



Baby Girl
by
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Baby Girl

I'm here lying in Gene's bed and I'm thinking—*man I could handle a triple latte*. That's all I want from the world. He's blowing his nose and blubbering on. Something about sorry and he hasn't cried since he was eight. And thanking me for allowing him this freedom.

Whole milk, I'm thinking. Sometimes I go for the skim. I've even tried the soy—total puke. But today I want the full triple, full fat. 'Full lead', as my sis Krista would say. He twitches my elbow. Then pulls himself in close, wrapping his knees around my thighs and leaving his trunk of an arm across my middle. His wet stubble scratches my shoulder. *There's so much distance between me and that coffee*.

"Thank you," he's talking again. "I can't believe I have you. I am a happy man." The 'happy' lands, hot and clammy, behind my ear.

I'm sucking on my tongue. Want to say 'shut the fuck up before I run outta this house like it's on fire.' Want his heavy parts off me. *It's just fucking, you big, hairy baby*. "Happy enough to make a Starbucks run?" I whisper, pushing his leg over and cupping his cock, balls, the lot.

Alone at last. Upon the throne, studying *People* magazine. Cover to cover. I love hating these people. The bathroom is steamy from Gene's shower, the mirror non-existent. I don't care; the tiles are warm on my feet. And I'm alone. From the john I stretch and reach the door handle—pop the button in. What was it the sign on the first Louis Vuitton building supposedly once read? *No Jews or Dogs Allowed*. I want a sign. I'd put it on the outside of this door right now, but usually it'd be on my forehead. No Whining, Crying, Wimpy, Lameass, Nice, or Needy Types Allowed. Guess that's a little more than just a sign. More like a Rules of Play at a pool hall. Plenty of fine print. It'd be awesome.

I take a slow, very enjoyable sip of my latte. Perfect every time. I don't know how they do it. The bathroom even smells of coffee. A steamy, java air. And Demi and Ashton didn't make it. *Life's a bitch*.

"Babe, I gotta run," Gene taps lightly on the door. *Can't you read?* "Class starts in thirty, you gotta boogie too."

I unravel some toilet paper. I can hear his shuffle lingering behind the door. "You don't want to keep the lovely students waiting," I sing-song back at him. More shuffling, no leaving.

“Um. Love you.” Shuffle shuffle.

I flush. “Yeah, babe, see you tonight.”

On campus, we’re supposed to pass each other like strangers. Any whiff of a student/professor hook up, let alone shack-up, would simply destroy his career. A one way ticket to regret, I’d imagine. We’ve talked about it. He swore he’d cover for me. “How sweet,” I ran my fingers down his cheek to seal the pact. *How pathetic.* Overall it’s not too hard to hide. Gene’s biggest worry is his buddy, Albert Wolfe, my hero—a total physics genius. God, he’s brilliant. Weird thing is Albert thinks Gene’s the brilliant one. Ha! Wonder what he’d think of Gene’s infantile outbursts with each come. ‘Oh Samantha, my mother despised me.’ ‘Oh Samantha, I knew no warmth as a child.’ ‘Oh Samantha, what good is being able to think when I cannot feel?’ Man, I could hang this guy.

As I walk I can feel someone watching me. Gene is sitting on a bench alongside the quad, an open book on his lap. *He’s not ugly, I guess.* His big nose is sort of regal, and I like the way his shaggy hair sticks out of his wooly hat. But he’s too pale, and thick around the chest. He’s torturing the buttons on his peacoat. Our eyes meet, and lock, though my gait remains strong. I surprise myself, find I’m enjoying the eye-play. I slow down as I reach my building, lower my eyelids and flick my tongue at him. Then run like a schoolgirl up the steps, my books across my forearm. *What was that?* I shake my head though I am smiling.

Physics 2435 with Wolfe. Glancing around the room, I take my seat. *Bunch of losers.* I figure no one knows I’m the oldest student here. I still look good. *Except for those silver fucking stretch marks, that is.*

“Probability states there will always be outliers,” broadcasts Professor Wolfe while looking down at a stack of papers. “Some of you really threw off the curve.” He surveys his audience. *Is he looking at me? I totally aced that exam: I am Entropy.* “Now, where did we leave off? Aah. Destructive Interference. Since the positive amplitudes from the crest of one wave, be it sound, light, what-have-you, are added to the negative amplitudes from the trough of another, this result, in fact an addition, can present like a subtraction.”

As much as I dig energy collision, I already know all this. Bastards wouldn’t accept my credits from Tech because I dropped out mid-semester. And then didn’t end up transferring for two years. Twenty-two years old and back into sophomore year all over again. *What a fuck-up.* Gene and I can’t go out in public in case someone sees us together. “Who?” I’m always asking

him. I don't know a soul here, but Gene's hardcore about it. *Since when is a real margarita at a good old happy hour too much to ask?*

I scan the class for anyone who might have potential, as in a fake ID. There are two very cute guys sitting together up front...taking down every word. *Geeks*. They're probably called Gene and Gene. I mean really, who looks at a brand new helpless baby and says Eugene. Let's call the little darling Eugene. The damn 70s. Poor Gene didn't stand a chance. How was he supposed to make it through to adulthood with a spine? They should've given him up. Now that takes some guts. It's incredibly brave to be able to do that. *Yeah, that's it, I was brave*. Krista was so against it, *desperate even*, but never explained why keeping her was the easier path. I look around the room of strangers again. *Anyone else in here brave?*

Following the bell it's clear a bunch of them are going to the campus center. It sounds fun though I hesitate; the thought of shuffling past their crowded table on my own with a grimy brown tray in hand...*fuck 'em*. I put my head down and beeline for Professor Wolfe.

"Nice work again, Samantha." He hands me my paper.

"I really enjoy your class, the sciences are so solid." *Whatever that means*. Cringe.

"Well, it shows. Consider a TA position for next year?"

"Definitely! Thanks." As if my goofy grin isn't embarrassing enough, I think I'm blushing. I shove the exam into my notebook, and head for the door. *Damn, I'm psyched*—my head could just about burst. I head back to Gene's bench to share the news. As I near I see he is still there, but talking to someone. They look deep in discussion...*probably some Plato nonsense*. I feel like a moron just standing here, but I don't want to pass by them. I sense a panic coming on, so I cut through the turf around the back of the nearest building and head for home.

The walk is about twenty minutes and I've got to be back in less than two hours, so it's barely worth it. Gene has been trying to convince me to go pre-med. I don't exactly know if I want to be a doctor. He says since I'm into the sciences, I may as well think ahead. I turn and plot my course for the Career Center. I really don't feel like going home.

"Do you have an appointment?" The flunky at the front desk pushes her glasses up so high they magnify her eyebrows.

"Em, no. But I had some time, so..." I try to smile. *Lost your tweezers honey?*

"Wait here." She manages to lift her ass out of the chair and lumbers down a hallway, leaving me alone in the room.

It's warm in here, and I pull off my gloves. There are posters, their corners torn and peeling, covering two of the walls. A black man in a suit smiles, his leather briefcase visible beside his desk. An Asian woman in a white lab coat examines two test tubes, one contains a red liquid, the other yellow. *Duh.* A golden retriever lies on its side on a table; a concerned white woman wearing gloves looks on. An army man points at me...*yeah I know this one.* I move to leave as Flunky reappears.

"If you can wait about ten minutes, he can see you." *I should bolt.* I don't know what I'm doing here anymore. But the truth is I have nowhere to be.

"Thanks." I dump my black wool coat and backpack on a vinyl chair in a line against the wall. Above the chairs hang Lucite boxes, each filled with poorly photocopied leaflets. As I peruse, the door slams closed with the wind. I spin around to find those two cute guys from class laughing and unraveling their scarves. I spin back, feeling my cheeks flush and my heart race. *Man I hate myself sometimes.* I slide 'Choosing your Major' and 'Considering Graduate School?' from their cases and take a seat. I pretend to read one of them, and steal a glance in their direction.

They're at Flunky's desk, chatting amiably like they all go way back. I notice a huge clump of mud on my boot...and then see the smeary prints all around the room...from the door to the desk, around the perimeter, to my feet. *Shit!* Here comes the panic I tried to head off. My eyes dart around the room, desperate for...what? I look longingly at the exit. *Now, I could go now.* The guys take seats opposite me, and start browsing through a huge black binder. Flunky goes back down the hallway. My heartbeat suffocates me as I realize *I'm still here.* There's no escape. But maybe no one will notice. Deep breath. I've got to get the clump off before I get called back there. I could wipe it with the leaflets. *I can do this.* As I start to cross my legs and bring my boot closer, the guys stop their chatter.

"Hey, you're in our physics class, right?" Leg down.

"Yeah." I clear my throat, offer a small smile, and cross my ankles. "You too?" *The blond is cuter.*

"Augh, yeah. It's so harsh. I didn't have a clue today," Blondie chuckles. *Cuter maybe, but an idiot.*

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I roll my eyes back. *What am I, twelve?*

"You applying for the internship too?" The guy with curly dark hair makes strong eye

contact. *Comforting dark eyes.* I allow myself to gaze back.

“Uhhh, no. I don’t know anything about it.” *Do I never look into people’s eyes?*

“You get a ton of credits,” Blondie pipes up. “And it looks really good later, on your applications.” He motions toward my leaflets. Nervous flutters. I look away and tuck my feet deep under the chair.

“Yeah, but it’s cool too,” Brown Eyes interrupts. “You shadow a doctor—you pick what kind—so you can see early what it’s like.” *This guy is dead sexy.* I imagine my fingers in his dark curls. He has a lovely mouth, too. He stands abruptly, towering over us; *he’s huge.* “Check it out.” He lifts the bulky folder and heads over to me, taking the seat beside me. We both need to hold the binder to keep it open to the right section. Our fingers are touching, our forearms brush. And yet I’m calm. *Something about this guy is calming.* “There’s ten different doctors in the program—you can read their bios. And then there’s student evaluations...a couple are clearly assholes.” I try to actually read the page. “Pwah! What’s that?” Brown Eyes is smiling, looking at me. Our noses inches apart.

I laugh back, “What do you mean?”

“Dude,” he signals Blondie, “it’s ripe in here!” He turns back to me, and I meet his lovely gaze again. His face is sort of twisted.

“Wha?” I’m not getting a good feeling here.

“Whoa, check the floor,” Blondie is pointing to the tracks. I’m 150°. Never been hotter in my whole life.

“Nasty!” They both chime in together. They’re laughing and leaning over to see my boots. *I’ve got to get out of here. Get me out!!* The words whirl within my skull; a raging angry force.

“Excuse me,” Flunky is peering at me from the hallway, “he can see you now.” I push the folder back to Brown Eyes and snatch my stuff from the chair. I guess they think I’m going back there, but I finally follow my instincts and run for the door.

“Hey, it’s cool. No biggie.” I can hear the words behind me as I throw myself out into the freezing cold, my coat in my arms. I dress as I run, and once I’m far enough I find a good tree and scrape off my boot. Panting and swearing aloud. I scrape and scrape. I grab a loose twig and scratch at the tread of my boot until the dogshit is almost gone. I’m sweating and trembling. *I’m such an ass.* I grunt as I throw the twig as far as I can. Then the crumpled leaflets too. They don’t fly, just blow around in circles in the wind.

As I stand there, frozen, my cell phone rings. I can see from the ID that it's Krista, and while I'm really not in the mood it's got to be better than this.

"Hey." I turn and start walking.

"I actually caught you, can't believe it."

Instant regret. *I was better off alone.* "What's up?"

"Did you speak to the adoption agency?"

Broken fucking record. "No. Did you get yourself out of my business?"

"Nice. Actually yes. I gave them your number."

No! "Krista!"

"What did you expect? They've started calling every day."

"I told you to say you don't know where I am."

"Yeah, I could've done that. Except that you gave away my niece, and didn't sign the papers right." *And here we go.* "Come on, Sam, let's get her back. I'll help you."

"Uargh Krista. You have no idea what you're saying. Don't you get it's got nothing to do with you?"

"Then let her go. Sign already and let her go."

"I'm trying to make a life." *Back off.*

"You don't know what a life is."

"Oh fuck-off and leave me alone." I hang up and check my surroundings: an empty bench, bare trees, darting squirrels.

Solitude with my thoughts is not a good option, so I settle for the comfort of my afternoon Neuroanatomy class. It does the job, forcing me to empty my mind and focus. As evening approaches I return home, well to Gene's home, and find the door ajar. He's busy in the kitchen and he shouts out as I close the door behind me. "Don't come in here! Go do something else! Do you hear me?" *Oh what the fuck now?* I head for the bedroom and throw my bag down. *He could at least go out sometimes. Jesus, he's always here.*

I'm lying on my front, spread out. My neck, head and arms dangle off the side of the bed, and the stretch feels good. *Gravity's cool.* I'm getting into the pull of it. Letting my head hang, lower and lower. Feeling my spine lengthen, from top to bottom. At least class was good. *An adult human cadaver head cut off around vertebra C3, with no hair, weighs somewhere between 9 and 11 lbs, constituting around 8% of the whole body mass.* All day our delicate necks

manipulate eleven pounds. It's quite amazing. I relax even more and think I can feel my body sliding upwards, toward the edge of the bed, like I'm slowly going to pour over the side and fold like chocolate syrup onto the floor.

Suddenly, though gently, Gene is on top of me. His face between my shoulders, his full body pushes me deeper into the mattress. This is something we do sometimes. It can feel safe. But he's just killed my moment and he's the one who banished me in here in the first place.

"Christ, I thought you were busy. Get offff." He doesn't move, snuggles around a bit like he's getting comfy. "Fucking hell, Gene, I said get off. You're a deadweight." He rolls over, shaking the bed as he lands at my side.

"What's your problem?" he gets up on one elbow, rubs my back with his free hand.

"My problem? A little space would be nice. Don't you ever go out?" I keep my face hanging off the bed; don't want to look at him.

"Hey, what's the matter, Sam? I thought after today on the quad we might..."

"We might what? You're an albatross, you know that?" I push his hand off my back.

Silence. *Thank fuck.*

"Your psycho moments are such a joy." He moves to get off the bed abruptly, but gets caught in the messy covers and clambers off awkwardly.

"Spaz," I hiss. My burning eyes firmly lock on a stain in the carpet. I hear him elephanting around in the next room. Stomping and backtracking. Then the front door slams.

I don't move. Here I thought I wanted the place to myself, and really there's nothing to do. *There's no way off this train.* I mean God, Gene talks about 'why things happen'. About 'balance' and 'karma' and has the nerve to preach, *more like beg*, that if only I'd let him in, he could help me let go. *He doesn't know shit about me.* And what about Gene? He's supposed to be my fucking knight? He, I can let go of. But that sobbing baby girl. If Gene only knew. And with Krista harping on during every damn conversation. 'She might come looking for you one day, you know.' *Yeah, I know...hell, I might even go looking for her.*

Okay. Say I drop out, get a job and a place. But without a degree? Can't go back to Krista, her husband hates me from the last time. So I hold out a little longer, TA, do one of those internships. Try to set up a real job and a home for if I did drop out. Then I can see about the baby. But that means I have to stay with Gene. As I have no friends to share with, because of Gene. So I just continue on. Floating along in school, and rolling over onto my back at night.

With his tears to look forward to. He's the last bad thing that will ever happen to me.

The ringing telephone makes me jump. *I'm so trapped.* I can't even answer the phone. Gene uses the land line, and I get the cell—keeping our lives separate and preserving our little secret. *But I don't give a shit right now.*

"Hello?" I sound as if I've been sleeping.

"Oh, yes, hello. Is Gene there?" I recognize Albert Wolfe's voice immediately.

I pause. "Not right now, he went out for a walk." *Let's see how brilliant you really are.*

"Really? Do you know when he'll be back?" It feels like one of those cop movies, where they try to keep you talking so they can trace the call.

"He might not be home 'til late, now that I think about it." *Home.*

"I see. Well, he can call me up to ten or so. Do you think he'll be back before ten?" *Don't go, not yet.*

"Usually, he would be. But probability states there will always be outliers." *Drumroll...*

"Is that so? Tell him Albert called." Click. *Bright lights, big music. You win what's behind curtain number three!*

I go into the front room, and find the tiny dining table set with matching plates and new candles. Alongside one plate is a lone white lily. The table looks clean. The countertop is covered with food: muddy portobello mushrooms, a soft stick of butter, garlic cloves, sharp knives. A tupperware holds two hefty steaks, drowning in a herby looking marinade. Smells really good. I check out the fridge, only to find a bottle of Moët, my absolute weakness, chilling in the door. *Ok, so I win the Royal Bitch Award.*

I pull the champagne and snag a glass off the table. Twist the bottle and hold the cork...not the other way round. The only useful thing my mom taught me. POP, *the most satisfying sound.* And the front door opens.

Gene looks even paler, if that's possible. He's wearing his coat, but his hands and ears are bright red. I'm feeling like a cat with a mouse in my jaws, as I firmly grip the bottle's neck. I reach over to the pretty table, grab the other glass. He stands in the doorway, staring at me. I fill them both. "Stay a while?" I hold a glass out to him. He shakes his head and sighs; *he looks different somehow.* He steps into the room and collapses on the two-seater sofa. Keeps his coat on. He's staring off at nothing.

I take the two glasses over to him, squeeze into the space beside him, and try again, "Peace

offering?" He looks at me. *Oh God, don't cry.* He takes the glass, then gazes off again, like he's waiting for something. We both drink separately. The silence goes on and I'm completely comfortable with it. *Should I put the steaks in the fridge?*

"That's a hell of an apology." He turns to me, his expression both hurt and steely.

"Um, oh. Right. I had the most horrible day." I try to look earnest.

"Samantha, you always have a terrible day."

"No, really. You don't understand. I don't even know if I can go back to physics class."

"You just can't say the words, can you?" he barks at me.

"What do you mean?" I really have no idea.

"Sorry, Sam. I want to hear you apologize to me. I went all out here. Do you even care?"

He faces me.

Do I care? Think fast. "It's hard. I have no one else to talk to." The magazines and dirty mugs are gone from the coffee table. *He cleaned up?*

"No one else? You don't talk to me. I'm seeing no point in this." *In what?* "You owe me an explanation."

I want out, how's that for an explanation? Actually, I want you out. You go quietly now, and I promise to be nice when I see you around. "Oh, I don't know. I get angry about everything that's happened."

"No way. This is about us, not your crummy childhood. You're just plain mean, Samantha. It's time you went."

Went! Where? My heart beats strong and fast. "Gene, I don't know what you expect me to say."

"It's not brain surgery." He looks around the room, pausing on the cluttered counter.

He cannot be dumping me. "Look, it's...you know, it's..." I stop. A heavy sigh escapes from my nostrils. "You don't know about a bunch of stuff. About before I met you." *I can fix this.*

"No shit." He eyes me suspiciously, but I know this is what he wants. My pulse slows.

"At Tech..." I suck the final drops from my glass. *He's trying to play it cool, but I'm the master.*

"A guy?"

"Yeah." *Reel him back in.* I eye the bottle on the counter. Study the condensation on the

green glass.

“Well?” He’s boring holes into the side of my head.

I stand and stroll the three steps to the bottle, quickly undo another button on my shirt while my back is to him. Fill my glass at the counter, and face Gene head on, free hand on my hip. “Well, he’s the real reason I left. I got hurt.”

He considers me a moment. “Samantha, if you want me to understand, you need to actually tell me.”

I return to the couch, climb onto the armrest facing him, my knees up and boots on the seat. *Okay, Gene, enjoy the sting.* “I loved him. Thought he was the one.” *That’s right, him. Not you.*

“Well, this is new. So you were together the whole time? Then he hurt you? So you left?” Gene spits out each sentence.

Yup, he’s pissed. Jealous. “Not that simple. And it was only a few months in all. But, yeah.”

“And?”

And I’d like to stop here. Shit. I wish it just stopped here. “I thought we were going to have a family.” My voice crackles on ‘family’. *Stay cool.*

“A family is what you want?”

“Wanted. With him.” I look down at my boots. *Should have taken these off, really.*

“But he didn’t, so you left school?”

“Yeah.” *The End.*

The silence returns. He’s staring at nothing again, nodding his head. I still don’t know if he’s kicking me out. My chest constricts. I thought I was in control of this, but I’m done. *I’m freaking.*

Gene takes the glass from my hands and puts it down. He pulls me into him. *Don’t kiss me.* He tucks my head into his chest, the rough wool of his coat envelops me. His arms wrap around me, my legs are tucked underneath me upon the couch. And he holds me. Just holds me. Tears roll down my cheeks, *I have no control.* I feel minute in his embrace. I feel relief, and *I’m not alone.*

The phone starts to ring. I open my eyes and see the red glow of the digital clock. It’s 10:12 and I start sobbing like a baby girl.

About the Author

Donna is obsessed with the tangles of modern women. Outnumbered at home by her husband and three sons, she writes about the confusing place where whims and power collide with circumstance.

She was born in South Africa grew up between London and Florida, and now lives outside of Washington DC.

Her fiction has appeared in print in **RE:AL** Literary Magazine, **Compass Rose**, **Talking River**, and is forthcoming in **Amazing Graces**, an anthology of DC women's fiction (Paycock Press).

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Cover Art and Design

The cover is designed by Domingo Campuzano. Domingo is a contemporary Cuban cowboy and a true artist with a penchant for baseball, late nights and red meat.

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