

The People We Like

by Jennifer Donnell

I thought of Rob and Paul, last week, when I passed you and you didn't say anything. I was walking along the sidewalk, as you crossed the sidewalk onto the grass.

When Paul asked me out during ninth grade, I was happy. Not because I liked him or planned on saying yes, but because it meant I was likable... to actual, real life *boys*. Paul had dark blonde, wavy hair that puffed up around his head. His nose was crooked from the time a basketball hit him in the face during P.E. He wasn't particularly handsome or popular, but my own social status was hindered by my sister's hand-me-downs and blatant insecurity. My friends thought it was really sweet that he asked me out via love letter. Granted, he didn't *actually* write the letter, his friend Rob did.

It would have been impeccable timing, had we actually spoke.

Rob, or Robbie, as we called him, had better penmanship and a way with words. In the letter, Rob -meant to be Paul- complimented my smile and eyes, physical features I'd never thought of as attractive before. I found the note stuffed in my locker, after Algebra. What was meant as the piece de resistance, were the six words at the end, "Will you go out with me?"

I saw you, first, and bit my lip. I caught the way I glanced at you and how you looked away. Then, when you looked at me... I unconsciously turned my head, as if willfully pretending not to see you.

I felt bad saying, "No.", so I went through Robbie and he told Paul, on my behalf. Paul was disappointed but understood. I don't think he'd expected much else. During the two and a half weeks he'd liked me, he looked absolutely miserable. Each time we'd pass in the

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hallway, his face would turn beet red. When we'd talk in class, he'd prickle with sweat and put his foot in his mouth (not literal). When he did manage a smile, it was little more than a nervous grimace. Liking me sure seemed to freak him out.

As you marched past, your tennis shoes growing muddy in the earth, I noticed you stiffen with each step.

After my “No.”, Paul asked out Gina. She and I were old friends. Her father was a janitor at an elementary school and I used to be jealous of this, because she often got cool items people left at the school. Gina was the only one of us who'd kissed anyone. She'd even tongue kissed Rob, but told Paul she'd date him. Paul looked pleased, though Gina admitted she didn't really like him and planned on breaking up within two weeks. They ended up dating throughout high school and getting married. When I saw them at the high school reunion, I waited to glimpse their happy glow from marrying their high school sweetheart... but it never came. They didn't want to dance and left the reunion early.

There was an awkwardness to both of us being silent- weary of acknowledging the truth.

After Paul asked Gina out, Robbie began calling me on the telephone after school and trying to be romantic. He'd say things like, “Go and look out the window at the sunset.” I would lie that I'd looked, but wouldn't even open the blinds. Boys telling me to look at boring, old sunsets didn't appeal to me one bit. The main thing I found beautiful was a long haired high school junior, who didn't even know I existed. He listened to Led Zeppelin, so I bought a Led Zeppelin CD and wondered if he'd ever ask out a freshmen girl. If he did, it wasn't me.

In the quiet, cold air, the night approached like a lone dog wanting a warm bed.

I'd like to say my need for approval was isolated to my being fourteen. It wasn't. It lingered like a summer dry spell from freshman year... to my senior year, even a bit beyond.

How hard it is to pretend to be someone else. Alone, together, in the silence... I thought about how you must really like me to act quite like that. I wanted to hold your hand and read the unsent love letters.

