

“Mine?”
--by Patrick Dorsey

She says the name “Katie” and he shoves everything aside -- the textbooks, the notebook, the loose-leaf binder, the index cards and the pens of black, blue and red, even that day’s student newspaper. Not that the word “Katie,” by itself, means anything to him. He knows no Katie, at least not intimately. Never has in any of his twenty-one years.

The word “Katie,” in this language, simply means “possibility.” Especially when followed by the word “single” -- as has been the case for weeks, from the moment that name first was tossed in his direction. Add to it one familiar sentence -- “I think you guys would hit it off” -- and, well...

“She’s singing with us Friday,” Em continues. “You should come. Maybe say hi.” Em pauses and smiles. “And not just to me.”

Adam smiles, too. But there’s something in his green eyes, something in the wrinkles at the corners of his mouth, something washed across his narrow, accented, pale face beneath his short, brown hair that conveys bewilderment -- the same bewilderment that usually follows an hour of reading macro handouts, or a mind-numbing lecture on standard deviations, or a heated discussion-group conversation about political aid to Africa, or pretty much anything that doesn’t involve that journalism degree of his.

“I think I will,” Adam says, but only to the first part of Em’s suggestion.

He’s not so sure about the second part.

From outside Adam’s third-story apartment, orange street-light glow cuts through the slits of Venetian blinds, illuminates the glossy hardwood floor, then ricochets upward and lights the white ceiling to which Adam’s wide-open eyes are glued.

Katie, Adam thinks ... and now he’s in a dimly lit Mongolian barbecue place, at a small square table across from that very girl, ranting about why we Americans insist on being cute and trying to use chopsticks.

“We have forks for a reason,” he says indignantly, then he quickly grabs a pair of those wooden utensils from his placemat, awkwardly twists noodles and bits of meat and vegetables around them, pulls the mass toward his face, and gracelessly splashes sauce everywhere -- on his chin, on his shirt, on the table’s painted surface.

Katie laughs. Giggles. Can’t help herself. And Adam laughs, too, but gets caught on something else: God, she looks just like she does in her Facebook photos -- the same toothy, bright-as-the-sun smile, the same golden-brown waterfall of hair, the same

Pacific-deep eyes, the same narrow, strikingly elegant face and the same pointy, slightly askew nose that's beautiful in its imperfection.

The laughing subsides. Their eyes lock. The seconds tick in Adam's head, behind his frozen face: One, two, three...

Glow like the sun's hits the empty stage. Darkness covers the rest of the auditorium. The audience's conversational buzz drowns out the sound of soft piano-jazz tunes playing through speakers. Adam sits three rows back, on the room's far right, his roommate Kyle positioned one seat his left.

"Can we get this over with?" Adam says.

"Whatever, dude," Kyle says. "You know you're gonna love her -- I mean, you know you're going to love it."

Kyle grins. Adam rolls his eyes. The lights go down for seconds -- one, two, three -- then an a cappella-sung sound rushes from stage to ears as the lights go up again. And there they are. No, there *she* is -- with that same, as-seen-on-Facebook look: the toothy, bright-as-the-sun smile, the golden-brown waterfall of hair, the narrow, elegant face with the pointy, askew-but-beautiful nose. And those Pacific-deep eyes -- wait, Adam thinks. Did they look at me? Could they be looking at me? But she doesn't even *know* me. But what if Em--

Kyle jars Adam from inner monologue with an arm tap and says: "Damn, dude. She's pretty hot."

"You talking about your girlfriend?" Adam says, motioning toward Em.

"No, I'm talking about *yours*."

"Right..."

Adam rolls his eyes again, but widens them when Kyle returns his gaze toward Em and the stage.

Girlfriend, he thinks ... and now he's leaving that Mongolian barbecue place, Katie's arm in his and a bit of dating lubricant on both of their breaths. And they walk slowly -- slowly as if with no direction, along the busy sidewalk, next to the rush of the passing cars and beneath the signs of all the local shops selling coffee and college-themed clothing and the like.

They stop. Katie turns her head to the right and shoots a glance at Adam, as if to ask, "Where to next?" but knowing the answer.

Adam doesn't hesitate.

"Walk you home?" Adam says, and Katie's mouth opens wide with an almost disbelieving half-laugh, half-smile.

"You're such a great guy," she says, and those star-white teeth are back ... and now they're reflecting glistening stage light as everyone -- Katie, Em, and the rest of the co-ed group -- hold concert's final note for what feels like blissful eternity. The audience erupts with applause and shouts and whistles and cat-calls. Adam does the same, standing.

Standing in the hallway minutes later, Em pushes toward Adam and Kyle with purpose and one of those I've-got-a-surprise-for-you faces aimed directly at the former.

"You ready?" she says to him. She taps Kyle's arm, and Kyle's face takes the same shape as his girlfriend's.

"Yeah," he says. "Got a good pick-up line?"

"Well," Adam says with mock enthusiasm, but his sentence gets cut off as she -- Katie, real-life Katie, not the Facebook Katie or the dreamed-up Katie or even the on-stage Katie but the true, in-the-bronze-flesh Katie -- pushes toward the trio and takes Em in an embrace of congratulations, followed by the typically enthusiastic words that accompany those scenes.

Then Em points the living goddess toward the two guys in the group.

"This is my boyfriend, Kyle," Em says, and Katie -- still smiling like an Oscar winner -- takes Adam's roommate in a light, friendly hug and says: "Great to meet you! I've heard so much about you."

"And this," Em continues, "is my friend Adam. He's the sports editor at the paper. Real big-time."

Em winks at Adam. Adam smiles, but with just one mouth corner pointing upward on his nervous face. His foot taps. He opens his mouth to speak. But before he can say anything. Katie -- in a fluid, flawless motion -- releases Kyle and floats over to Adam, offering the same friendly affection given his friend.

"Great to meet you!" Katie says.

"Yeah, great to meet you, too," Adam says.

And he says nothing more. Katie lets go of Adam, takes two steps back and says, still jubilant: "Well, thanks for coming!"

Katie trots away. Em and Kyle turn toward Adam, scowling.

Adam shrugs.

“Seriously, dude,” Kyle says. “You dropped that one like a wide receiver with no hands.”

Adam fidgets in the doorway to Kyle’s room. Kyle, sitting at desktop computer, mouses and clicks something. A song -- something alt-rock from the mid-1990s -- emerges from computer speakers at a low, in-the-background volume.

“I didn’t know what to say,” Adam says, moving his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants.

Kyle’s eyes move from computer to roommate. He gets angry in that loving-friend way and says: “What? How about, ‘You were great’? I know -- real tough to think up, but--”

“Nah,” Adam says, still bobbing back and forth with anxiousness. “That’s lame. I mean--”

“Lame and effective,” Kyle says, and he goes on with a few more sentences about all it takes is effort and confidence. “Look how I got Em,” he continues. “I just went up to her. Like that.” Kyle snaps his fingers.

Adam grins. “So I should just go up to her and snap my fingers?” he says. “Then she’ll melt?”

“Yes,” Kyle says, now in on the joke. “Girls love that stuff.” Seriousness returns to Kyle’s face. “But seriously, dude. It’s just confidence. Just show a little and everything’s easier.”

“Right,” Adam says. “But confidence -- I mean, results breed confidence. And I’m oh-for-life with girls over here. So how--”

“Whatever. That’s the sportswriter in you talking. All you’ve got to do--” Kyle clicks a few things, then continues: “All you’ve got to do is pretend. Convince yourself. That’s it.”

Kyle looks at Adam as if he’s just told him two plus two equals four. Adam, though, looks like he thought the sum was five. Wordless seconds -- one, two, three -- pass, then Kyle, mock-angry, says: “Now get the hell outta here. Midterm Monday. Haven’t read the book.”

Adam’s face changes, from one of fear to one of humor. “Reading?” he says, turning to walk toward his room. “Who reads?”

Then the song on Kyle's computer switches. Adam stops, frozen, halfway between Kyle's room and his. He looks up. He angles his head to the right, and begins mouthing the words -- words of melancholy, draped in the angry, dark sound of semi-hard rock. He begins moving again, again toward his room.

Inside, he shuffles to his desk and his black swivel chair ... and now he's sitting -- sitting inside a beat-up old sedan, with white street lights and stars lighting the interior, and with that same song playing through old tweeters. He's in the driver's seat. His 16-year-old eyes are tearing up.

She's on the passenger side. Hers aren't.

"I'm so, so sorry," Jana says, brushing blonde bangs aside with her right hand and placing her left on Adam's jeans-covered knee. "You're a great guy. You really, really are. I can't even begin to tell you how much I mean that. But -- I mean, it's just not in *that* way. You know?"

Adam wipes a drop from his cheek. He isn't sobbing. He won't -- not yet, that's for later. But won't look at Jana, either. Doesn't want to make it worse. Doesn't want to see what he's missing. Doesn't want to see the person that really, really likes him -- but just not to his liking.

"Yeah, I know," he says, sniffing and gazing through the windshield, eyes fixed on the half-moon reflecting off the lake in front of him, a half-formed shape bobbing in the waves. "I'm good. Just not good enough."

"That sounds awesome -- I can't wait," the e-mail reads, and Adam clicks "send," stands up with a moderate fist pump, and strolls through his doorway and out into the apartment living room where Kyle sits, watching TV. Kyle notices Adam's presence -- his determined gait, his erect posture, the glow in his green eyes -- and says, with a smile: "What, get an 'A' in stats or something?"

Adam laughs. "Finalized the Philly internship," he says. "Everything's a go."

He falls on the dusty gray couch, on the side opposite Kyle, while the roommate says: "All right! You'll be covering the Phillies in no time."

Adam nods and they begin discussing details -- the wheres and whens and hows and whos -- until a short jingle from Kyle's phone interrupts the conversation. Kyle flips the thing open and reads. Adam's eyes drift toward the sports highlights on the television screen.

“Yo,” Kyle says, bringing Adam’s attention back to him. “Got a perfect way to celebrate. Party tonight.”

Adam shrugs. “Nah, I’d rather--”

“It’s on South Campus. Couple blocks away.”

“Yeah, but--”

“Katie’ll be there.”

Katie, Adam thinks ... and he’s at that party, with her. No, wait -- he’s leaving that party, with her, sauntering down the cracked, dark sidewalk next to the thin, glowing beauty, who has starlight shining off her teeth as she laughs at the just-somewhat-funny thing Adam just said. And Adam keeps going -- now he’s expounding on his view of those so-called girly cocktails, how he loves them and he’s not afraid who knows it -- and she’s drinking it up like so much liquor.

Finally, his dissertation is over. The slow stroll stops.

“Walk you home?” he says, and she smiles with lips pressed together, as if surprised and pleased by the question.

“You’re such a great guy,” she says ... and suddenly he’s back home -- his home, sitting on that dusty gray couch and shaking his head at Kyle’s suggestion.

“Nah,” Adam says. “I’m off that train.”

“Whatever, dude,” Kyle says. “You’ll get back on it tonight.”

“You remember Adam,” Em says to Katie, the two girls cornering the young guy near a clogged bookshelf in the noisy, partygoer-filled apartment. And of course Katie nods. And of course Katie smiles. And of course Katie offers that same friendly hug, the one that means absolutely nothing to the unassuming and absolutely everything to the over-assuming.

Then Em says it -- “He used to sing, too, in high school” -- and the conversation is on. Katie’s eyes are even brighter than her teeth, her hair, the apartment’s fluorescents, the sun, the stars, life, everything.

“Oh really?” she says as Em shuffles away with a grin.

“Yeah,” Adam answers, as if trying to downplay it. “Show choir. All four years.”

“Well why don’t you sing with us? We could use another strong voice.”

Adam fidgets and drinks from the red plastic cup he is holding, his cheeks’ color beginning to mimic the cup’s exterior. “Ah,” he says, “ya know, too busy with the newspaper.”

“Right, you’re the sports editor. Sports editor -- did I get that right?”

She did, and Adam appears stunned by the recollection, then even more astonished at the ensuing questions: How long? How tough is it? What excites you about it? What are your dreams?

Adam answers, then responds with the same queries. Katie takes them and runs, overflowing with words on her Soprano-high goals and all she’s willing to sacrifice to achieve them.

Adam drinks, not in sips but in gulps. He wants that passion -- wants to possess it, to be inspired by it, to let it validate him and all of the dreams he holds with matching meaning.

Adam looks left, right, then left again. Then his eyes meet Katie’s for seconds -- one, two, three -- and he opens his mouth to speak.

And somebody taps Katie’s shoulder. It’s another girl -- one Adam doesn’t know -- who wordlessly come-hithers Katie. Katie obeys. Walking away, she says: “Great talking to you!”

Adam says, “Yeah,” and nothing more. Head down, he shuffles to a chair where Em and Kyle are sitting.

“So,” they sing in expecting unison, “how’d it go?”

Adam shrugs. “Eh,” he says. “Never found the right opening.”

“But you were talking for like half an hour,” Em says. Adam nods, but offers answers and excuses, trying to explain away his inaction. All of these are met by scolds, then encouragement, then a friendly but stern order from Em: “You go back there and talk to her.”

“Nah, I’m outta here,” Adam says, moving toward the door. “She’d never go for me anyway.”

“Nice column today,” Em says from her spot on the couch next to Kyle, who nods in agreement without looking up from his laptop. Adam stops before he reaches the kitchen and says thanks. Em continues with: “We gonna win tomorrow?”

“Doubt it,” Adam answers as he moves into the kitchen, opens the refrigerator, and removes a Chinese food box. “Gonna give up touchdowns all day long. Probably’ll need to drink after talking to the players post-game.” Adam grabs a plastic fork from a box in a cupboard, moves his socked feet back into the living room, stops, and says: “Any ideas?”

“On where to drink?” Em says, and Adam nods, still clutching the white-and-red, noodles-filled container with both hands. “Well,” Em continues, “there’s another party at that same place we were at a couple weeks ago, the one--”

“Where Katie was?” Adam says, with a mix of enthusiasm and guilty unease. Em nods. Adam pauses and seconds elapse -- one, two, three -- with his eyes aimed at the wall, focused on nothing in particular. Then he turns to Em and says: “She gonna be there?”

Kyle turns with fervor toward Em, as if also wanting to know. Em, though, doesn’t match it, instead tilting head left and drawing a deep breath. “Yeah,” she says, but trails off before adding another word.

“Yeah?” Adam says.

“Yeah?” Kyle says.

“Yeah,” Em says, seeming to search for words. “But she’s -- well, she kind of just started seeing someone.”

Adam’s right arm falls to his side, the Chinese food barely staying in the grip of his ghost-white fingers. His face’s color matches those fingertips. But he says nothing more than: “Oh. That’s too bad.” Em averts awkward silence by explaining the whos and whens and hows of it all as Adam stands rigid like a palace guard, not moving until the story is over and all that’s left is to say: “Well, she never would have gone for me anyway.”

Words of consolation and you-know-that’s-not-true follow Adam into his room, but he shrugs them off verbally and physically as he sets white box on desk, then sits ... alone on a butter-yellow couch in a crowded apartment, sipping colorful cocktail from a clear glass, shifting his eyes intermittently toward a striking brunette with Pacific-deep eyes and a golden waterfall of hair and a beautifully off-center nose. She’s standing there with her arm out, and that arm is gripping the bicep of a guy -- a guy with statuesque features head-to-toe, not an imperfection visible, and a voice so booming it rattles the creaky floorboards below. The girl’s light giggle follows, and it cuts through the haze of party conversation and digs into Adam’s ears like daggers.

“Nope,” Adam says to himself, lifting his drink. “Not good enough.”

He gulps from the glass until it's empty. Then he sets it aside and leans forward, putting face in hands. He holds that pose for a few seconds before leaning back ... and staring at the cluttered desk in front of him -- the one with all his textbooks and notebooks and binders, all those index cards of black, blue and red, all those stacked student newspapers that, at that moment, might as well have been blank.

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-Featured principles-

Irrational behavior emerges in two major ways here. The first: The idea of virtual ownership. Just as the consumer imagines driving that new car before the purchase is made (or even imminent), Adam here sees himself as the object of Katie's desires -- and does so in a way that's so lifelike, so true to Adam's partial self-vision (i.e. he's unafraid to show her all his quirks), that that the dream must be real, that she's already somewhat his. This breeds a harder mental/emotional fall when he finds out she isn't, that he missed his chance.

Of course, he misses his chance because of another combination of irrational behaviors: The self-fulfilling prophecy, brought about by an early "anchor" point tied to another side of his self-image, one of inadequacy. He might be a smart college student on a path of success, but he still isn't worthy, he tells himself, because he wasn't worthy the first time he got close to a girl. That first impression stays with him, and has for years, despite mounting evidence to the contrary. And so, although a side of him already sees himself as Katie's guy, another side -- the dominant one, in this situation -- lowers the expectations by insisting it never would work. And -- as often is the case with expectations -- he's right. He doesn't get what he dreams of. He simply gets what he expects.

-About the Author-

Patrick is a 2007 Northwestern University graduate, a sportswriter, and a part-time author. He has written for The Indianapolis Star, The Miami Herald, the South Florida Sun-Sentinel, ESPN.com, and several other publications, and recently published a short story in the Rose & Thorn Journal.