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I Came, I Saw, I Fled: Romantic Cowardice in High School

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Author Bio

Nicholas Koloian is a junior and English major who enjoys Pokémon, baking, and reading. He hopes to publish more written works in the future and can often be found sitting in the library, blankly staring into the void, contemplating life before eventually doing his homework.

I Came, I Saw, I Fled: Romantic Cowardice in High School

Back in my junior year of high school, I was fumbling, insecure, and awkward, with dark curly hair, crooked glasses, and a bit of body flab. I was (and still am) an undeniable nerd. I loved Pokémon, video games, and books and hated socializing, group activities, and athletics. A person such as me might as well have had a giant “Don’t Date Me” sign on his head, and at this point, I was an outcast from the various cliques at St. Timothy’s Catholic High School—Nicholas Koloian was a nobody.

The conflict during autumn of my junior year, and the apogee of my high school awkwardness, all came down to girls. Everything started with Michael, who almost acted like a friend when he wasn’t making fun of me. A pudgy African American of Nigerian descent who usually wore rimmed glasses, Michael made it his sacred duty to torment me at almost every opportunity. When he asked who my first crush was, I told him because he had told me who his crush was, and I lacked the common sense to not respond in kind. That’s a story on its own, but for now I’ll just say that she didn’t return the feelings, and that my friend Madison helped prevent her from finding out. It did, however, give Michael a precedent to ask me who my second crush was. I refused to tell him, but she was a sophomore named Natasha. Natasha was a petite girl with straight blonde hair, braces, and glasses. I related to her, in a sense, when I overheard people talking about how shy she was. I coveted her because I imagined her as being like me, even though I never spoke with her. She was the only girl I could picture myself with, and I barely knew her.

In a bold betrayal only matched by the likes of Judas handing over Christ to the Sanhedrin, a friend who knew I liked Natasha sold out my secret to Michael for five dollars, which the friend used to buy lunch. Michael informed me that the friend sold me out after school one day and then told a sophomore named Alexis right in front of me. Alexis told another sophomore named Gus, who is the primary agitator of this particular tale.

It happened when Alexis mentioned that I liked Natasha to Gus one day at lunch.

“You mean that really quiet girl?” he asked.

“Yeah, what are you thinking?” Alexis said.

“I’m thinking we should get her over here so Nick can ask her to homecoming.”

The fast-approaching homecoming dance, which I wasn’t planning on attending in the first place, became a source of existential dread after Gus’s statement. He came up with some truly awful suggestions for getting me to ask her out, like serenading her, or asking her out in front of the entire school at home-room so she couldn’t say no. Then Gus physically held me down at the lunch table so Alexis could find Natasha and bring her over to me. I managed to break free, run out of the lunchroom, and hang out in the hallways for a while. I came back to the lunchroom later for some reason (even now I’m not quite sure why),

and Gus told me I needed to “face my fears.” I turned at the door and saw Alexis and Natasha walk in, triggering a fight-or-flight response that sent me running from the lunchroom again.

But the big awkward moment happened on October 4th, 2013 – my seventeenth birthday. On that day, the hallways, with their bland white walls lined with dull green lockers, were empty at St. Timothy’s, save for Gus and me. Bright ceiling lights gleamed down on the white floor tiles, while Gus sipped from a nearby drinking fountain. I knew Gus was going to agitate me more, which gave me a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. Black bangs hung down over Gus’s forehead, overtop pale pimply skin and glasses—his body type was also distinctly doughboy-ish. “Face your fears,” he told me, after he finished his drink. We proceeded to walk down the hallways to geometry, a class we had together, which was also full of sophomores.

The arguing began in the hallway and continued into the geometry classroom, where Gus said he was going to tell her. He then told Pam, Lisa, and Kathy.

“Stop telling people!” I said.

“Practically the whole school knows,” he said.

Great, my secret was spreading like an STD.

The bell for the end of the school day rang, and I walked out of the classroom, down the brightly lit hallways, and eventually into the school’s library. It wasn’t so much a library as a room with shelves stacked with books, full of students goofing off, skipping class, or eating candy instead of reading. From the ratty, light brown carpet to the dilapidated bookshelves with a collection ranging from *The Hunger Games* to *Mein Kampf*, the place had no sense of comfort. This was the place I usually waited for my dad to pick me up after school ended.

Michael and another student named Lewis were hanging out inside the library when I entered.

“Gus is talking to Natasha,” Lewis said. Then I saw Gus and Natasha enter the library.

“Coward: One who, in a perilous emergency, thinks with his legs,” wrote Ambrose Bierce. Even if I had known this quote at the time, the wisdom of it would have been lost on me. I ran out of the library and down the entryway. The scene—a large foyer with a triangular roof, light shining down on the floors from the windows at the ceiling arch—was a blur to me as I sped out of St. Timothy’s. I went out of the building and down the long sidewalk, winding around the school. I ran past the white siding and brick foundation of the school, past the green lawn and the dark green shrubs that flanked the building. The sidewalk, right next to the road on which parents drove to pick up their kids, led me to a place right at the corner of the school, right where the road forked off into a T shape. I could wait for my dad to take me home here, and I stared at the trees across from the school, catching my breath and taking a moment to collect myself.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket, unlocked it, and noticed a notification onscreen. It was a text from my good friend Madison. She had always been nice to me, the kind of outstanding person you rarely see in a lifetime, let alone in high school. Before this, she had helped me with the first girl Michael tormented me over, finding out that she didn’t want to be in a relationship be-

fore I asked her out and saving me from awkwardness.

Regarding Natasha, Madison didn't have the full story, but had texted me saying, "Sorry everyone was being a bit of a dick."

I received no presents from friends on my birthday. Instead I went running from the school like a coward because someone was trying to force me to ask my crush out.

I saw a car drive up to my hiding spot at the corner. It was Michael getting a ride from his carpool. Michael just laughed. The student he carpooled with, Angelica, said "I've never seen you run so fast."

Eventually, they drove off, and my dad came back to drive me home. I didn't tell him what happened. Upon returning home, we proceeded with a meager birthday celebration, a chocolate cake from Wegman's. The cake was large, double chocolate, with thick layers of icing and "Happy Birthday Nicholas" written on top of it in blue. My dad went upstairs to take a nap, while I began eating my cake. I was eating a little too quickly. Bite after bite, I was feeling fuller and fuller. Upon finishing, I decided that I'd had enough of that day's bullshit and wanted to de-stress, to take a walk and listen to some music. I went out the garage door, Bluetooth headphones on, with some nondescript song from a Nintendo video game playing. I barely made it a few houses down from mine when I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach, as if I had just swallowed a load of wet cement, and then the sensation that I was going to be sick. I returned home, entered through the garage again, and ran to the bathroom, where I heaved my birthday cake into the toilet, the ultimate *coup de grâce* to my self-esteem after my flight from school.

It's worth saying, to his credit, that Gus never pushed further to try to get me to ask the girl out. Based on what his friends told me afterward, he felt incredibly guilty after seeing me run from the school. High school is a time of great immaturity, and they don't call sophomores "wise fools" for nothing.

What wasn't so admirable was that Michael ended up trying to force me to ask Natasha out after Gus relented. At first, I was almost comically unwilling, but the choice was between sucking it up and asking her out myself or having Michael ask her out on my behalf, as he was threatening to do. One day, I was with Alexis when I saw Natasha waiting to be picked up from school. Natasha stood by the school's front door in the entrance hall, looking out the window to watch for her ride. "She's right over there," Alexis told me. "Why don't you ask her out?"

"Fuck it!" I said. I walked over to her, gathered my strength, and then...

"Hey Natasha," I said. "I have a question. Would you like to go to homecoming with me?"

She smiled and said something I couldn't quite make out. Then she repeated herself: "I don't know."

"You don't have to give me an answer if you don't want to," I said. She assented and I walked off.

My friends, when they saw what I had done, immediately told me how brave I was. They also pointed out that I was shaking. If Ambrose Bierce's cowardice quote seemed too harsh on me, Mark Twain once wrote: "Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear." In that sense, and in that moment, perhaps I had overcome my cowardice.

A few days later, I asked Natasha over Facebook messenger if she had given my question more thought. She thanked me for asking her, but told me she was going with someone who she hadn't seen since middle school. At least she was polite when rejecting me; the first girl Michael asked out laughed in his face and said no.

I later learned from Alexis that Natasha was going to the dance with another girl. I still clung to the hope that there was some way I could change her mind, some convoluted plan that would get us together. Eventually, I texted Madison from earlier, who by this point knew the full story of the great debacle of October 4th and referred to the aggressors as “huge, colossal assholes” rather than “a bit of a dick.” By then, I had lost all aspirations of changing Natasha's mind. I told Madison there was no hope of me ever being in a relationship, and that I'd never let myself be burned again. I regret that I don't remember exactly what she said, but I do remember the general tone—taking a break was fine, but I didn't need to give it up forever. I would find someone someday. When replying to Madison's texts, I agreed that taking a break was good. It was only after a few months of waiting in high school that I got over it. From there, it was only a few years later that I realized Madison was totally right, when my romantic situation reversed.

In 2016, at the beginning of sophomore year at Gettysburg College, my flight on the 4th from St. Timothy's was out of my mind. Instead, a good friend who I had met on my first day of college was on it, and I had hopes of something more with her. I'd been playing it safe with the friend since earlier that year in the spring, spending lots of time with her, but never explicitly saying I liked her. One day that fall, I finally texted her and said, “I don't know if this is a good way of saying I like you as more than a friend?”

She asked if I meant as a crush or “bffls.”

“Crush,” I said.

Her reply: “Ur cute. :D.”

We then agreed to spend more time together and see where things went.

Almost one year later, now officially dating my college crush, the memory of Natasha doesn't pain me anymore.