

# UC Merced

## The Vernal Pool

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**Author**

Lammouchi, Noelle

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## Enabled Love

By (Noelle) Elle Lammouchi

\*\*\* Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA) is a genetic condition characterized by extreme muscle weakness. Many people with SMA die prematurely due to complications of their condition. \*\*\*

That stoner with the hella long hair knew that chick with the clear grey eyes wasn't innocent when they got together, but she wanted him to know what, really, happened to her, and maybe even what she did to herself.

*I'm not going to tell you, she said to him, about the first time I had sex or the second or the third. He wished she would tell him she remembered the time they had sex, in the too hot summer when the freckles on his shoulders dripped sweat. I'm going to tell you about the last time I had sex, she said instead, with 'that dude in the wheelchair' you and I both know I still love.*

*That dude in a wheelchair I left you for, her voice threaded in between her fingers as she braided his long, dark hair. He said it was mind-blowing. We're on a whole 'nother level, he said, back when he drank wine from a straw and slurred clichés in his dorm. She gathered a loose strand and wove their narrative together.*

She told him that, back then, she would hear the soft rhythm of that dude in the wheelchair's whirring voice even over the bi-pap's heavy sighs. She claimed the words were carried by the breeze of regulated air that kissed her forehead as her ear went numb pressed to the bones of his chest. The words traced the lines of her breasts, flattened on her stomach, and settled into her gut when that dude in the wheelchair told her, *I love you.*

His fingers were heavy to him, she said, and tender to her. His taut fingers brushed back the hair that lay matted across her brow. *It fell back into place*, she told that stoner with the hella long hair, *just like we always did*.

He didn't know if 'that chick with the clear grey eyes' was referring to him.

That stoner with the hella long hair, turned to try and see her face, but the braid she held was too tight. She told him that every time that dude in the wheelchair asked her if she loved him too. She whispered back 'always.' She said the word became an endless cycle of promises suspended in a realm of missed communications, in both their lives and in his next. She told him, *I wonder if, wherever he is, the curve of his spine is backed by rods like it is mounted in my memory still*, as if he could understand.

*That dude in the wheelchair,* she continued, *died just less than 48 hours after we lay panting beside one another, but you know that already*. He wanted her to stop braiding his hair, to stop trying to structure her grief. *The make-up sex was great because we had been fighting in the dorm that we shared with caregivers who didn't much care one way or another that I didn't want to go 'home' and he wanted me to*.

She told him how the caregivers always wanted extra hours to spend money on cigarettes they smoked just off campus in a dirt lot. She confessed the specifics of how the they made 'that dude in the wheelchair' cough would bore him, which is the excuse she used to avoid the cliché of saying he would never understand the complications of their life together. But she kept telling him what she thought he needed to know, what she thought she needed to say.

*You need to know that I loved him*. She unbraided his hair and began again, determined to get it right. *You need to know that I was worried about him staying the weekend alone with them, drinking Ensures and watching Portlandia all day*. That chick with the clear grey eyes insisted that stoner with the hella long hair needed to know that

dude in the wheelchair loved her, that he loved her enough to tell her she had to go. He was more worried about her than himself.

*He was worried, she said, about all the hours I spent startled out of micro-naps beside his wheelchair.* She explained how the demands of his body had derailed her dreams each too-short night during the winter break they passed without any caregivers. She pressed the nail of her thumb down on him, as if the pain of 'that dude in the wheelchair's' shoulder blades cutting into the too-thin foam mattress was comparable.

She asked him how long he had ever gone without sleeping, as if a caffeine-fueled League of Legends binge on his laptop could serve as a stamina check for the ability to sleep in only snapshot intervals between waking to roll 'that dude in the wheelchair' from side to side on their tiny futon. *I was so tired, she confessed, her fingers still, but you don't need to know that insomnia makes you question the spelling of your own names on endless medical forms, to understand he thought he was doing the right thing.*

That stoner with the hella long hair already knew everyone thinks they're doing the right thing, but he reached over his right shoulder to stroke her hand, still entwined in his hair, anyway.

*I was right, she insisted, when I left you for that dude in the wheelchair who would die.* She didn't want to admit his death spiraled her back into that stoner with the hella long hair's arms, though they both knew they had to be broken apart before they could heal together.

*You had a lover once before me who drowned her keyboard in blood on Skype,* sounded like an accusation.

*I had a lover who had to fight his own body every day to stay alive, a condemnation.*

*They both died, and we were powerless to stop them. She didn't want to fight so she dug her nails into his hand and bit her lip until blood pricked their skin.*

They had both suffered, and continued to suffer, headaches that mimicked heartbreaks and lasted long into sleepless nights.

*I know you know the feeling, her voice rang hollow, even though I'm supposed to tell you it's not your fault and there's nothing you could have done. She struggled to find the words to say people like them, the widowers and those that without a title to qualify their loss, know that's bullshit.*

That chick with the clear grey eyes and that stoner with the hella long hair knew it wasn't until after, after the paramedics left, after the Aspirin kicked in, after they'd slept an hour, maybe two, after they'd woken up and forgotten, forgotten just how bad they'd fucked up, that they'd realize just how really, really wrong they were.

*Only you still don't know what would have been the right choice, at the right time to save them.* He pressed her hand tighter and didn't respond because there was nothing to say.

That chick with the clear grey eyes he loved so fucking much didn't need to explain how hard it was to say what's wrong and what's right with limbs crisscrossed, with the color of 'that dude in the wheelchair's' mermaid hair bleeding out onto the white pillowcase. He already knew there was no way she could have read the oracle of his death in the perspiration of make-up sex drying on their clammy skin in the moments before she said goodbye forever.

She closed her eyes to remember the feel of 'that dude in the wheelchair's' ribbed tongue, the taste of his grimaced smile because the muscles in his jaw were unwilling to conform. *We're on a whole 'nother level*, she laughed, but not really, and that stoner with the hella long hair knew it was because she still couldn't believe he was gone.

It didn't mean the same thing when she remembered it aloud as it did when 'that dude in the wheelchair' said it. His death was not cliché. The story of how he was leaned back in his chair when he stopped breathing at the same angle she kissed him at raves while they blinked the neon lights off the blacks of their eyes, was not cliché.

Being on another level had been metaphorical then, like feeling their way through destiny with the bass line. She knew he had transcended to a metaphysical level beyond her reach, and the drop was heavy. It represented the great divide between life and death, between popcorn kernels exploding in the microwave while that dude in a wheelchair, who was still alive, queued a Netflix original, and the static silence of her looped feedback of guilt for not being there when he died.

But she didn't want to feel guilty. *I know*, she promised that stoner with the hella long hair, *that when we watch the playback of our lives together, we can move past the title sequence. We can move past that safe space where everything is all expectation and potential and nothing has spiraled out of control.* He wanted to believe, as they laced their fingers, then their legs, around one another and pressed play, that she would be ready to lean back into the security of his shoulders, to feel the reassuring pressure of his, 'I love you's,' against her ear, against her heart.

He had promised her eternity countless times, as he held her hand, clung desperately to the strength of her grip with the tightness that dude in the wheelchair could never grasp. But her heart was atrophied, so tight in her chest, strangled by the ropes of time, burning as they rubbed against her struggling soul.

*Don't think this makes me love you less*, she reassured that stoner with the hella long hair as she cradled his love in her heart like she had cradled that dude in the wheelchair's contorted body in her arms so many times as she carried him to their bed; she swore she would never drop either of them.

When that chick with the clear grey eyes fell into sleep that night, she could see them both there, in the time that wasn't time, in the place that wasn't place, laughing and jumping across stars in the wavelengths of her soul.

Deep sighs grounded her, awoke her. When she looked in that stoner with the hella long hair's face as he slept, his long, dark bangs draping over his eyes, he seemed to feel her. He blinked, even though she was quiet when she got out of bed and didn't turn on any of the lights in his room, which was slowly becoming theirs.

For a moment, before his consciousness fully took hold, she could see the whole universe in the swirl of his green galaxy eyes; she could see that dude in the wheelchair staring back at her. She kissed his forehead. The grip of his long fingers around her wrist turned her back to the bed, back to the eyes that suspended time.

*Do you love me?* The eyes pleaded. *Do you really, really love me now?*

She did.