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Baby Girl

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BABY GIRL

Elaina Erola

His birthday was September eleventh. He had really been looking forward to it that year, the year he turned sixteen. We went to chemistry class in the morning, but all we did was turn on the news and stare at it blankly. No one knew what to do. The teachers and the students were equally at a loss, unsure what was even within our power to do. Scott appeared devastated. As though just by being born, this was his fault. It had been a long time since he had been looking forward to anything, but when the planes hit the towers, he told me it was the worst day of his life.

All the girls were in love with Scott. He had just moved to our small town and he had brown eyes as large as my thumbs with long lashes. These eyes, these limitless reflections coupled with his baby face and boyish charm, got him in and out of everything he wanted. The school administrators started letting him off with warnings. Teachers started letting him turn in makeup assignments instead of the actual assignments. Girls started unbuttoning their pants.

He was also from California, which made him exotic to us fishermen's daughters from Washington. We called it "Cali," not knowing how this exposed our ignorance of the state and its residents. It was my mom, who grew up there, that told me to stop saying it that way.

"Nobody says that," she said. But Scott perpetuated the misnomer. So I didn't stop either.

He wore cologne and designer t-shirts. He wore jewelry and had his ear pierced. He worked out. He knew R&B songs from the year they came out instead of a year later when they finally came to our airwaves. He would dance in the hallways during our breaks, with moves we had never seen. He would eventually take me to my first dance, which kept me eying the chaperones all night to see if we were about to be asked to leave for inappropriate conduct.

He was nothing like the animals I grew up with, lumberjacks and fishermen in Carhartts and plaid. Small men, boys who weren't afraid to get their hands dirty with the scent of the earth, the insides of dead things, and the stain of motor oil. He had a job in the kitchen at a Red Lion. He drove thirty miles to the hotel at 4 a.m. every weekend for the Sunday brunch crowd because he loved the work. He loved crafting with his hands and the seduction of cooking. The meals he created were always surprising and sensual, a gateway to bring him closer to the mouth of women.

Of all the girls, he chooses me. Long-haired, wide-hipped, tall, copper-skinned me. I don't have Jamie's striking eyes, Jillian's narrow hips, or breasts at all. I know about Cali. We bond over the Raiders when I tell him my mother grew up in the Bay. My grandfather lived in Castro Valley with citrus trees and a backyard of rose bushes.

We dream about sunsets on the water and warm weather in the city. I can't remember if I asked my parents first. I saw a boy who was finishing brunch shifts Sunday mornings and falling asleep on his drive home and told him he could stop at my place on his way home. It was a halfway point, close to the state border. This was how it started.

In the beginning, we talked a little, but eventually, he would come straight to my room, and shortly after that he fell asleep. Scott was the beginning of a long line of boys in high school that I would collect that would just fall asleep at my house. In the middle of the day, apropos of nothing, they would sleep like they hadn't slept for a week beforehand, all of them fighting battles it would take me years to understand.

Scott would fall asleep with his head in my lap, squeezing my legs together. He would sleep all day. I would resume my normal Sunday and pick up the book next to my mattress on the floor and continue reading. I was content to be this way forever; Scott holding on to me for dear life and I reading books. We were only interrupted by my mother's dutiful visits to observe us, and my occasional need to pee. It took only a few weeks of this before we fell in love. This is how it starts.

We are engaged before we remember to go through the trouble of a relationship. It happens during one of our phone conversations, the kind that takes up all the waking moments outside of high school and breathing. He tells me I am the kind of girl he would like to marry. He is the kind of boy I would like to crawl inside, subsisting only when he breathes, letting my person, my beingness come through his pores. I will never leave him. So we decide to be with each other forever. We make a plan. In four years, at my graduation ceremony, we will get in his truck with everything we own and drive back to California. That's when our life together will really begin.

I am lucky Scott is my first love, because I would have given my virginity away to the next person who had asked. To me, virginity is only valuable to my missionary grandparents who want me to remain pious and chaste for all the wrong reasons. It is a symbol of my ignorance, and my naivety, and I don't want it anymore. Sex seems like a powerful thing, a way for me to gain some control back in a place where I am otherwise only a child, a student, a daughter, a minor. I am used to being ignored, told I am too young to know things, that I don't know what I'm talking about. I am used to being intelligent and no one noticing. I believe that sex is the only way I can become considerable at fourteen.

Scott and I are timid and forgiving with our touch for about ten seconds. Then we are smashed together constantly, trying to make our bodies one being. I wrap my hands around his back and pull. He grabs my ass so often it's like his own little purse. We are cited for making out in

the hallway by our lockers so many times I am almost expelled. Yet it is worth it. The heat between us, the draw is inevitable. There is no make-out session, no dry humping, molesting, and no physical invasion that can compare to the desire that occurs between two attracted people that haven't had sex yet, as they fight the barriers between them.

I beg him to take my virginity but he wants to wait. His first time was with an older woman and that's all he'll say about it. He was not in love with the woman, but his love for me seems to be what keeps him from repeating the experience. He tells me to wait. Instead, he takes me home after school. Scott has the master bedroom with a private bath. It's the gift his father gave him when the decision was made that Scott should live in Washington now. His father is never home and if he is, he barely nods hello as Scott and I race to the back room of the mobile home and barricade ourselves in.

He tells me to wait. Instead, we take a shower every day after school. We wash each other. We learn each other. We put our lips on each other, feeling the heat of a body, under the warm wet water. We keep the water on too long and then step out into the hot wet air. We makeout against the mirror and leave the marks of our bodies there forever. I now know where the gravel fragments from a skateboarding accident live permanently under the skin of his shoulder. He knows where my scars are.

Instead, he gives me a name that I have never heard before. Baby Girl. I wrinkle my nose. I don't like being associated with youth. He tells me no, that's not what it means. It's a little bit gangster, he says. This is a name I could have tattooed on me. This is a name I could have airbrushed across the ass of my track pants. I am one man's Baby Girl, for the rest of our lives.

He says it to me when I'm upset. He says it to me when he is crying. He refers to me as Baby Girl when he looks across the cab of his truck at me, and whatever it is he's running from seems far away. When whatever he left in California is far from finding him. I like my name.

Instead, he gives me a diamond and it is perfect. Scott knows about jewelry because he used to lift it back in San Jose. He knows about jewelry because he wears more of it than I do. He asked me to get something pierced so I do, but the diamond he gives me is in a necklace. Everything about it is flawless. We agree when we go to California we'll have it put in a ring and we'll be in love forever. I wear the necklace every day. I place it next to me at night. I sometimes stare into its facets and lose my mind in the glint when the pain of being separated from him is too much. It is the only diamond a man will ever give me.

Instead, he brings me home after school and we start skipping the shower. We start doing other things instead. Things that involve new places on our bodies, new tastes, and new sensations of growing that are not quite painful. Because it is 2001, thongs are all the rage. My mother doesn't allow thong underwear, but all my friends feel sorry for me and buy them for me anyway. All of the things that Scott does to me instead, involve removing my thongs. I let him keep my most prized one. Scott teaches me to do things for him as well, but soon there is nothing

we can do to each other that relieves us. There is only one thing. We have been waiting, and eventually, he gives in.

The first time we have sex is the first time I have sex, although he will express to me later he's not sure he can believe me because I don't bleed. It is three days away from my fifteenth birthday. It is a time-consuming, laborious task. I know that if we can make it to a technical point of consummation, the hardest part will be over and sex will be what it is supposed to be after that. I do not have expectations of it being romantic and it is not until we succeed. And then I am under the man I love, the person I trust, and I am having sex. He seems sad, and we both know this is something we can never take back or repair. But as far as I am concerned he has already changed me entirely, so I should know what it is to feel that change inside of me.

It is around this time I notice that Scott isn't going to school anymore. He's quit his brunch job. Despite having seductive cursive and enthusiasm for certain teachers, he is not interested in the tenth grade anymore. He's failing out of school, and asks me if we move back to the reservation can we live in tribal housing for free. He starts living in a garage with a few other friends, which I like because it's close enough that I can ride my bike there.

I like his friend, Ryan, whose garage this is because he is so kind and we have our own inside jokes. The boys are smoking a lot of weed and then eventually they are selling a lot of weed that is being run over from Canada. Sometimes it's pills. One night they are in a car accident. I race to the emergency room where they are but no one will tell me what has happened. They say the gravel on the dump road was too fresh. Then Ryan's cat has kittens and Scott adopts one. They are homeless together.

It's May 9th, 2002, 7 p.m. when Scott shows up at my house unannounced. I am doing homework. He tells me he got into a fight with his dad and that he's moving back to California to live with his mom and I burst into tears. Scott seems resolute. He knows this is what he wants and it's the best thing. He promises me he'll take summer school to catch up on the work he missed this year. Then in three years, we'll resume our plan. I continue to cry. My mother and my father are sitting with us in the living room. A change for all of us since my mother, my father, and I usually spend all of our time avoiding each other in the evenings, sequestered in our private corners.

My mother tells me to calm down. School is over in five weeks and if I can make it that long, we can fly to California and visit. For the first time, it occurs to me that my mother would like to see her own father. Although this is a trip that could accomplish both visits, this is an unfathomable gesture of kindness on her part. Scott also tries to calm me with this knowledge and lets me know this is not goodbye and it is not forever. After my mother and I take Scott to the airport a few days later I become the mist of a person, barely detectable but leaving some sensory impression. I begin battling my first real depressive episodes. He leaves me his kitten. I write to him a lot and he writes back some. We talk as much as we can but he is busy with summer school. The classes are hard for him. Somehow, I make it the five weeks.

Our time in California is insulated and heartbreaking and wonderful, simultaneously. I'm relieved to be with him, saddened to know it's temporary, proud of him for all the progress he's made in school, and scared for what comes after this trip. But here there are no distractions, just us. We ride the BART across the bay to San Francisco and hold hands on the pier. We make out in a parking lot scented with night-blooming jasmine. We go bowling and shopping. We ride rollercoasters all afternoon at Great America and by the time I fly home, I am convinced this is the best thing for us. In California, there aren't pills and car accidents. He promises me he'll be better at writing.

Summer drips by but the heat improves my attitude. I watch fireworks from a beach by the Columbia River on that Fourth of July. I've only received one letter and a handful of phone calls, but I still feel like Scott is safer than he would be here with me. I am filling my days with swims at the river and wiping down workout equipment at my part-time job. When I'm lonely, I play air hockey at the arcade on the boardwalk until my knees bruise. I am undefeated. I think about Scott, miss Scott, and dream about Scott. By August I am ready for the sophomore year to start. I'm at the arcade and on my sixth game of air hockey when Scott walks in.

He's already with a group of friends and this is obviously not his first stop today. The hockey puck sucks into my goal with a bang. It has been two days since I talked to him, yet here he is telling me he's decided to move back. He didn't finish summer school. I am unsure what to do with this information. I kiss him and we resume being a couple. I walk away from the game and we spend the rest of the day, the gang of us, roaming the boardwalk and trying to find a buyer for alcohol before the state-run liquor stores close. I think I am happy.

As school gets closer, we have our first fight. I'm involved in less and less of the decision-making of our lives lately, but now Scott is starting to keep things from me. I had assumed that because he was back in Washington we would be closer than ever, but he spends the majority of his time with the boys. They are a company of gentlemen without guidance, supervision, rules, or consequence and I am not. I have a curfew. I have a GPA. I have parents who notice when I come home drunk. The boys do not, and they find girls who can match that pace. Suddenly there are a lot of parties. There are parties that happen that I don't even know about.

On a Friday, I get a phone call from a boy who works at the arcade. He wants me to know that he was at one of the parties the night before and saw Scott there. It wasn't a large party, there were only about seven people there, so when Scott took a younger-than-me redhead into the bedroom for three hours people noticed. The boy from the arcade said he wanted me to hear it from him first, for which I will always be grateful. Gossip, in a small fishing town, can kill faster than the ocean sometimes, especially when you find yourself at the center of it. The phone call felt like a storm taking out a rotted birch. It made a lot of noise, it made a mess. Yet somehow everyone around knew it was bound to happen eventually. Except the birch tree. This is the end of our relationship.

The phone call that I make to Scott is quick. He doesn't deny that story and I don't ask him to. He knows me well enough to know this is exactly how it would play out. At fifteen, I still harbor enough self-respect to walk away from a man that has sex with someone else outside of the boundaries of our relationship. This will not always be the case when I get older, but it is true now. Despite Scott being my first love and my plan for the future, I have the strength to end it all when I am aggrieved. I still admire that girl. When I hang up the phone, I go back to crying and do not stop for months. My parents find me on the floor of my bedroom wailing, a lot. For the first time that I know of, I scare them.

I go back to school that year and Scott does not. When he turns seventeen, I am not at the party but everyone else from school is. People talk about this party. People talk about this party for many many years. The way I heard it, Scott is with his boys discussing things that teenage boys discuss. Some of the girls there serve as accessories to his significance. Somehow, a discussion ensues, a debate if you could call it that, as to how to properly eat out a woman. The right area to concentrate on, the correct rhythm to use, the give and pull, the area to hold her with one hand or two.

I wasn't there, but I know Scott was not that drunk. He would have done this for his own satisfaction, the fame of reverence. What I do not know is the amount of convincing, what the ask would sound like, if she wanted to say no. What I do know is that Scott had one of the girls help him demonstrate. In my imagination, every boy at the party watched. I heard the place fell silent. I heard he was thorough, laying her out for them all to see, a gash of pulsation, red and gleaming meat. I heard it was successful and the argument was put to bed when it was over.

I felt bad for the girl unless she didn't feel bad about it at all. Like the red-head, this wasn't a girl he had feelings for. He wasn't committing these acts to find new girlfriends, he was having sex for the sake of sex. I felt like a secret had been stolen, an act I had only known to have a life between Scott and I. He just gave away our intimacy for free to everyone. I knew then that nothing could be consecrated. No act of love could be protected from those that didn't believe it was worth protecting. My first love had been special until it wasn't and now there was nothing but the second and third and fourth loves going forward perpetually. But there could never be a going back.

It was shortly after that I heard he forged his parent's signatures to sign up for the Army. He was always one that needed a sense of duty and the attacks of September 11th had inspired that across the country at rates I had never seen. Hell, I was even thinking about going into the service at that time. Recruiters hung out in our high school hallways relentlessly, looking for any kid who was bored or could be convinced that the signing bonus was a lot of money. Scott did tours in Korea, Alaska, Iraq, and other places far away where I lost track of him. Sometimes he called me. The phone rang at three in the morning my time, him on an untraceable satellite phone somewhere over the international dateline. When I ask him why the

Army and if he has any regrets he tells me “honor” and “country” and that his father is finally proud of him.

I think about the towers and how little I understood at that time. I think about how they have been there my whole life, and how even though I had never been to New York, I had never known the skyline without them. I did not know yet, that the towers were actually in New York for a short time, a moment in the history of the city. I do not know about building an entire life around a monument, an entire identity around something that can crumble and disappear despite its grandeur.

A thing may indicate permanence. A city may build an architectural triumph to create its iconic skyline. A teenager can have sex for the first time with the first man

she ever loved. This thing, this relationship you have to something, it can take its time with you and it can marvel you. It will surprise you when it leaves a hole, a gap where it used to be. The thing you were so sure you had, slipped. It survives as ethereal.

Remember that you gave it meaning. Objectively it was only concrete, a rock, flesh, bone, saliva, or the heat of a body. It was the first time you went to the city, the first time you knew what it meant to everyone else, the first time you felt seen, touched, or loved. No one else knew that relationship, no one else knew what was taken from you when it ended. What I mean to say is, that it lived because it was important to you.



THE VOIDS WE FALL INTO

Edwin U. Aguilar