

You were my first real crush: a “late for Algebra 2 so we could walk into the classroom together, save my art project that you complimented during critique, make my friend look at the bus list for the field trip because I was too nervous to see if we were on the same one, butterflies in my throat” crush.

*I know.*

We met as Sophomores: awkward cocktails of hormones and blossoming intellect. You leaned over my desk in Latin class and I would complain that you were blocking my textbook, but you never moved and I didn't want you to. You told me I reminded you of Niobe from the television show *Rome*, and my face burned with thrilled discomfort when I saw how beautiful she was.

*I know.*

I wasn't exactly subtle, was I?

After three and a half years of bruises and rug burns from my mother's abuse, after residual flinching at hugs and dreading a tap on the shoulder, I couldn't trust a rare considerate smile from a boy I liked. And you seemed so confident.

*I wasn't exactly subtle, was I?*

*Neither was I.*

Our quad of Latin class friends represented a range of clichéd high school popularity. If we were in a movie, we wouldn't have known that the other existed. But you asked what I liked about *Beloved* and complimented me on my prom dress the color of spring air and we were always “randomly” paired up to work on projects together. And you seemed happy about it. I wasn't bold enough to make the first move, or to hope that you felt the same.

*Neither was I.*

I wanted to ask you to prom.

I want to live in the dream of what might have been: To imagine how it would have felt at sixteen to know that I was wanted. Maybe things would have turned out differently if I weren't so broken, or if we had just done what neither of us could at the time and admitted our feelings.

*I wanted to ask you to prom.*

*Why didn't you?*

We would have posed for pictures, standing, barely not touching. I would have tried not to laugh at your dancing. I remember watching you while we all jumped to “Shout” and wondering what dancing with you, actually with you, would have been like. We made eye contact across the dance floor and I almost came over to talk to you.

*Why didn't you?*

I was afraid.

We had a relationship that I could never count on for stability, even when you would seek me out every day for a week to rant about your computer science class or ask for my help brainstorming ideas for your studio art project. At times, we connected over instant messenger, complaining about homework and joking about our juvenile screennames, and then I would see in you the hallway and it would be as if those moments existed only in my dreams. Bloating with doubt of my own self-worth, I saw rejection as the only outcome, and I wanted to keep what friendship we had.

*I was afraid.*

*It's too late now.*

I was so different from the other girls that you liked, and now that I really know you, beyond the surface of teenage longing and lingering glances, I know that we would not have lasted. If our almost classical stoicism (mine from my mother's abuse then still flowing through my bloodstream and yours from a lack of self-confidence you've since grown out of) didn't break us up, our different college paths would have.

*It's too late now.*

I'm sorry.

You caught my eye as I was leaving our ten-year reunion, full of new memories and a deeper understanding of the discomfort that comes with trying to step back in time. You sent me a message, “hi,” and I was sixteen again. Now instead of wondering and could-have-been, we have memories of 30<sup>th</sup> birthday weekends, solving a 1950s murder mystery with our friends, and singing along to *Moana* at 2am on New Year's Day. We are true, real, friends, which isn't something that my sophomore-year self could have imagined.

*I know.*