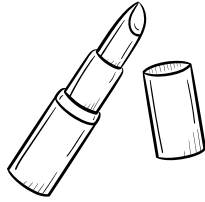




# UNDER THE BART TRACKS

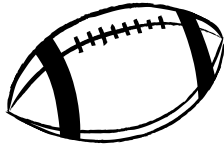
BY SULA FOUND



“We have chemistry,” I told Nyla, who was reapplying her makeup for the tenth time. I sat on her bed and picked up the numerous shirts laying on top. I judged all of them and disliked the ones that would fail to fit my chest.

“It makes me nervous,” I continued, flinging a shirt behind me.

“That’s a good thing,” Nyla reminded me. She turned to her vanity dresser and traded the eyeliner for mascara. Looking at me through her mirror, she asked, “Do you think you will have sex with him?”



I didn't think my mom would say yes to me going to Theo's house. She was nervous about his dad and step-mom coming over and seeing the inside of our small townhouse. She hated that they lived far in the hills, but her excitement about me having a boyfriend outweighed her insecurities. I was meant to watch the Super Bowl with Theo and his family.

That Sunday, he and his dad drove down the hill to pick me up. Our dads made small talk near the front door, which was awkward, but I promised my mom that I would be careful not to let anyone see inside. They would've seen a modest-sized, clean home despite seven people living inside. I didn't want to deal with my mom, so I hoped neither needed to use the bathroom. We got in their van and made our way to the other side of BART tracks.

Theo gave me a brief tour of their large house near the Berkeley Hills. Several walls were the Nantucket blue that middle-class white people loved in the early 2000s—the shade that reminded them of coastal living without the hippies. He led me downstairs to a furnished family room that reminded me of *Growing Pains*.

His brother Patrick was finishing up on the shared desktop. We noticed that he was on a new website called Facebook. Patrick caught on that Theo and I weren't interested in chatting about how it would be better than MySpace. After he left, Theo and I made it through ten minutes of the game before we were rolling around on the futon.

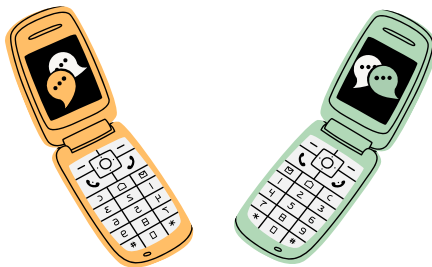
We exchanged I love you's during Prince's halftime performance, which I wished we had watched in its entirety. I suspected we would say it for the first time all week. Theo had already typed I luv u in a message, but texting wasn't the same as feeling the emotions.

I hoped he wouldn't feel moved enough to say it in person. That would push through a layer I wasn't sure I wanted to become a reality. As soon as we exchanged those three little words in person, I realized that our relationship was fine. Sweet, even.

Theo was thoughtful and kind. He was clingy at times, but not in a bad way. If I were a different kind of girl, I would've loved how much he seemed to enjoy being around me. I knew we weren't in love with each other, even for teenagers. But I love that he desired me with a ripe curiosity. It never felt pushy, disrespectful, or even outside of my desires.



Looking back, I can't remember what we talked about. While our conversations flowed easily, we didn't have much in common. Theo was supportive whenever I felt anxious or fell into one of those moods where I felt like disappearing or held a lot of anger about everything. I remember he cared dearly for his mom and genuinely enjoyed hanging out with his brothers. He was caring and kind without being a pushover.



We didn't argue like other couples because nothing seemed serious enough to bother either of us. We had friends who were couples who constantly fought to make up. Makeup sex was already in their vocabulary when Theo and I were just getting to the first time having sex part.

One afternoon, Theo was able to get out of school early and make the trek to see me. We ditched our friends for alone time, but we had nowhere to go. There were no less than four people at my parents' townhouse at all times. Even though Theo had access to two houses owned by his divorced parents, it was too risky to go to either of them.

We settled on an empty park where it was unlikely that we'd run into anyone we knew. We laid down on the grass and used our backpacks as pillows.



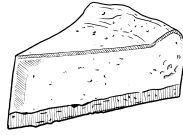
Theo kissed me with an urgency that felt exciting. Hesitation was still starting to sink in. Kissing already started to feel different, as if it would become a thing of the past. We were alone, not that we were in the most remote place, but still, we could take this next step. I flinched as he slid his hand into my jeans.

A few days prior, Theo told me he wanted to make me feel good. I was willing to give it a try even though penetration of any kind didn't intrigue me. He traced the outline of my underwear before pressing his palm against me. We both took a deep breath as he guided his fingers inside me. It didn't hurt as much as it didn't feel good. I faked subtle moans so he could feel accomplished. Part of me wanted it to end, but I wanted to know if it would eventually feel better.

Within minutes, the park was filled with younger kids' voices and small footsteps as they ran. I opened my eyes and saw several families heading towards the playground. I pushed Theo off, grabbed my backpack, and scurried towards the path under the train tracks. He followed me, and I told him I had to catch the bus home.

Instead, I walked to Nyla's house and asked her how long it took to get wet because I couldn't when I tried. She replied, "You had to try?"





Keiko, April, and Nyla convinced me to wear makeup and straighten my hair in preparation for a double-date that I dreaded. I was assigned to Theo, who was a friend of Nyla's boyfriend, Emerson. He had the advantage of seeing a picture of me before we met, but I was given a list of celebrities that he loosely resembled.

"Zach Efron, if you squint," said Nyla.

"You're forgetting that I don't find Zach Efron attractive. Couldn't you have hooked me up with Angelia Jolie?" I responded.

It was a holiday Monday, and I convinced myself to go on a date instead of curling up with a book. The weather was overcast, perfect for reading Rachel Cohn's *Gingerbread* and eating cheesecake from Nation's. There was no way that I would be able to defeat my friends' persuasiveness. We had all spent the night at Nyla's apartment. Her mom had to work late, so Keiko, Nyla, and I shared two of Mike Hard's lemonade from the fridge.

Nyla texted with Emerson about making plans for tomorrow. He was staying at his childhood friend's home and wouldn't be able to meet without him. Nyla slowly scanned April, Keiko, and me with her eyes before grabbing my arm and saying you have to come with me! Keiko lived 40 minutes away, which limited most romantic prospects. April couldn't date yet. I wasn't the cutest, but I was available. I protested and shared my plans, to which they all responded, "How boring! Now, this is a story!"



The girls warned me that I would be alone forever if I didn't give Theo a shot. It was an overstatement, considering that we were 14 years old. I did spend most of the year pining after a short-lived relationship where we broke up twice. After the last breakup, I played an obnoxious amount of acoustic love songs and swore off dating. My friends weren't wrong; they only wanted me to move on. They called it a blind date, which made us feel grown.

Keiko and Nyla stood before her closet and tossed the largest item onto my lap. My chest was what aunties called well-endowed, and none of my friends shared my struggles. I wiggled the shirt around my stomach and reached for a cardigan. In the bathroom, Keiko attempted to straighten my hair for the first time. She said the electronic flat iron was different from the one her sister used. She reached for a comb and hid the thicker parts—that looked like they were recovering from a night out—with a sweatband. Yes, like the one you wear to the gym. It was the only accessory that wouldn't get lost in my hair.

Finally, we were on our way to meet Emerson and Theo. Keiko and April gave me a pep talk as we walked to the shopping plaza from Nyla's apartment. The Plaza was where everyone picked up coffee and groceries, shipped packages, and got their pets groomed. Meaning, I was bound to run into someone I knew, or worse, was a relative of mine. I didn't have to sneak around to date because it was prohibited, I just didn't want to deal with my family all up in my business.

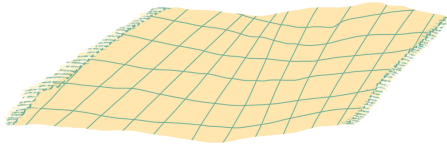
Praying that I didn't run into a family member or neighbor, I tugged at the too-small shirt that kept rising underneath my cardigan. As we got closer to the plaza, I fiddled with a patch of hair that lurked out of the sweatband and wouldn't stay down.

Nyla and I walked up to see Emerson standing next to a lanky blond guy in a pair of dad jeans (a decade before their comeback) and a wrinkled shirt. He wasn't ugly, just plain. He looked exactly like Max Thieriot in the 2007 film adaptation of Nancy Drew, but I resented having to get dolled up for a guy who showed up moments after rolling out of bed.

Nyla grabbed my arm as I turned around, exclaiming, "Hell no, absolutely not. What's up with his outfit, is it laundry day? How come I had to get dressed up for that?" Unabashed, I pointed at Theo, who darted his eyes away from me. A guy across the street yelled, "Yo, that's cold" as I kept walking.

Nyla begged me to hang out with Theo since he was Emerson's best friend. I decided to stay since preparation for this date required a 30 minute beauty makeover. Theo gave me several compliments, and the poor guy tried to make small talk even though I wasn't having it. I nodded a lot and mean-mugged Nyla as she cupcaked with Emerson. The four of us spent two long hours wandering in and out of stores until managers mean-mugged us for not purchasing anything. I gave Theo a pity hug goodbye after we stopped by Barnes & Noble, then I dragged Nyla away. Well, that was done. I'd never have to deal with that guy again.

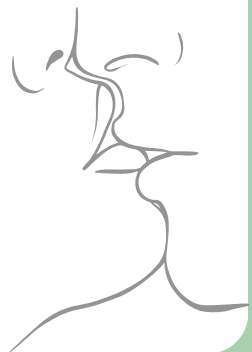
Months later, we were a few weeks into our freshman year of high school. Nyla and I sat on a blanket and watched Emerson toss a football with a few of his friends. A muscular guy caught the ball and threw it past the group. Emerson shouted *Show Off* as he went to retrieve it. I turned to Nyla and asked, "Who is that?"



Turned out, Theo grew a couple of inches and his body caught up with his shoulders. He was recruited onto the varsity football team at a rival high school and I noticed that he got an ounce of what I perceived as swagger (give me a break, I was 14). He had a flattering haircut that I found quite attractive. Theo's lowkey glo up led me to checking the cleavage in my shirt before arching my back and trying to shamelessly flirt with him. Unsurprisingly, Theo was not interested in my antics. I went home feeling embarrassed but proud that I took the risk to try. Until I received a text that said, "here's your 2nd chance lol."

I can't tell you what our first kiss was like, but I can tell you that we made out everywhere as soon as our lips touched. If there was a place to sit nearby, I was likely straddling Theo as we made out. I should've been more embarrassed, but we were horny teenagers. Our favorite make out spot was a pillar underneath the train tracks near the plaza where I first rejected him.

He would lean against the pillar and pull me close to him as my back faced the trail. We ignored the adults who coughed as they jogged past us. It was amusing that these attempts to deter us never happened when my hand was down Theo's pants.





I can't tell you how we officially got together or why he decided to give another chance to the girl who rejected him in public. But suddenly, he was my boyfriend and I was his girlfriend. We were a mismatched couple, as I leaned pop punk and Theo started to rely on hip hop aesthetics despite not having the fashion sense for it. He wore the same variation of an outfit most of the time and seemed to try a bit harder every time we saw each other. He experimented with the shades of his jeans—darker was better, lighter was for parents—then moved onto shirts. One day, he showed up wearing a slightly loose white t-shirt that rode up and exposed a happy trail when he stretched his arms. I appreciated the effort that Theo was putting into pleasing me, he was eager and seemed to care more than the average guy.



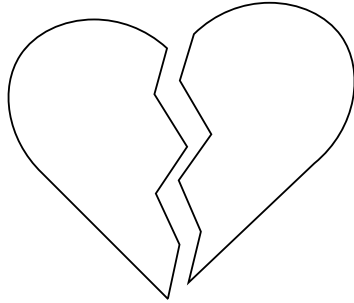
The news of Theo and me dating spread across my school since he and his brother went to elementary school with several of my classmates. Fortunately, neither of us were popular enough for people to care beyond congratulating me on the relationship or mentioning something nice that Theo did for them in fourth grade.

In history class, the first girl I ever pursued told me that she was surprised to hear that I was dating a boy. She had a boyfriend of her own, but to others, my brand of bisexuality seemed more like a stop along the way to lesbianism. It crossed my mind many times, I just liked Theo's mouth too much.



After the park, I worried for hours that I was broken and would never be able to feel sexually satisfied. It occurred to me that a fifteen-year-old boy might not know exactly what to do. That night, I waited until everyone was asleep and closed my bedroom door. I laid on my bed and tried to emulate what Theo did hours before. Immediately, it felt better with my own fingers. I wasn't quite sure what I was doing but there was an ease to the act, unlike with Theo.

I wanted to keep going on my own terms, and it hit me that I wasn't prepared to keep exploring my sexuality with another person. It didn't matter to me that Theo and I weren't in luv or whatever, and I don't know if that would have made a difference. I knew that I would eventually have sex with him if he wanted. Sex seemed like a rite of passage in high school relationships. I wasn't one to follow the status quo, but I struggled with boundaries, especially when pushing them was pleasurable.



Instead of sharing my anxieties, I broke up with Theo two weeks later. Then I almost took it back because I felt bad at how crushed he appeared. Theo's eyes were damp as he begged me to reconsider. I walked him to the BART station, hoping he wouldn't cause much of a scene. He said, "But baby, please," until his bus arrived.

I texted him the next day and told him that I made a mistake. He refused to meet me, "I don't do three strikes."



*Sula Found aka BB K aka Nobody's Darling is a writer and storyteller based in Northern California and Chicago.*

*You can follow their writing at [withoutanartform.com](http://withoutanartform.com).*