

Trigger warning: Contains underage sexual content, mentions of assault You know the movie Dirty Dancing? The one where Baby goes off to that fancy resort with her parents for the summer, and in the beginning she is a good, sweet girl who loves her daddy, and then by the end she is still a good sweet girl who loves her daddy but now she is kinda sexy too and can dance like a pro and is totally in love with that beautiful dance teacher. Why doesn't anyone talk about how that teacher is clearly much, much older than Baby, and despite Patrick Swayze's swoon-worthy body and to-die-for dance moves, it is probably borderline illegal for him to end up with her? And then I think, well of course no one talks about that because all of us growing up wanted to be Baby, we wanted Johnny's fingertips to caress our waist and make us giggle, we wanted to learn how to do lifts in the lake, we wanted to wake up in a dirty shack in the woods after losing our virginity to the bad boy dance teacher with the beautiful abs. I blame Dirty Dancing for thousands of young teen girls summer flings, for all the girls who became camp counselors in the hopes of meeting their own Johnny Castles, only to realize that a sleep-away camp job was more about bug spray and band-aids than romance. Also, all the male dance instructors I ever met were gay. But the lure of Baby in her tiny shorts was like a right of passage, every teen and pre-teen girl's invitation to a wild (and somewhat inappropriate) summer romance. Most of them were nothing like Dirty Dancing of course. Most of them involved the back seats of old cars or sticky kisses behind the bleachers at the high school. If the girl was lucky it was at least exciting, if she was even luckier, consensual. There was often music, however, a song playing on the radio that when you heard it twenty years later it would remind you of the smell of old leather, the taste of strawberry Chapstick. For me, it all happened the summer I was 14. His name was Morgan, he was 17, and he was no Johnny Castle. Also, it wasn't consensual, not really, although I didn't exactly say no either. Also, I liked girls at the time, but I can't really blame him for not knowing that. It was the 90's, things were starting to change, but it was still not really ok to be out and proud like it is now. It was exciting though. Not the kissing part, which was wet and messy and too fast, or the sex, which was the same. No, the exciting part was what happened after. I wasn't in love with Morgan. I wasn't even in like with him, but I was 14 and bored. Nothing happened in the summer in the tiny town where I lived. Nothing happened during the school year either, but at least there were football games and afterschool clubs and stuff. In the summer, the older kids who had licenses would drive an hour away to the shore and drink beers in the sun all day. Morgan had a license, but he also had a job bagging groceries at the local supermarket four days a week, which meant less time for suntanning and more time to seduce underage girls in the Foodtown parking lot. The person I really liked in the summer of 1992, right before my sophomore year of high school, was Stacy; soon to be senior, 16 years old, with long curly auburn hair and big brown eyes. Stacy was the reason I ended up in the parking lot that night to begin with, she was the reason I was dressed in my shortest shorts and the bright blue bikini top that I basically lived in that July. She was also the reason my sophomore year of high school went the way it did. Let's just say that when you are 14 and hopelessly in love and someone takes advantage of your innocence you go a little crazy. Not Morgan. I barely remember him. But I will remember that first kiss with Stacy forever. Morgan had a beat up Toyota Camry that he had inherited from some family member, and he had tossed two fuzzy checkered blankets into the backseat. My 14 year old self did not think twice about this; it wasn't until I

was much older that it occurred to me about the kind of boy who would keep two folded up blankets in the backseat of his car. He kissed me and I played along (it wasn't actually my first kiss) and then he put his hand underneath my bikini top and I went along with that too. By the time he was unbuttoning my jean shorts, his eyebrows raised questioningly, (he did ask first, in his own way) I had already gone along with so many things I figured what was the point in saying no now. Like I said, it was summer in a small NJ town, I was bored to death, and Morgan was something new. Stacy appeared a few minutes after it was over, her long tan legs sauntering across that Foodtown parking lot like a supermodel on the runway. She walked right up to the Camry and opened the door. "Morgan, really??! She's barely a sophomore!" Stacy then turned her dark brown eyes to me. "Gia? You are Gia right?" I nodded. "Are you ok? Did he hurt you?" I considered this for a moment. "No, not really." Stacy watched as I awkwardly retied my bikini top. The expression on her face was unreadable. When I was fully dressed again she offered me her hand. "Come on Gia," she said. Morgan was refolding the blankets but he had the decency to at least look up long enough to say goodbye. He didn't offer to call me or anything; that wasn't part of this whole experience. But he did smile and say "See you around." Stacy and I walked out of the parking lot and down Main Street. "He's kind of a douche," she said. "But I get it, an older guy with a car and all." I opened my mouth to explain that no, Morgan's car had nothing to do with it, that I really just had nothing else to do that afternoon. But that made me sound like a whore and I wanted Stacy to like me, so I just shrugged. We kept walking, all the way to the Wawa on the end of Main. Stacy then proclaimed it was "hot as balls" outside and she wanted a frozen lemonade. One drink, two straws (like the country song). We drank it right there outside the Wawa, and when she kissed me afterwards, her lips tasted like lemons. "Am I right though?" she asked. "You like girls? I'm usually right." I nodded, slightly breathless, eyes wide. Stacy smiled. "Yeah I'm usually right", she repeated. And then, even though I hadn't asked. "I like everyone." Years later, sitting on a twin bed at Smith College, I told this story to my roommate. Ayala was from Queens; street smart and very beautiful, and she had rolled her eyes. "They are the absolute worst." I assumed she meant guys like Morgan but she shook her head. "No silly. There is a Morgan on every street corner. I mean girls like Stacy." I didn't tell Ayala the rest of the story. That I had spent all of July and half of August floating through town like a tumbleweed. Each time, just when I thought it was over, Stacy would suddenly appear and we would spend the afternoon together, drinking frozen lemonade, swinging on the old tire swing in the middle school playground. One day we went to the town pool, another we rode bikes down to the muddy lake and tossed pebbles into the water. Anyone looking at us from the outside would have just assumed we were good friends, slowly inching our way through the long summer days. They didn't see what we did when no one was looking. Stacy left for a family vacation in mid-August, but before she did she kissed me long and hard and told me that I was the prettiest girl she had ever been with. In the fall she started dating the captain of the football team, a pairing that I found cliché and unsatisfying. I did not handle it well; Morgan's Camry was not the last backseat I found myself in, and his were not the only fuzzy blankets. By the time Stacy and her jock boyfriend won prom king and queen that spring (she wore a long blue dress with sequins and a slit up the side) I had developed somewhat of a reputation. Stacy graduated and went off to some college upstate. I spent the summer before my junior year working at a sleep away camp on the shore

where I actually met a cute dance instructor. (Her name was Hannah, not Johnny.) Hannah was a sweet girl with blond hair and dimples that burrowed into her cheeks when she laughed, and we had three weeks of innocent and completely consensual fun. On the last day of camp she got a little teary and told me that I was the first girl she had ever been with. I lied and told her the same. After college I followed the well worn path of many a New Jersey girl and moved to a tiny one bedroom apartment in Brooklyn with a roommate I met on Craigslist. When she decided three years later that she couldn't hack NYC life and moved out, I decided to keep the apartment for myself. The girls I met on dating apps liked to talk nostalgically about their past, about high school when your biggest concern was Friday's midterm and what to wear to school in the morning. About college when you could drink 6 beers, pass out in someone's dorm room, and stumble into sociology the next morning in your pajamas and no one batted an eyelash. They whined about the unfair expectations of the current job market, about high maintenance women with unrealistic dating goals. When they asked me about my past I would always reply with "Small town Jersey", as if that explained everything. Maybe it did. All I knew is I was happy to be grown, happy to no longer be a lost teenager desperate for any kind of adventure. You couldn't pay me enough to be 14 again. Morgan actually became somewhat of a low key celebrity, known for a popular series of YouTube videos about woodworking, or sculpting or something maker-ish like that. The last video I saw had over one million views. Stacy married a stockbroker and last I checked she was living in a big white house in the suburbs with 2 kids under 2 and a big, fluffy golden retriever. I have no idea if that was the life she wanted. Sometimes, late at night when I can't sleep, I like to think that it wasn't; that somewhere deep in the back of her mind she still thinks of me as the one who got away. It's a funny thing, your past. Mostly it shrinks father and father away, like the entrance to a long tunnel you are driving through, until it is barely a dot in your memory. But occasionally something attaches itself, stubborn and prickly like a barnacle in the ocean, and it can take you years to shake it off. On the last night of my honeymoon in Cancun, I was sipping a glass of champagne by the water when my beautiful new wife turned to me and said, "Tell me your deepest darkest secret." I thought for a moment, the gentle soundtrack of the waves playing in the background. There were plenty of things I could tell her, plenty of embarrassing moments from a younger life that had not been particularly reserved or conservative. But instead I shook my hair out of my face and said, "It took me twenty years to finally know what kind of person I want to be." Cynthia raised her eyebrows, clearly having expected something different. "And what kind is that?" "Someone worthy of love", I replied. She kissed me then, and it wasn't at all like being 14 in the backseat of a Camry or like the taste of lemonade in the parking lot of the Wawa. It wasn't like deep in the forest at Camp Mohunk, the scent of bug spray in everyone's hair. It wasn't like dorm rooms in college or the wet spongy air in the back of that bar in Red Hook. It wasn't .like any of those times. This time, this kiss, was like coming home