community, I needed to live in public as a male for one year before I would be allowed to have any kind of gender reassignment surgery, like having my breasts removed. I began to ask people to call me Arin instead of Emerald, and to refer to me as "he" instead of "she." For the most part Jessica was cool about it, but every now and then she'd start whining: "Why can't you just be gay? Why do you have to mess with this whole transgender thing? Why can't you be normal?"

She considered herself something of a rebel, but I think my coming out as trans was one step too far over the line for her. Bisexual was edgy, gay was even cooler, but being transgender was a new one for most of the people in our school. But that was okay with me at first—I

understood that a lot of people were going to have a hard time getting used to the change, and I naively didn't let her complaints upset me. I thought I could educate her.

Also, to be perfectly honest, she was two years older, and it was kind of a big deal for a sophomore like me to get to attend prom.

I spent hours getting ready the night of the dance. When I had been Emerald, if I'd needed to dress for a formal event, I'd throw on whatever hideous dress my mom had picked out for the occasion, and I'd invariably end up letting her brush my hair since I couldn't be bothered myself. She loved to do it, though. She took any and every opportunity I gave her to try to make me look pretty. Mom named me after the Emerald Pool at Trafalgar Falls in Dominica—she had visited there while pregnant with me and thought it was the most beautiful place she'd ever seen. It was a lot to try to live up to back then.

But for my first prom as Arin, I went all out. I discovered the color of Jessica's dress and bought a blue shirt to wear with my suit so we'd match. I ironed all my clothes until the creases were razor sharp, and I polished my black dress shoes until I could see my reflection in them. I spent forever in the shower, scrubbing myself clean. After I toweled off and put on my binder—a tight piece of elastic that squashes your boobs to give the appearance of a flat chest—I messed with my hair for at least twenty minutes until I got it just right.

It hadn't even occurred to me to buy a corsage, until my mom told me she'd be pissed if her prom date showed up without one, so we stopped at a florist shop on our way to Jessica's house. I chose a white rose on a wristband for her, and a matching boutonniere for me.

"Promise me you won't drink," Mom lectured.

"I won't," I said.

"And don't get into a car if anyone else has been drinking."

"I won't," I said. I wished she'd just trust me. I had no interest in partying. All I wanted was to be out in the world as a boy with a beautiful girl on my arm. I wasn't about to ruin that feeling with booze.

She dropped me off in front of Jessica's and leaned over to kiss my cheek.

"You look very handsome," she said, and reached out to ruffle my hair. I ducked her hand.

"Don't touch it," I said. "This took forever!"

We locked eyes for a moment. The past few years had been the worst of our lives. I'd come back from wanting to die. Initially she had vehemently resisted my need to transition, and if you'd told me even four months prior that we'd be experiencing this moment together—me with short hair, dressed in a suit, taking a girl to prom—well, I would have called you crazy.

"Love you," I said, getting out of the car and slamming the door shut behind me.

I knocked on Jessica's door, and her dad answered. I had no idea if he knew I was transgender, and I think he sensed I was nervous.

"Hello, Arin," he said, giving me a firm handshake. "Come on in. Jessica's told me all about you."

Everything? I wondered.

Jessica appeared from the hallway, fastening an earring into place.

"Hey," she said, sounding bored.

Her hair was pulled up into a pouf on top of her head, held in place with a thin circular braid. The rest curled and tumbled down past her shoulders. It was sort of a fifties retro thing, like that singer from the B-52s. Her strapless teal dress was covered in rhinestones around her breasts, and more shiny rocks marched in vertical lines toward her waist, where the cloth dissolved into layers of tulle. Her legs were bare, and ended in open-toed black heels. I thought she looked beautiful, and told her so.

"Thanks," she said, and I felt a twinge of disappointment when she didn't comment on my suit.

I slipped her corsage onto her wrist but fumbled when I tried to pin my boutonnière. Her dad saw me struggling and stepped up to help me get it on straight while Jessica watched, a slight smirk on her face. That should have been warning number one—wasn't she the one who should have been playing this part in the ritual?

But the thought disappeared when her dad finished and gave me a little pat on the shoulder. All he had to do was refer to me as "son," and it would have been a moment right out of some cheesy prom episode of a sitcom. I was going through the same motions that generations of American boys had gone through before me, and it felt unreal and incredible at the same time.

We took a few photos outside, and then piled into her dad's car to take our official prom pictures at the town gazebo. It's a Catoosa, Oklahoma, tradition, and there were at least ten other couples there jostling for a place on the steps.

As gazebos go, it's not much to look at. Plus, there are only so many angles to shoot from where you don't get a view of a gas station or the shuttered Lil' Abner's Dairyyette in the background.

Afterward, we drove back to Jessica's house. Alyssa and her date, a guy named Eric whom Alyssa had been dating on and off for about a year, were pulling into the driveway in a beat-up red car—our ride for the night. Alyssa looked stunning in a really simple strapless, eggplant-colored gown. Eric, on the other hand, was in jeans and sneakers and was still buttoning up a short-sleeved plaid shirt over a long-sleeved white thermal top. His hair was a

disheveled mess. I didn't know him all that well, and his appearance seemed pretty disrespectful. I shot Alyssa a questioning look, and she just rolled her eyes. Don't ask.

After a few more photos it was time to go. I was sort of surprised when Jessica jumped into the front seat next to Eric instead of sitting in the back with me, so Alyssa and I climbed into the cramped backseat. It still didn't occur to me that anything was wrong, though. I was just too excited. I snapped clueless selfies and posted them to Facebook, making sure that my boutonniere showed up in the shots.

Look at me, on the way to the prom! My date's in the front.

We were headed to Catoosa's fanciest restaurant—a popular Italian place—when things really started to dissolve.

“There's a party at Ryan's house after prom. We should go,” Eric said. “He'll have beer.”

Jessica got super-excited. “Oh, totally,” she said, and turned around to face me for the first time. “Arin, you in?”

I felt my heart sink as I remembered the conversation I'd had with my mom earlier. I'd given her my word, and that meant something to me. Plus, being around a bunch of drunk teenagers isn't exactly my idea of a good time. They tend to get a little too probing with their questions about my being transgender. I enjoy talking to people about trans issues, but when alcohol gets involved, the queries inevitably end up being mostly about my genitals, and I didn't want anything to ruin this night.

“Yeah, no, I don't think that's a good idea,” I said.

The mood in the car shifted almost immediately. Everyone got real quiet, until Alyssa said, “Come on. I bet it'll be fun!”

“I can't,” I said. I saw everyone exchange glances with one another. I hoped that maybe they'd change their minds, but I still discreetly texted Mom that I might need a ride home after the dance. Even if they went without me afterward, I was still determined to have a good time at the prom itself.

When we got to the restaurant, I beamed when the hostess called me “sir.” It was working. All that was missing was a hot date on my arm. I looked around for Jessica, but she was standing a few feet behind me, looking bored and unhappy.

She cheered up when we sat down and the waiter, a college-age guy with brown spiky hair, came over to our table and promptly settled his gaze on Jessica's chest.

“You guys look pretty sober for prom night,” he drawled, his eyes still glued to her. “Can I interest you in some wine?”

Eric and Jessica got really excited. But just like at the gazebo earlier, half the town—

including a few of our teachers—was at the restaurant.

“We’d better not,” Jessica whispered to the waiter, batting her eyelashes at him. “But thank you.”

“Suit yourself,” he said, shrugging. He continued to leer at Jessica’s cleavage while he took our order, and she fussed with her hair, loving the attention.

Oh well, I thought. At least my date is so hot that all the guys want her.

After dinner we headed over to the dance. Prom wasn’t being held at our school. I guess the idea of having it off-site was supposed to make the night feel special, but the venue the prom committee had chosen, the Home Builders Association of Greater Tulsa, was about as glamorous as if they’d hosted the prom in a hospital cafeteria. From the outside the building looks like any other industrial office complex, and despite some silver streamers hanging from the ceiling and bunches of pink, yellow, and blue balloons taped to the walls, the banquet hall couldn’t have been more bland.

At least the theme, “A Night to Remember,” was appropriate.

When we walked through the front doors, all of the chaperones made a big fuss over us. They told me how handsome I looked, how beautiful Jessica was. Our high school administration had actually been really supportive of my transition—the teachers all called me Arin. I still had to use the bathroom in the nurse’s office because I wasn’t allowed to use the guys’ room, but they at least understood that the one for girls wasn’t an option for me. Everyone’s enthusiasm at seeing us together made my heart swell, and for one last moment I believed that the night might be okay, that this could be the storybook prom everyone is supposed to get if they want it. I turned to Jessica to ask her if she wanted to dance, but she was saying something to Eric.

“Will you hold this for a minute?” she asked, handing him the corsage I’d bought her.

“Sure,” he said, and she turned around and walked off into the crowd.

Confused, I scanned the dancing hordes and saw her standing on tiptoe, whispering something to a guy I recognized as Ryan, the one hosting the after-party. The music morphed into a new song, and they started dancing together.

I stood there staring at them, still not quite understanding what was going on.

“Come on,” Alyssa said, grabbing my hand. “Let’s dance. I don’t know why she’s being so weird.”

Alyssa and I danced for a few songs. I tried to keep my eyes on Jessica, but she kept disappearing. And whenever I did see her, she was dancing with either Ryan or some other tall guy in a tux whom I didn’t recognize.

I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. It was a text from a strange number.

What do you have in your pants?

I hit delete.

"Who was it?" Alyssa yelled over the music.

"Nobody," I said. I'd gotten messages like that before, and refused to engage.

A slow country love song started to play. Alyssa and Eric coupled off, and in a burst of bravado I shoved my way through the crowd, looking for Jessica. I finally saw her standing near a table stocked with gallon jugs of sweet tea and store-bought snack platters stacked high with sweaty cubes of pale pink meat and rubbery cheese. A look of panic crossed her face as I approached.

"Will you dance with me?" I asked.

"Oh, o-okay," she stammered, looking around her, as if hoping someone would come and rescue her.

We walked out into the middle of the dance floor, and I went to put my arm around her waist, but she moved back a step and reached her arms out. She put her hands on my shoulders, with about two feet of space between us, and I realized that this was going to happen junior-high style.

She refused to make eye contact with me the entire time, and the song seemed to last forever. I felt like an idiot, and was convinced that everyone in the room knew this was a pity dance on her part.

The moment the song was over, she dropped her arms, turned around, and walked away without a word.

I headed to the snack table and poured some sweet tea, utterly depressed. When I turned back to face the crowd, I saw her dancing with the tall guy in the tux. He was wearing the corsage I'd given her. She must have gotten it back from Eric.

When the lights finally came on, she made her way over to me.

"So, I'm going to catch another ride to that party," she said. The tall tux guy was standing off to one side, holding her coat.

"Great," I said, totally deadpan.

"Okay, well, bye." She suddenly tried to give me a hug.

"No, forget it," I said, taking a step back.

“Whatever,” she said, rolling her eyes. She spun on her heel and took off.

Alyssa had watched the whole exchange and now rushed over.

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry. I don’t know what’s gotten into her,” she said, hugging me.

“It’s fine,” I mumbled into her shoulder.

“Look, I think we’re going to go to that party too,” she said sheepishly. “Please come with us.”

I shook my head and pulled out my phone to text Mom to come get me.

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I told her what happened as soon as I got into the car.

“You’re going to find someone,” she promised as I sat there in the passenger seat, staring at my lap. “This was just one date, one of many you’re going to go on. Some work out and some don’t, but I know that there is someone out there who is perfect for you. It takes time.”

Rationally I knew all of this was true. But emotionally nothing she said resonated. I woke up the next morning still angry and depressed, but a full night of sleep and a chance to really reflect on Mom’s “buck up” speech seemed to be helping. I decided to not let what had happened at prom get to me. My attitude was basically, Screw it. I don’t care. She wasn’t even that pretty.

I scarfed down some toast and took my coffee out onto the back deck. Our house sits on the top of a steep incline that leads down into a wooded ravine. Spring was in full force, and I could hear the stream at the bottom of the hill roaring with fresh rainwater. Technically we live in Broken Arrow, a suburb of Tulsa, but our place is located about fifteen minutes from the heart of town, in the middle of the countryside.

Two of our three dogs followed me down the steps and into the woods, down a trail to my favorite pile of moss-covered boulders. The stones are ancient, and are so haphazardly placed that they look like a giant hurled them toward our house from miles away.

I scrambled up on top of them, sat down, and chucked a few pebbles off into the forest, trying to think of ways to distract myself from the previous night.

I decided to go to the weekly Saturday night dance party at the Openarms Youth Project center. OYP is basically a safe place for underage gay and trans kids to hang out, and I needed to be around people like me. OYP serves snacks and sodas, and there’s a little lounge area with couches near the dance floor. There are drag shows once a month, and the center hosts their own prom every year. A staff of volunteers runs OYP, and no one older than twenty-one is allowed in. It’s a great resource for the youth community, but from the outside it looks like a seedy bar, a windowless concrete structure at the end of an industrial

stretch of warehouses sandwiched between a strip mall and a Baptist church. There's a small wooden porch that looks like it's just propped up against the front door as an afterthought, and a fenced-in concrete backyard.

I was going through a preppy phase, so that night I slipped on a pair of white cargo shorts, a white button-down shirt, and some Sperrys. Mom dropped me off, and when I walked inside, I immediately spotted my friend Dale, another trans guy, sitting across the room.

"Hey! How was your prom?" he asked. "Get lucky?"

"Hardly," I said, and flopped down onto the couch beside him.

I was in the middle of filling him in on my awful night when I noticed the front door open. I glanced over and saw a girl walk in. I caught only a quick glimpse of her profile before she turned away from me. But I could tell that she was stunning. Tall, with long dark hair, and wearing a black shirt with a few sequins that caught the light, making her sparkle. She was wearing skinny jeans that hugged her butt perfectly.

I nudged Dale. "What's a gorgeous girl like that doing in a dive like this?" I joked.

At that moment she turned in my direction, and I got a look at her face. My mouth dropped open.

"Oh my God, that's Katie Hill."

Déjà vu washed over me, and I started to sweat a little.

I felt like I was hurtling back in time, to the day when I'd first read her name in the paper and learned that she was transgender, like me. Memories of when suicide had felt like my only option came creeping back in, reminding me of just how far I'd come since I'd been a little kid trying to pee standing up behind my grandparents' barn.

I had to talk to her. It felt like I'd been waiting my whole life to.