

Positive Reinforcement

by
Alessa



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I don't like her.

Can't stand her, in fact. She's too damn happy, *all the freaking time*. I suppose with a name like Summer, no wonder it's all sunshine and butterflies in her life. But I tell you, it's aggravating as hell.

And it's not just that. She's stupid.

I mean it. A grade-A moron. She thinks people are *nice*, like they aren't going to try to screw her over the first chance they get.

I know. I told you she's an idiot.

It gets worse. Not only does she seem to think people are 'nice,' she tries to be 'nice' to them, too. Like helping people carry in boxes, or take out the trash, or tutor some of these morons as if there's any hope of them ever caring what the hell the Pythagorean theorem is.

And it never works. Once she volunteers to help, like the Girl Scout she is, the assholes leave her to do all the work, copy her tests, or just stand there and gossip, jacking around like she isn't the only person decent enough to give a damn what they do with their pathetic lives. And she still does it, day after day, letting them walk all over her, still confident that somehow she's "making a difference" and "making the world a better place" and all that feel-good shit.

So, yeah. I don't like her.

But all this crap was stuff I saw *before* she tried to play Sugar Plum Fairy on me.

I don't look like your typical high school girly-girl or someone who would appreciate Summer's efforts, okay? I'm not a cheerleader or a popular girl. A lip ring and a punk haircut just don't scream '*Oh, please come be my friend! I'm so lonely!*', you know what I mean?

But she didn't pick up on that, somehow. In eighth grade, her family moved to this town, and she joined our school, and ever since she realised I was another potential victim of her happiness, or whatever the hell you want to call it, she's been trying to pull that crap with *me*.

It hasn't gone over well.

The first couple of times she said "Good morning!" in that ridiculously cheerful voice as we headed off to class, I tried to let her down gently. Scowling, muttering vaguely obscene curse words under my breath, or ignoring her—that sort of thing.

It didn't work. So I had to resort to less subtle tactics, namely, telling her to mind her own damn business, and if she felt it necessary to shit sunshine everywhere she went, could she please do it somewhere other than on my shoe?

My friends thought it was hilarious, and I managed to convince myself that I didn't feel guilty at all for putting that kicked-puppy look on her face.

Almost.

Well, for some reason, that didn't deter her. In the following weeks, our little Miss Sunshine continued to brightly inform me that she wasn't a morning person, either. Well, fuck me sideways; she almost fooled me. My response was to politely tell her that if she valued her life and virginity, she would get the hell out of my way.

I don't think she believed me. Anyway, what followed was a really unfortunate episode where I kind of went off on her and pissed her off. Now, she hates me almost as much as I hate her.

Which brings me to the Halloween of my ninth grade, following a year and a bit of solid venom. The ironic thing is, she's not quite as stupid as I thought. Being a teacher's pet and all that, she's one of those intolerable overachiever types, set on entering some snazzy Ivy League College and getting a degree in Communicative Disorders, so she can be a counsellor for kids with special needs.

I know. Gag me, right? What's she going for—the Nobel Prize? Wait, never mind; that wouldn't surprise me at this point. Not from someone who actually volunteers in her free time. Like passing out food at the soup kitchen kind of volunteering. And she *was* a Girl Scout, and she sings in the church choir, for God's sake. I mean, she actually goes there every Sunday.

I think I'm gonna puke now.

Anyway, the only person who ever seemed to rub her the wrong way was me. It turns out she doesn't mind being taken advantage of, but she can't stand being talked down to. My bad. So now all of our accidental meetings, which happen a lot given she's been in at least half of my classes and lives next door, result in verbal bashing, where I am almost always the loser. Sucks, right? But she's good at getting the last word, and when I get pissed off, all I can really do is curse while she keeps her cool.

So it's All Hallows Eve, and the normal high school kids are off getting baked at some party or another. She's not. Instead, she's hosting a Big Sister Halloween Extravaganza (it says so on the banner), and all these underprivileged miscreants are packed into her room, right across from my house, and probably slipping drugs into her decorative candleholders. I don't know if there are any, but it seems like the kind of thing she would have.

So I'm standing in front of my door, marvelling at her capacity for idiocy, and she's trying to push these guys from our Home Economics class, which they took only to meet naïve *freaks* like her, out into the hall. I don't like these types of guys, and this pair in particular. They're the reason 'nice' girls like her have to get into contact with 'nice' expecting mothers groups.

"Look, I'll see you Monday, okay, Liam? But I really can't let you hang out here for now; the kids need only positive reinforcement, and you two smell like beer. So—Tyler, *stop*—So if you would please—"

Summer's voice carries over, and I hear enough to figure out that the bastards are giving her a hard time. They just laugh, and the guy in front, apparently called Tyler, pulls the door closed, wrapping his arms around her.

"Aw, come on, Summer, positive reinforcement isn't all it's cracked up to be. I should know. Why don't we test that theory, huh? Just you and me. Maybe if I do a good job, you and I can work out a reward system of our own. How about every time I—"

But I've already yanked him away from her. He's got his hands on her, and I push them off, already thinking up the many different ways I'm going to cripple him for trying to screw with her. Still, I want to hit her for being so damn stupid and *them* for being such asses, and—hell, I just want to start swinging my pocket chain and busting their teeth like it's going out of fashion.

I stand between her and them, snarling in a way that must have freaked her out, too, because she jumps.

"Back the fuck off, asshole. She told you to leave."

They stare at me, confused by the fact that a girl is ordering their asses around, and Tyler, or who I guess is Tyler (I don't care enough to learn their names), laughs again, although he's much less confident than before.

"Look, freak, nobody asked for your opinion. If she wants us to go, she'll deal with it. This isn't one of your... this isn't one of your feminist meetings."

The faltering was because I had wrapped the pocket chain around my fist in an incredibly overused but effective way and taken a step forward.

"She tried. You didn't get the hint. So if you don't leave in the next... thirty seconds or so, I'm going to dispense some justice."

The morons look at each other, like they're trying to figure out whether I'm serious, and whether or not they can take me on. I start counting down, and they seem to decide that yes, I am, in fact, serious about ripping their empty heads off with my pocket chain, and they start to back away.

"Whatever, fucking dyke. We'll see you Monday, Summer."

Tyler is about three feet away, and I smash him once, knocking him to the floor.

"Like hell, you will."

He's too shocked to retaliate, and his friend pulls him to his feet, both of them stumbling backwards through the door, their lack of sobriety making the trek even more entertaining. It would have been hilarious if I wasn't barely restraining myself from decapitating them.

Unfortunately for Summer, that one good chain-lash did very little to suppress the fury that had been building in me ever since I realised she was in trouble. With another snarl, I whirl around, scowling darkly at the wide-eyed cheerleader. Yes. She's dressed up as a freaking *cheerleader*, pom-poms and everything. All five-foot one of her is decked out in school spirit, which was probably the reason for the

trouble in the first place. Jocks get off on cheerleader fantasies; everyone knows that. How could she be so *dense*?

Before she can speak, I'm yelling, barely louder than the music coming from the other side of the door.

"Why the *hell* would you let those assholes inside your house!? What the hell were you thinking!? What the fuck would you have done if I wasn't out there!? How can you be so damn stupid, Summer, when you're supposed to be some kind of fricking genius!"

I'm yelling, and I don't even know what I'm yelling anymore, except that for some reason I've become so pathetically worried about her wellbeing that yelling at her made me feel just a tiny bit better about how pathetic it really was.

And she's just standing there, looking bewildered and uncertain and way, way too grateful. Doesn't she get that, even though I'm a girl, I'm every bit as dangerous as those guys? Where the hell was she when they were passing out brains? I say as much before pausing for breath, and in the brief silence, she makes a very big mistake.

"Thank you, Autumn."

I stop mid-tirade, totally frozen. She's never said my name before.

I resume yelling, louder than before, screaming at her all the reasons she's doomed to turn into one of those milk carton disappearances, and is she trying to get killed before she's sixteen?

But she smiles now, which is worse, and my voice is hoarse, and I want to shake her until she *gets* it, but I'm afraid to touch her, and she won't get it anyway, she's too damn innocent, and that is way too appealing, and maybe I have a cheerleader fetish too?

"Autumn?" She offers timidly, looking aggravatingly enough like she's trying to keep from laughing.

"WHAT?" I rasp, breathless and angry as hell, although it's draining away way too quickly in the face of her almost-laughter.

"Would you like to come in to the party? We have... uh, punch?"

And all of a sudden I'm exhausted, and I rub my temples, muttering, "I thought it was positive reinforcement only?"

She's laughing for real now, and without answering, she pulls me inside.

The rest of the night was basically me feeling awkward and her introducing me to her 'little sister' and the other kids, being way too happy as usual, and announcing, "This is my friend Autumn!" like we've been friends for ten years instead of ten minutes.

Sadly enough, it wasn't that bad, and I ended up eating a lot of chips and drinking a lot of the promised punch. Free food is always a good thing, and I almost have what might be called a good time. In an alternate dimension, and if she wasn't there. Because, let's face it, I don't like her. At all.

Really, I *don't*.

Oh, hell. Maybe I like her a little bit.

I'm having this internal debate as the guests start petering away and clean-up begins. No decorative candleholders in sight, by the way, but a rather questionable frog incense burner. Anyway, she's cleaning up, and I'd feel like a douche if I didn't help, so I'm picking up cups and plates and working my way around to the door. I'm thinking, perhaps I can make an inconspicuous escape, but she taps my shoulder, and I turn, and now she's *kissing* me. If you can call it a kiss. It's so short, and then it's over, and she's blushing, and she's so fricking *adorable*, all freckles and dimples and fireworks in her eyes and this wavering, shy smile that makes me realise she's nervous as hell, and when I finally smile, totally against every instinct in my body, she beams, and I am so screwed.

"What—um... What was that for?" My voice is almost hopeful, and I nearly curse randomly just to earn back some points.

She shrugs, smile firmly in place now, and says, "Positive reinforcement."

I roll my eyes, thankful to have something other to do than stare at her, because how did I not figure this out before? She's still queen of the idiots, but I'm definitely a close second at this point.

We stand there awkwardly for a moment, and I finally glare, pointing one finger into her still-way-too-happy face. "This is not going to be a goopy, sappy thing, you hear me? Don't expect us to cry into each other's shoulders while hugging fluffy pillows. I'll take you to a Green Day concert, and we'll watch movies where lots of cars explode, and then we'll come home, and that's it, *dammit*" (I was proud to squeeze that in), "no roses or cards or anniversaries, and I'm not going to call you on holidays and tell you I miss you, got it? Actually, scratch that, no dates. You can order takeout, and I'll come over, grab a box, and then leave. Because no one is going to find out that we don't hate each other anymore, because the result would be disastrous. I will not be cooed over by your nerdy, dorky little friends, do you hear me?"

Summer only nods her head and then giggles. Giggles, I tell you. Ugh, the audacity of that girl. And as if that wasn't enough, the next thing she's up on her toes, her hands around my neck, and she's kissing me again, longer this time, and I'm almost not annoyed that she ignored everything I just said, because that was important, *dammit*, but I can't really think at this point, so I give up and hold her against me, not thinking for the first time in a long time.

When we come up for air, she's still grinning, and she flicks my lip ring once before settling back on her heels again.

"So, Autumn," she begins bubbly, and this isn't a good sign at all. "Autumn, Autumn, Autumn, you talk too much. It's easy to make mistakes. You do realise goopy isn't a word, right? And you shouldn't probably pick nerdy *or* dorky, because both are a little over-ambitious, but good job with the *dammit* squeezed in there—" I raise my eyebrows, and she laughs. "What? I can say, *dammit*." But her voice still gets softer when she says it, and it sounds so adorable that it makes my heart do some funky shit inside my chest, and I really hope my face doesn't look as stupid as it feels like it does, because that

would be really sad. But she smiles, shakes her head, and continues, "Green Day is my favourite band, Autumn. And I can't stand chick flicks either, so you're safe there. Buuut..."

She draws the word out, and I'm really scared now, and she smiles sweetly and says, "I think we should revisit Tyler's..."

Here I growl unconsciously, and she tightens her hold around my waist with another megawatt grin.

"...Tyler's reward-system idea, because you definitely get points for *that*." She's looking at my lips, so it's easy to figure out what she means, but since when did Summer start using sexy innuendos?

Well, lip ring be damned, and punk haircut too, but it seemed like a nice thing to do since she enjoyed it so much, so I kiss her again. Ugh, crap, fucking 'niceness' is contagious. Although... maybe it isn't so bad after all. It certainly tastes good. And the innocent shyness is tolerable too. Yes. Definitely tolerable.

Later, when I finally go home, I'm still grinning like an idiot virgin nun on her first date, I'm sad to say. But I smile all the same, which seems to be out of my control at this point, and that's a shame, because it's hard to be a badass when you're grinning like a moron.

The End