

I'm So Sorry to Ask You . . . What's Your Name Again?

The room was quiet as I walked in, despite the fact that it was filled with people. No one looked up from their phones, the dull bluish hue illuminating their faces as their thumbs flicked expertly on the screens. My face still stung from the cold as I awkwardly squeezed my way in between the people sitting at the edge of the row, slight annoyance evident on their faces as I made my way to my seat. I dropped my backpack on the ground, shuffling around in the front pocket of my coat for my phone as I settled into my seat.

Every week was exactly the same—it began with a 7:45 a.m. lecture that no one really wanted to be at. But it wasn't just this class; it was every class that began that same way. I walked in five minutes before the bell, 15 if I was lucky, to a room full of people with their heads bent forward, fingers scrolling up and down the screens of their phones. I was one of those people too, immediately reaching for my phone as soon as I sat down, absentmindedly thinking about how easy it would be if people would just fill the lecture hall from the middle of the row out.

Then again, if I got there early, I would also sit at the edge of the row, the prime seating location in any lecture hall.

The bell rang, and there was an immediate scrambling as people stuffed their phones into their pockets, paper swishing as notebooks opened. There was that collective sigh as the professor launched right into the lecture, the entire hall leaning forward as he reached up to the chalkboard to write. It went on this way for the next 50 minutes, the antsy feeling growing as the end of the lecture neared. Everyone waited for that moment when the professor would indicate

the stopping point, the shuffling resuming as people stuffed their notebooks in their backpacks and filed out of the lecture hall.

Discussions weren't much different, except instead of 300 people, there were only 30. But for one little piece.

"All right, discuss this with the person on your right."

Everyone froze at those words.

But the moment went away as quickly as it came while we all shuffled in our seats, turning to the person next to us. I turned to the girl I had sat next to for every discussion since the beginning of the semester three weeks ago, briefly glancing at the familiar face and mumbling a greeting. We worked on the problem together and came to a consensus as quickly as possible, before turning back to face forward once more. It was a carefully mastered routine, one that happened in every single discussion like a well-oiled machine.

Silence befell the room once more as we all completed the routine, staring at the board blankly again. Our TA smiled expectantly, and we all knew what was coming. I fiddled with my pencil, staring down at the notebook in front of me.

Please don't pick me to explain this problem.

He scanned the room once more, before zooming in on a victim. The room grew especially silent, and I looked up. He waited in anticipation, and I let out a breath of frustration.

And . . . of course.

I reluctantly looked over the work I did, beginning to explain the problem.

"Uh . . . so . . ."

I gestured to the person sitting to my right and paused, glancing briefly out of the corner of my eye. Panic gripped me as I realized that I didn't know her name, despite the fact that, for

the last five weeks, I had sat next to her in every single discussion. I fumbled with my words, trying to find the name that was just out of reach.

“Nina.”

She supplied helpfully, flashing a brief smile. I smiled back sheepishly, relief washing over me.

“So Nina and I began by drawing a force diagram . . .”

I continued to explain the problem, letting out a sigh of relief when I finished. The rest of the discussion continued uneventfully until the bell rang, and we tossed our papers and pens into our bags and left the room without a glance back. I paused for a moment, wondering if I should apologize to her for forgetting her name.

But she was already gone, lost in the crowd of people who flooded the streets between classes.

It was the same routine, week after week from September through May with a three-week break in between. Despite the fact that there were no assigned seats, people always claimed one for themselves within the first week. Infringing on that would earn one a reproachful glare for upsetting the order. However, even though people inevitably sat in the exact same spot for the entire semester, I rarely knew their names. I didn't know where they would go after class, what they would get for lunch, what table they would sit at, or if they would even get lunch at all.

I saw the same people in class every week; I passed the same people on the way to class, making awkward eye contact but never bothering to learn their names. They became their physical attributes, their punctuality, their handwriting.

She's the girl I walk past on the way to chemistry, who always wears that oddly colored green scarf.

He's the guy I sit next to in discussion who just won't stop clicking his pen.

And so it went. They were familiar, in the way that made me do a double take when I passed them on the street at the beginning of the semester. As I passed them, I saw the flashes of recognition on their faces and my mind paused, wondering if I should raise my hand to wave. But before I could figure that out, they were gone yet again, already behind me. I disappeared into the crowd too, equally unknown to everyone else. I knew them, and yet I knew nothing *about* them. I never saw them except for in that defined, tiny slot of time. I never reached out to say hi, and for some reason, they never did either. I wished I could, but there was something stopping me—a worry that maybe they didn't want to be friends.

As kids, we find making friends to be deceptively easy; just sharing cookies builds a bond. It's now no longer as simple as splitting a cookie because people begin to make judgments and first impressions matter. Relationships grow more complex. After we've spent 12 years of going to school with the same classmates, it's suddenly a lot harder at the beginning of college, where there are entirely new ones. There's an endless stream of people, everyone struggling to rediscover how to make friends, trying to find connections.

"So what's your major? Where do you live? What classes are you taking?"

There's a pause, followed by a sense of relief when the elusive connection is finally found. Sometimes it's just a TV show, a mutual love for a band, a shared class.

Over the course of the semester, her face grew more familiar. The uncomfortable eye contact became a small nod of acknowledgment as I passed her on the crosswalk at the same time every week, growing into a brief smile as I reached the halfway point of the semester. By the second midterm, the mysterious person sitting next to me in lecture was a familiar landmark, and I unconsciously looked for her back as I walked into the lecture hall toward my "assigned"

seat. Sometimes, we glanced at the board and made a joke, a silent connection forming between us. Without realizing it, she became a small part of my life. I vaguely knew her name now, but I also knew that she spent the night studying for our midterm, that she always left the lecture hall and turned to the right because she had a sociology discussion next. At the end of lecture, I exchanged a quick wave with her before disappearing into the crowd again, going from someone to no one in the span of a second.

By the end of the semester, we were almost friends. *Almost*. Not quite though, because I didn't have her number. It was an awkward in-between. There was a familiarity in her presence, wherein she was inexplicably a part of my life despite the fact that our conversations were limited to occasional blurbs in the five minutes before class. I knew facets of her life, but I didn't have the pieces to put together an entire person. Neither of us ever made the effort to see the other outside of class because that would just be way too awkward. We would be crossing the invisible line that makes us classmates but not quite friends, two people who are bound by a single lecture together.

On the last day of class, I walked into that same lecture hall toward the same seat that I always sat in. The room was no longer completely silent; instead, it was filled with the dull murmur of conversation. The faint glow from the phones was still there, but it was interrupted by the occasional glance up, by laughter from a shared nervousness about the final. When the bell rang, there was the shuffling of papers as we turned to the last pages of our notebooks. It was strangely bittersweet. The class had made itself a part of my life over the course of the semester. But at the end of the 55-minute interval, it would no longer be so. I would start all over again next semester.

As the end of the period approached, our professor wrapped up, thanking us for a good semester. There was the faint smattering of applause, and I turned to the girl who sat next to me.

“Well, now we just have this final left.”

She laughed, nodding as she slid her notebook into her bag. I debated about asking her if she wanted to study with me and then decided against it, unsure of whether it was okay. After all, we had only ever really talked in class. She turned to leave and then paused at the end of the row, giving me a slight smile.

“Would you want to study together? It’s okay if you don’t want to, I tot . . .”

I smiled, cutting her off halfway.

“I would love to. I just didn’t ask because I figured it would be kind of awkward, since we haven’t ever really talked.”

“I was worried too! It’s so awkward isn’t it, making friends in college? Wait, let me get your number before I leave so we can set this up . . .”

She paused as her finger hovered above the name box in her contacts, a sheepish grin on her face.

“I’m so sorry to ask you this, and I know it’s the end of the semester, but . . . what’s your name again?”