9-22-2017

Wish You Were Here

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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol2/iss1/23
This short story is meant to explore the social experience of college freshmen, especially those who rarely tell their own stories. Students who are introverted and shy can be overlooked and undervalued, causing social and emotional consequences, especially when their more extroverted and outspoken peers convey this lack of appreciation. Freshman year is a socially stressful time, and students may feel the need to stick with a group they don’t connect with out of fear of not having a group at all. However, there are consequences to this approach too, as the story shows.

My hope for this story is that it is a way of showing introverts in similar situations that they are not alone. It is also meant to help extroverts understand their quieter peers. Storytelling is one of the most effective ways to connect with others and create empathy, which was my goal in writing this piece. I hope that this story brings comfort and encouragement to students who have suffered social isolation, and promotes compassion and understanding in students who haven’t.

I was what I like to call a “third-tier friend.” Like, there’s the top tier: the most popular members of the group, the ones everyone likes, the ones the friend group wouldn’t be the same without. Then there’s the ones who are still pretty essential, who everyone’s always happy to see, who definitely add to the dynamic of the group. And then there’s me. The one everyone’s pretty neutral about, and is ultimately expendable. The one who’s no one’s favorite, who never knows what’s going on because no one includes them in the gossip, and who no one knows much about because they don’t really care enough to get to know. But I couldn’t complain. I don’t mean that in an “everything was fine and I was still happy” kind of way. I mean I literally couldn’t complain: my place in the friend group was already not secure, I wasn’t going to risk that.

My parents asked me if I was exaggerating. If I was being insecure. If it was just culture shock. If it was just what all Hawai’i kids went through when they went to college on the mainland, having to go from living in a place where people cared about other’s feelings more than their own to a school full of overconfident rich kids. Or if I was just being too hard on myself, as usual. I think they wanted to believe that. I did too. So I tried, fairly successfully, to convince myself that I was just overthinking everything.
Until one day when I was heading back to Steven’s dorm, where we all hung out after class, and after I said something that made him laugh, he told me that he thought I was the most underrated member of the friend group.

It was at that moment that I learned that “underrated” is not a compliment.

I laughed, pretended that I was faking being offended. And I “jokingly” asked who the other underrated members were; I wanted to know who I was competing with.

He thought for a few seconds, then said, “I don’t think anyone is really underrated.”

“Oh, so it’s just me?!” I laughed, being overdramatic about being hurt to hide that it was real. Being the most underrated is bad. Being the only one is worse.

So I tried harder. I spent more time with them, even when I didn’t really feel up to it. I listened to Steven read me his writing and complain about our other friends when there was no one else for him to hang out with. I spent more time with people in the top tier, like Steven, and Michael, and especially Katherine, who I had met a year earlier at a summer writing program and who was nice enough to try and make everyone feel included. She would always make sure I had a place to sit when we watched movies and ate lunch, and would usually spend a few minutes talking to me before finding someone else to talk to.

I could never figure out what to do or say that would let me connect with them, like they did with the others, but at least I was able to be amusing enough to be around.

I pretended to like the shows they watched. I didn’t reveal that I hated their boyfriends. I asked questions about their lives and said little about mine because they liked talking about themselves. I organized events they didn’t go to. I never said anything controversial when they were arguing about politics. I encouraged them to be kind, but I didn’t really stick up for the girl they were bullying. I was always positive and happy, even on my worst days, so that I could be likeable. I overthought everything. Should I say this? No, that sounds stupid, say it like this. But does that sound lame? Should I say it like this? They might think I’m weird, though, won’t they? Maybe don’t say anything.

I thought it was working. I mean, yeah, they would forget that they invited me to things and go without me. And they had a separate groupchat that I wasn’t in. And they threw a birthday party for everyone else but didn’t even remember when mine was. But it seemed to be getting better. They knew one of my favorite colors. They knew I loved cats. They liked when I made them cookies. That’s something, right? It’s better than not having friends at all.

I was eating dinner with them one night. I was late, since they had all left without me. The table was too crowded as usual; there were so many of us that I had to sit about two feet away from the table so that everyone could fit. I was hoping to sit next to Katherine, but she was tightly packed between her boyfriend and best friend. I had to circle the table a few times, quietly asking if there was any room before I was able to squeeze between Brandon, who for a week after we met thought my name was Naomi because that was the name of the only other freshman from Hawai‘i, and Steven.

I listened intently as they all complained about their professors, passionately debated which TV show we should watch next, and condescendingly discussed social issues that they were not qualified to have such confident opinions on. We were the loudest group in the room. I was trying to participate, but I was having trouble figuring out when and how. But when I heard Steven mention a book we were reading in our English class, I turned to him and said something about it that I thought he would find interesting.

He slowly turned his head to face me, smiled, and said, “Okay, don’t get mad, but honestly, sometimes I forget that you’re here.”

He laughed, like it was a hilarious realization, and I did too, because I didn’t know how else to react. Everyone else looked over, impatiently asking why he was laughing, smiling in preparation of the fun they were about to join in on.

He repeated the statement, and they all burst into laughter and started to agree. “Oh my God, you’re right!” “Me too!” “Yeah, I do that all the time.”

I forced myself to think that it was funny, too. I couldn’t risk thinking anything else.

“But whenever it happens, I always wish that you were here,” Steven said, half-heartedly trying to make himself seem less rude.

I spoke even less than usual for the rest of the meal. And when I did, Steven looked over at me and shrieked, “Oh my God! It happened again!” Before sending the entire table into laughter. When I picked up a water bottle, they would joke about how it was levitating, or someone would pretend to use the force.

It was my joke now. Everyone had a joke. Something about them that we would make fun of, in a friendly way, not enough to really hurt them. For Eric is was his hair. For Lexi it was her family. For Elle it was her old fanfiction. For me it was the fact that my friends cared about me so little that they forgot I existed.

I stopped trying so hard. I preferred to eat alone.