

You Were There

I met you online. Or maybe you met me. I can't remember how it happened, but it happened and I remember. Not on line at Starbucks where we realized we both loved the white mocha. Not on line at the pet store where we bonded over our punky faced cats. Not on line as we waited for our plane to board after a long night of delays. On the Internet—I met you, as much as you can meet someone who isn't there at all. I was fourteen. You were real and imagined, and both at once. Talking to you was everything and nothing—but more.

I remember staying up so late that one day bled into the next. Typing and typing through the stream of sunlight breaking past the sky, ripping through clouds, a brand new day, though it always felt the same. Typing until my eyes blazed red, and I saw double on the screen. Typing until I was exhausted and invigorated, never wanting it to end.

I don't remember the conversations. I remember the stupid smile on my face as it looked back at me through the reflection of my screen. I remember searching my brain before I responded, deleting words only to type them again; deleting whole sentences, feeling pressured to think of something smart before so much time passed that it'd be irrelevant, a new topic begun. I remember having to pee badly, and holding it in, afraid to miss your reply, afraid you'd say you had to go and I wouldn't be there to type 'ttyl'. I remember shivering in my wintry house and sprinting into my room to get a sweatshirt and slippers, only to see you hadn't responded yet when I was back in front of my computer screen. I remember

spending every second with you, never looking you in the eye. I liked not looking you in the eye.

I knew you were real—at least that you were who you said you were, even though you never said it. I knew people who knew you, a string of mutual friends from a different town and different school that led me to you. There was no chat room, no chance of pedophiles, no chance of embarrassment and attachment. No chance that whatever developed would be real. You weren't a stranger, except that you were. You weren't anyone important, except that you were. You weren't mine, except that you were. You were a screen name. Conversations took place inside my head and on my computer screen—never out loud. A name that I would get excited to see lit up on my buddy list. My one reason for logging on. I'd look at the clock if I'd see that you weren't there, and I'd wait five minutes for you, before logging off. I'd smile triumphantly if I saw you suddenly appear, but I'd count to sixty Mississippis before sending you an I-M. I never wanted you to think me desperate.

You knew me through pink verdana fonts, and a lame, trying too hard profile description. Through the letters 'QT' in my screen name—used by every teenage girl who once thought she was cool. You knew me through my thumbnail photo and what I told you. You knew me through what you thought of me. If you thought of me. But, you must've known me most by not inhabiting your real life. By not bringing me around your friends or to high school parties. By not taking me to the movies where we'd share greasy popcorn and cherry coke. By not running your fingers through my straightened hair or walking down the street with me, talking out loud. By me not being there at all, even though I always was.

I talked to you every day. It must have been every day. Ten years. We talked as summer began to cool down and the leaves changed from evergreen to bright hues of yellow and red. We talked until they fell off the trees altogether and snow graced the dead branches. We talked until tulips bloomed, and painful, frostbitten weather left us like it had never been there at all. We talked and we talked, no matter day or dusk, confused seasons beginning or ending, hail or blistering sun—you were there.

You were there through high school graduation, college acceptance. You were there through your drug problem and your release from rehab. You were there through ended friendships and new ones begun. You were there through first kisses and virginities lost—never daring to speak of it with each other. But, you were there. You were there as I grew up. You were there as I began to learn who I was. You were there.

Years and years never seeing your face in front of mine. Never hearing your voice dance around my ears. Never feeling your flesh beneath my fingertips. Never knowing what it was like to talk to you in the world. Every song on the radio reminded me of you. Characters on TV said things you would say. When I picked out my outfits, I wondered if you'd think I looked pretty. If you'd like my purple nail polish and the French braids in my hair. I listened to the music that you liked and watched the shows that you watched. I was desperate to learn every detail about you, though I can't remember them now.

I paired my first name with your last, as I wrote it over and over in my notebook until I was dizzy with red hearts and the idea of you. The idea of you. The

idea of holding your hand. The idea of laughing at old sitcoms with my head nestled into your shoulder. The idea that you lay awake at night picturing me and replaying our conversations in your head, right until I entered your dreams and took over every part of you. The idea that what we had was real—though it wasn't, was it?

I applied mascara and eyeliner, thinking maybe I'd see you. I used mouthwash and spritzed perfume, with thoughts of smelling nice for you. I shaved my legs, anticipating your touch. Never caring that there were no possibilities of any of it. Never caring that you wouldn't notice, anyway. I wanted to see you, smell you, feel you—but really, I didn't.

Sometimes I hated you for not telling me how much better your life was now that I was in it. For not giving me gifts of necklaces and daisies, even if I found daisies pointless. I hated you for not declaring that you wanted me and only me forever because I meant so much to you, because I was real and you needed me like water, you needed me so much that your ribs ached. I hated you for being so inconsiderate, for continuing to talk to me to the point of ridiculousness. All the while never wanting it to stop, never wanting to raise the stakes. Why did we both draw it out like it meant nothing and everything the same?

A few years in we used webcams. I saw you, your movements, in something other than photographs and the dots informing me that you were typing. I saw the moment when your face formed into a smile just as you began to laugh, the moment when you opened your mouth and let words spill out through those lips that I had only ever seen be still. The moments when you listened to my words, a fixed expression on your face, like I mattered. It was nice to watch you laugh, to watch the

corners of your hazel eyes crinkle and the scrunch of your ski-slope nose—to know I was the one who put those emotions on your familiar face. I saw you as you smoked cigarettes in front of your laptop and I hated how cool you looked. I wanted to smell the smoke and taste the nicotine destroying your lungs. I wanted to be capable of destroying you—to matter so much.

We talked through the year you were sent to Afghanistan. I saw your barracks and your uniform. I saw you act as always, smoking and joking, like you weren't in a war. Like killing people wasn't a daily possibility—and I never did ask if it was. I saw the dimples in your cheeks and the freckles on your nose as you looked at me and *smiled*. I wanted you to come home even if I knew I'd never see you. I liked knowing that you were near and I could keep you far. I didn't want you to actually be far because then the possibility of being with you was never—even though it already was. I wanted you safe. I wanted me safe so long as I didn't have your body in front of mine.

I missed you and I never had you to miss. How could I possibly miss you when you lived inside my computer screen? Dead when my laptop lay shut.

You came home and I still didn't see you. I can't remember if we ever spoke of meeting or if it was understood that we wouldn't. We talked like we did meet though. We talked like we hung out everyday. And, I guess in some ways, we did.

It was like ten years of anticipating a first date that never came. Nervous wings fluttered around in my stomach every time I typed 'hey' to you. I checked my makeup even if you couldn't see me. I laughed alone in my room even if what you said wasn't funny. I never fought with you because there was no reason. I loved

every single thing about you that I made up myself. I made you who I wanted. And I desperately wanted you, even though I didn't.

Before I lost my virginity on a clumsy, drunken college night, I pictured often what it would be like with you--someone who mattered. To feel you on top of me. To have your tobacco flavored mouth press against mine. I wanted your breath to whisper against my throat and crush me with purpose. To run my fingers over the army tattoo on your shoulder. I wanted you because you were you, and you were so cripplingly important, even if you weren't. I wanted to know you better than anyone and perhaps, I already did.

We met once. It was set up on one of the many nights of drunken text messages declaring nonsense and love. I told myself I'd go through with it, to stop being scared, that I was ready to see you even if it took eight years. That this was normal. You came, and we both acted as though it wasn't new. I stood in front of your face that day. That face that I loved to watch change in front of me, even though I didn't want it this close, this alive. I hugged you, awkwardly. I felt your muscles tense beneath my grip as you moved into me, I felt the swish of your t-shirt caress my bare arms, heard your breath as it left your body and found my ears, all of you pulsing through me like blood. My heart pounding in my chest. Not realizing that you were just a person—because you weren't.

I couldn't think of anything smart or charming to say. Of course not, you were there and I didn't have the safety of my keyboard and my fantasies. I didn't have the safety of talking to you through a webcam, knowing you were far away, that you couldn't touch me, you couldn't break me. The day wasn't magical because it was

real. The day wasn't good at all. I wanted you to retreat to your computer and let me live in bliss. Which was exactly what we went back to doing after that day, like it never happened at all.

You can't talk to someone for ten years online and act like it was normal that you never met. You can't act like you ever met. You can't act like you understand your relationship. I learned you wrong. I learned you through my desktop, which turned into a laptop, which turned into a smart phone—the whole time you were there. I learned you and learned you, never asking myself 'what was the point?' Were you so insignificant? Were you so overwhelmingly important? Were you ever who I thought you were? Did I even think of who you were at all?

I liked pretending what we were. I didn't actually want it. What would be magical about telling the story of how you met online—not at Starbucks or the airport or the pet store--and didn't meet for years in real life? The magical part is that it isn't real, that's what magic is.

I still miss you. I still long to talk to you even though it's been years since we last spoke. I can't remember when we faded so far away that we were no longer us. It was gradual, there was no instance one day where all communication was gone forever, but now suddenly, it is. It's sudden when I look back because you were there for so long. We didn't have a falling out, we didn't begin dating other people that weren't okay with our confused, non- relationship. It was nothing like that. But, now it's nothing. I don't like that it's nothing.

I wonder how your life is. I wonder if you quit smoking and left the army. I wonder if you still skateboard and like to draw. I wonder if you met a real girl, realer

than me. I wonder if you think of me. If you ever did. If you liked our made up world, too. I wonder.