

Pretty Good Girl

"Psst! Over here, Elsie." Melanie pulled me to the back of the school bus. Eleven-year-olds shouldn't be pulled like that, but I loved being told secrets.

"Mr. Oslin is retiring next month, and Miss Nancy wants you and me to craft a gift for him. Her idea is to use pipe cleaners to spell out 'Thank You, Mr. Oslin' in a nice, artsy sort of way, and then glue the letters onto a decorated rectangle of wood."

Here, Melanie's voice diminished to an almost inaudible whisper. "Don't tell anyone! Otherwise, Veronica will hear about it..."

"...and will want in and will boss us till we lose our patience," I finished for her.

"Uh, I guess. Also, because Brandon..."

"...can't keep a secret," I interrupted eagerly.

"Well, we want it to be a surprise. But Ms. Nancy said you were trustworthy, so don't tell anyone."

"Oh! How exciting!" I clapped my hands gleefully.

That day, Ms. Nancy's explanation on first-year algebra was entirely lost to me. In my view, her request for me to help with Mr. Oslin's gift was a wonderful assurance that I was a *pretty*

good girl — much better than bossy Veronica or secret-spilling Brandon.

Mind you, I've never claimed to be half angel — I couldn't stand the infantile way Melanie treated me — but my faults were

never half so bad and bothersome as those of my fellow classmates. I'd often marvel at the trouble some of the students who attended our Christian school would get into. I knew my good behavior would one day be noticed and singled out for attention, but to — at long last — be noticed by Ms. Nancy was a special honor.

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"Meet me to start work on our project after you've eaten a snack and changed out of your uniform," Melanie called after me as I danced off the school bus and into the local craft store. Even her bossy attitude couldn't dampen my mood. It is possible that the clerk had never seen a customer as happy as me!

Just as I finished scripting a movie — *Presenting a Gift to Mr. Oslin* — starring myself, an unmistakable "Yo, Elsie!" unleashed a bomb on my daydreaming. *Oh, no! Brandon!* I grimaced.

"What's up?"

"Nothing really," I replied coolly, speeding up my stride, trying to hint that I was busy.

"Hmmm! What's this?" He pulled a protruding orange pipe cleaner from my bag and in doing so opened my bag further. "Wow! So many different colors! Cool! But what's this all for? You seem a little too old to be playing with pipe cleaners."

That hurt. "It's not for me, silly. It's to make a gift for Mr. Osl —"

I stumbled on my words and then scrambled for poise and calm.

"We can't have the whole class wanting to work on this project. ..." Again, I realized I had said too much. "Don't say anything about this, Brandon," I whispered fiercely, glancing anxiously about.

"Anything about what? Mr. Oslin is one million miles away. You sure worry too much! Cheerio!" He sauntered away as we neared my home.

"What have I done?" I muttered as I stomped to my room. "Ms. Nancy had been counting on me. ... Stupid, stupid Elsie!"

Maybe I can wait until Melanie finds out herself. ... No, then she'll be even more upset that I hid something from her. I need to tell her now, or I won't be able to sleep in peace.

I sealed my bag of craft materials and set off for Melanie's home. Visions of a flabbergasted Melanie with flaming eyes and fiery words

filled me with dread. Would she sigh and shake her head? *What if she bans me from helping on the project?*

So often I had commended myself for being magnanimous with Melanie, and now I was at her mercy.

"Great! You've already bought everything! Let's get going! ... Oh? What's the matter?"

"Well..."



She listened silently until I completed my last apology. “Never mind, Elsie. It wasn’t really *all* your fault. But you should tell Ms. Nancy in case Veronica does fuss.”

“O-oh, you’re not mad at me? Th-thank you for forgiving me! You’re too kind!”

“Next time, laugh silly Brandon away. Now let’s start,” she said dismissively, reaching for the pipe cleaners.

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I neared home as the sun flung itself behind the evening’s velvet cloak, making me yearn for a similar veil with which to cover my mistake of today. Melanie’s earlier words—before it all happened—resounded in my gloom: *Ms. Nancy says you’re trustworthy...*

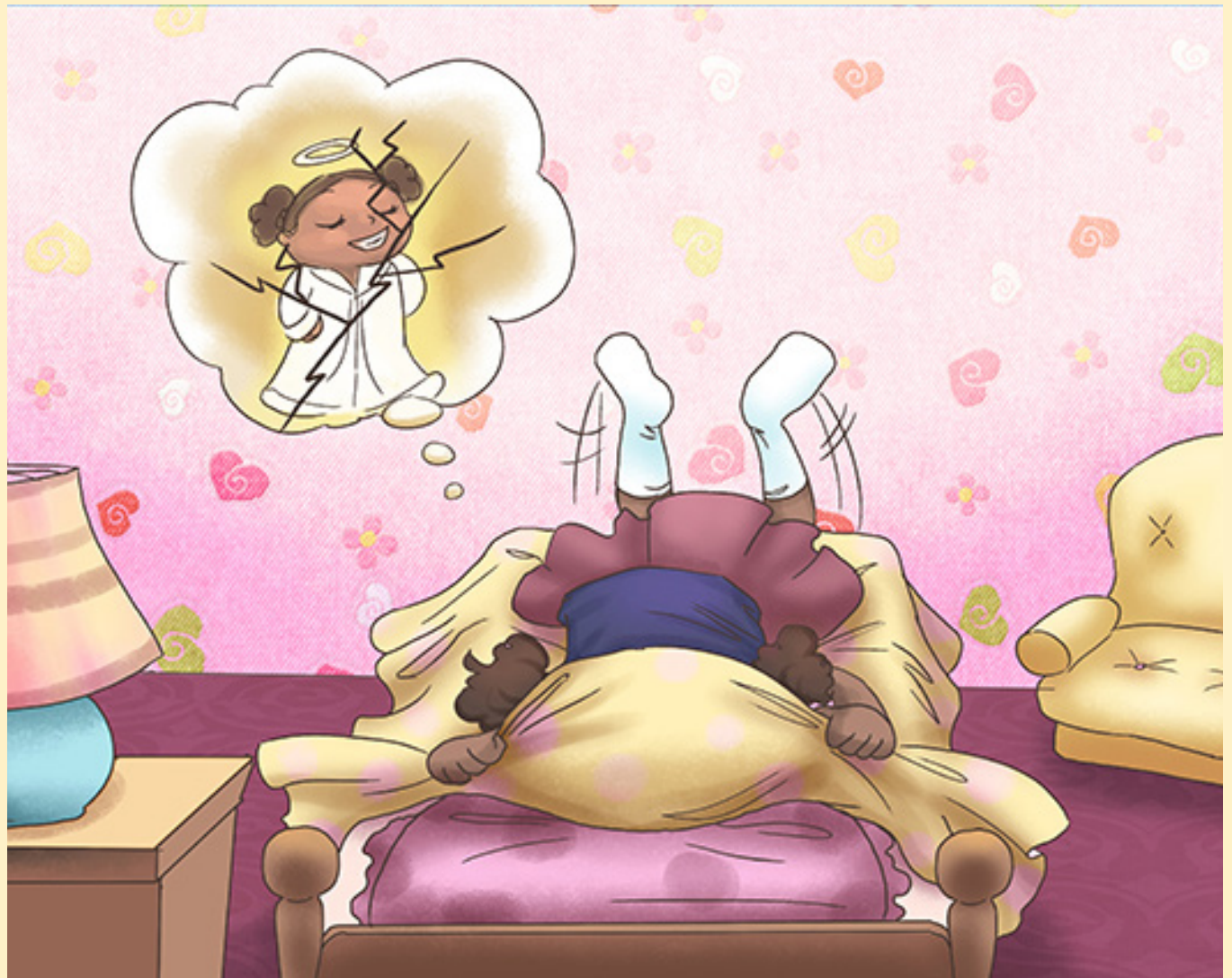
Well, not anymore. I suppose I hadn’t grown out of making mistakes like I thought I had.

I collapsed onto my bed and pulled the covers over my flushed, frowning face. After a bit, I recovered enough to admit that prior to this episode I had begun to think of myself as faultless. And I shouldn’t be surprised that this image of myself had crumbled. But now with this mess clinging to me, and my diligently cultivated image in ruins, I wondered if anyone would still like me.

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Concentration was at an all-time low and condemnation at an all-time high as I sat in Ms. Nancy’s algebra class. Aside from my upcoming meeting with our teacher,

Veronica had already corrected me for not including her and grumbled about Ms. Nancy favoring her “darling pet.” Melanie tried to assure Veronica that Ms. Nancy probably had some part for her in Mr. Oslin’s farewell program.



But all this fled far from my thoughts by the time I tremblingly forced myself to tell Ms. Nancy of yesterday's mishap. She listened unperturbed, then replied, "You know, Veronica's dad taught her woodworking. I was going to suggest that she carve all the decorations and cut the board. Why don't you and Melanie consider it? Whatever you decide, don't feel bad about yesterday. I didn't suggest this earlier to keep it a surprise for Mr. Oslin, but I



think Veronica might be a good addition to your team." My elation at receiving her forgiveness temporarily distracted me from my concerns over Veronica. But not for long.

That afternoon, I was again on my way to Melanie's, this time worrying over Ms. Nancy's suggestion we include Veronica. *Why her? Veronica is so bossy! And it'll be warfare from start to finish!*

The still, small voice reminded me of my realization from the night before. *You want to reject Veronica because of how she's behaved in the past. But two people you value did not do the same when you made a mistake yesterday. Why not give Veronica a second chance?*

"Yes, Lord. I'm sorry for my attitude."

Veronica initially tried to mask her awkwardness and insecurity by stepping up her Queen Veronica act. I struggled to resist the temptation to grumble with Melanie. Yet it became a wonderful testing round of my new resolution "not to think of (myself) more highly than (I) ought to think."¹ And when I saw her excellently cut board and elegantly carved decorations, I felt proud

to have included her. Also, my respect and admiration for Melanie and Ms. Nancy grew greatly, in view of the Christlike love they had shown me.



Despite my fears, my friendships improved: People love those who admit when they make mistakes and aren't trying to put on a show of goodness.

The End

¹ Romans 12:3, *adapted*