

Girls

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Ivy is the first girl I allowed to steal my heart. She wore cherry chapstick, blue eyeshadow, her tan was two shades too dark. I couldn't help my want to want her. We'd do laps around the mall looking for the right outfit, new makeup, and sometimes even lingerie that she'd let me teeth off her in the back of my first car at the ripe age of 16. Then on the ride home, she'd unbuckle her seatbelt, ignoring the car's warning sounds and pop the button of my jeans.

Later, I'd run off with Abigail, who had the thickest black hair I had ever seen. She was sassy and spoke up for herself and always wanted me to sneak over but I'd been too scared of my own parents finding out to go. The summer I turned 18, she wore the shortest jean shorts with tight, little crop tops and no bra, her perky nipples poking through whenever there was a hint of a breeze. "Everyone will stare," is what I would tell her, and they did. The only date we went on was doing minigolf.

Those teenage years were fun, running around with girls in your hand-me-down car with stained seats, an AC that doesn't work, and nothing but the FM radio. She'd say something, a little hint at what you both wanted, then look away as if scared, because she's not so sure of herself yet—most girls aren't at that age.

We could barely get through thirty minutes of whatever Netflix show we'd thrown on before Jasmine was wrapping herself around me. She smelled like cigarettes and sweat and was three years older than me.

And there's something about being that kid at the end of high school with an older girlfriend, something that makes the other guys look at you and you can almost feel their jealousy. It fuels you and maybe you don't even like the girl but you like the way it makes you feel. But Jasmine was a dropout and worked at the local swimming pool, and it was her tanned skin and bright eyes that kept me drawn in for all those months as we sexcaped through all the living rooms she couch surfed on. I spent a whole summer before college in random houses,

barely watching the TV as she ate me whole and then chewed me out for someone her own age with a nice job and new car.

Then in college, the nameless girl that sat next to me in the back of the ECON101 lecture hall, with the softest voice and thick glasses stuck her hand down my pants the second week of class. “Do you want to...” She would trail off, looking me up and down like she’d been starving all her life. Sometimes we’d pretend to be packing up until everyone left and devour each other in the dirty seats, where other college students would come to sit down and take notes, not knowing what we had done in them.

Maybe that’s what made it so fun and maybe that’s why it hurt so much when I never saw her again, but from time to time I wonder how she’s doing and if she ever did those things to the other guys she sat next to. Probably. Why does it hurt to think that?

It was after I got caught in what was supposed to be a locked lab with some short cheerleader named Amelia that sent me into a spiral. I chased after her like a dog to a bone, wondering if I would ever find someone with a talented mouth like hers. I spent weekends with her friends or at her stupid sorority, listening to the girls talk shit about the girl on the squad that sucked and almost dropped another girl at practice, acted like I wasn't jealous when they talked about the guys on the basketball team and how tall and handsome they were, drove her and her annoying friend Hailey to clubs where we used our fake IDs and felt on top of the world. All that time she forced me out with her to every football game, sorority event, frat house party, looked over my shoulder when I was on my phone, called me fat and made fun of me to my face, but I loved her—I think.

That’s what love is right?

Sacrifice?

Pain?

Suffering?

Maybe you don't recognize that it is manipulation until it is finally over because you're so blinded by what you call love.

I can still remember the night we ended things for one final time, and every time it comes to mind I am put back in that place, feeling small and alone in front of a girl I still loved.

"No," I said. But she pushed her breasts against me, holding me against her.

"I could persuade you," she said.

But I had been done, and I think, at the end of the day, she was too.

I spent a lot of time after that swiping right on any pretty girl, [small] talking my way into their pants and onto dates I paid for with money I didn't actually have. Each one seemed to look the same, always regurgitating the same stupid shit. I had begun to lose my sense of self in those women who all wanted to look like the next big super model. I barely slept, barely ate, and barely went to class. I spent a long time contemplating something that feels so distant to me now. I can't even recall the names of all those girls, the only one who sticks out among them all had been Joanna.

She was horrible in bed and I could barely pay attention to her with my sadness hanging over my shoulders. Once I had finished, I laid down next to her and I burst into tears with all of the pent up anger and sadness. She put her fingers through my hair until I stopped and I left without a word. I know she's probably somewhere, retelling this story as if it was funny, but I'm thankful she never said anything.

Shortly after, there came a time of confusion, when I first met Emmitt and he wrapped his soft hand around my wrist in the back of a party, loud, drunk, dazed from all the alcohol and blurry from the smoke. I poured my heart out to him through late-night texts, time spent in my first car, now beat up from a hit and run—my fault—smoking weed and pretending we were exploring the meaning of the universe cause that's how it feels when you're high.

I was confused by all the long glances, hands that lingered, and the way he went quiet when I brought up all my exes or talked about how fat that girl's ass looked in those jeans. But

when I kissed him, something made sense. And he was on top of me in the back of that car, where many, many girls had been before him, and I didn't feel anything anymore. We were so, so high that the smell of marijuana was embedded in the beads of sweat coming from our skin.

I'll later recall that night as something like a mistake—oh, I was just drunk, that's not who I really am. But other times, when I lay beside the naked woman next to me, I can't help but think of him and wonder why he never talked to me again.

After that, I planned a trip to Florida for spring break with a group of guys I barely knew, where the girls wore nothing but bikinis and had bleach blonde hair and skin that smelled like tanning lotion and tequila. We rented a house right on Daytona Beach and would throw our empty beer cans at the girls that passed by, saying some shit we shouldn't have to try and get their attention.

On the second night, I sat alone at the bar next to a tall, brown-skinned girl whose smile melted me more than the Florida sun. She took me down to the ocean in the dark, when the air finally became cool and the sand was littered from a day's worth of visitors.

She slipped off her dress to reveal nothing underneath and I chased her into that ocean, the waves beating against me, holding me back, telling me something my mind should have. But I chased her until we were wading in the frigid water, wondering how I could still feel so aroused in my cold shorts. I danced on my toes in the water and grabbed her waist, pulling her closer to me when we first kissed.

Then we snuck back into her parent's house and as we lay, staring at the ceiling, she drew circles and unintelligible shapes on the bare skin of my chest, her breath on my neck, sending shivers down my spine. Her fan whirled, creating a white noise as we lay in silence.

She drove me out of Daytona the next few days, showing me her favorite spots and a shitty hole-in-the-wall restaurant we ate at more than we should have. She clung to me like velcro and I couldn't seem to rip her off of me.

“I could come back with you. I have money. I’ve always wanted to leave,” she whispered to me, so quiet I almost didn’t hear, on the night before my flight home.

Maybe I knew something she didn’t, or maybe she felt something that I couldn’t, but I looked down at her round doe eyes, moonlight glistening off them through the open window.

“I’m not your savior.”

When a tear rolled down her face, I kissed her and pretended I didn’t know she was crying as I held her, our sweaty bodies molding together under the thin sheets.

I got home and immediately met a girl who once again tore my heart out. But I let her. She was seventeen and half years old and she crashed into my life like a bad car wreck. She’s the one who finally put my first car to rest after wrapping it around a pole off some alcohol I shouldn’t have given to her.

Somehow she came out unscathed and walked all the way back to my apartment. I don’t even think I was mad at her. I was so high off of pills that when I looked at her, disheveled from the crash, all I wanted was to fuck her. But maybe I shouldn’t say it like that when our relationship was a whirlwind of illegal activities and she was young and naive enough to love me back. But she made me feel like I was doing alright, despite the mess I had made of my life.

She would sneak into my internship, acting like a food delivery driver, just to drop the food down and immediately crawl under my desk, laying her head in my lap, asking, begging. And with all the coke in my system, how could I say no. I definitely should have though, because it’s the exact reason I got fired, but I didn’t care. We were doing so many drugs that I felt untouchable by that time.

But maybe that’s how everyone feels at that age, like they’ve got everything and nothing figured out, but it doesn’t matter because you’ve still got some of mommy and daddy’s money left in your account and a pretty girl by your side.

But then at the end of the day, when I would finally come down, I'd realize she was just sitting around, stoned with almost thirty-year-olds. Whenever I'd say something, she'd fire back: "I'm not your typical eighteen-year-old," in that voice that made me want her even more. She was as fiery as her scarlet red hair, which draped down her neck in a bloody waterfall. I can still remember the way it shifted in the light as I was waking up from a thick headspace of a DMT dream, looking almost poetic through the smoke lingering in the room.

She had introduced me to her college friend, Adri. Who was skinnier, prettier, and better in bed. She'd tell me about her classes and all the boys that flirted with her, tuck her cold hands and feet under my body and talk on and on. When it was too much to pretend to care about, I'd ask myself why I wasn't fucking with someone by age instead of making changes.

I then got roped into buying alcohol and drugs and being their designated adult driver because I had just bought myself a brand new car, fresh off the lot. It had bluetooth, surround sound, and even a backup camera. It made me feel like a man, with all those young girls looking up to me.

It was weird how I went from being admired for having an older girlfriend to needing the validation of these young girls who I couldn't help feeling like I was ruining.

But I wonder now why it made me feel better being with those girls and why I felt like I was the only one getting screwed over at the end of the day. I know now that they were using me and using themselves, but I don't think I'll forgive myself for all those times spent with girls too young for me.

I can't remember the road to getting sober but no one took it with me. It was long and I lost everyone around me and felt like I had returned to the way that I had always felt before I became obsessed with pretty girls and sex and all kinds of bad things. I had become so good at masking the person that was true to me that I had forgotten him. I didn't even know where to begin to look for him.

"No one knows what they're doing at your age." Everyone said to me.

Maybe that's true, maybe it's not. At least not when everyone you knew years ago is getting married now, having kids, and getting promotions but you're just what you've always been—lost.