

## The Muse

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The first time I witnessed Katie Marie Walters, she was in the mildewy basement of St. Mary's Catholic Church, rehearsing for a performance of *Arsenic & Old Lace*. I was sitting on the floor, against the wall, collecting dust in the pockets of my corduroys. I was there for my boyfriend, who at 5'4" and 14 years old was the best the church could do for the lead role, Mortimer Brewster. I hardly had time to notice his pudgy or atrocious fake-Brooklyn accent, because I was transfixed by his fellow cast member, Katie, who was playing the role of Aunt Martha Brewster.

At 15, Katie was tall, long in every way. Her hair was naturally black and cropped at her chin. Her arm hair was just as dark and thick. She dressed in a way that revealed she didn't come from money, but also proved she would be stylish regardless: flats covered in flowers, lacy tops, jeweled headbands. She had a prominent lisp, as though her s's could never quite escape the confines of her incredibly large and permanently chapped lips. This made for quite the terrible actress, as hardly any of her lines were audible. Yet, she moved strangely and excessively. One moment pirouetting perfectly, the next twitching on the ground like a freshly-squished spider. There was no one in the room half as entertaining as her.

The next time I saw Katie was after the second (and final) performance of the play. The St. Mary's Youth Group cast and crew headed to Eat N' Park for celebratory french fries and ice cream. As the girlfriend of the one and only Mortimer, it was requested that I accompany the group.

We sat in one large half-moon booth with Katie in the center of everyone. She had on an

oversized wide-brim hat that made her look like a goth Audrey Hepburn. She laughed the whole night and flirted with our waitress. There was no one at that table who did not, in some small part, wish they were her.

Weeks later, when the spring semester of school started, Katie and I discovered we had French class together. We saw each other for 90 minutes every day. I discovered she was even more incredible up-close, and she discovered I understood all of her references to things like *Nosferatu* and *Cats*. It is likely, in this formative period of our friendship, we were incredibly obnoxious and interfered highly with our fellow pupils' capacity to learn French, but I didn't care then and I still don't. Becoming friends with her was like falling in love. A constant exchange of "You like *x* too? I love *x*!" that has the capacity to validate your entire existence.

There were also many things Katie knew that I didn't. She showed me Sylvia Plath. She explained to me, in detail, the life and work of Virginia Woolf. Though I don't think she'd ever read Woolf's work, sometimes Katie would turn to look out the window and sigh "Mrs. Dalloway said she'd buy the flowers herself." Most of all, Katie loved Anne Sexton, whose poetry was too overtly depressed for the confines of a high school English class.

Midway through this semester, Katie asked me if I wanted to enter a citywide Shakespeare Recitation Contest. She had a scene picked out from *Twelfth Night* in which Olivia bickers with Feste. I was to play the haughty Olivia and Katie, the wise jester. We hardly practiced. I used a high pitched Bernadette Peters-esque accent, and Katie's lisp made the jester's ramblings all the more incoherent. The day of the performance we were allowed to skip class, as the contest was being held Downtown at the Pittsburgh Public Theater. We performed our scene on a professional stage and were judged by actors and directors. The next day we were simultaneously informed that

the contest had over 500 entries and that we had come in second-to-last place.

This immense failure sealed us together like wet cement. We began hanging out every weekend and riding home from school together. Most of the time, we got dressed up and took pictures of each other. When artsy teens seek out friendship, there is perhaps no more sought after quality than the willingness to act as photographer. Katie had a decent Nikon, and I lived close to an old mansion in the middle of a forest. We would plot our poses and put on music while we photographed. To this day, there survives photo album posted to Facebook that contains solely the exploits of a day's wanderings through a strip mall. The 74 photo experience details our journey through trying on every costume at Party City and stuffing Wendy's chicken nuggets down our throats.

I remember feeling jealous of the fact that Katie's pictures always turned out so much better than mine. This was by no means a testament to my skills as a photographer. Rather, it was her complete lack of fear. She would nestle her face into a cherry blossom and I would smile without showing my teeth. Katie was born to be photographed. She would never live a single moment in which she was not herself to the fullest and the evidence proves it. Once, when I asked Katie what she wanted to be when she grew up, she thought for a moment and then said, "a muse."

Katie and I only ever fought twice. Save for me being non-confrontational to a fault, Katie was impossible to stay angry with. The first night she slept over at my house, we sat in my bed and watched *Oliver!* on my laptop. Katie requested a snack and proceeded to haul a plethora of incredibly crusty bread smeared with crunchy peanut butter back into my bed. I told her if she was going to eat that, she had to sit on the floor. Katie jokingly took a large bite, letting crumbs trickle

down into the folds of my comforter. This aggravated me so severely that I shut off the movie and demanded we go to bed (after I grudgingly shook out all of my blankets). It didn't matter in the morning.

The second time we fought was because Katie revealed to my close friend, arch rival, and long-term amorous interest that I had feelings for him. In retrospect, I can't blame her. The boy in question was a manipulative pustule who likely forced the information out of her with some sort of James Bond villain mind-control technique. At the time, I was too startled to do anything but distance myself. It was the quiet sort of fight where she knew she was inviting my wrath and I was too exhausted to offer anything in return.

Though Katie and I were the same age, she graduated a year ahead of me and began aimlessly navigating her way through community college. Watching her made me realize she had never fully anticipated the arrival of adulthood. She sighed through classes and scrambled her way through relationships with boys and girls. We saw each other less regularly but still embraced just as hard. Her mother had another daughter with Katie's step-dad. Katie worried what this meant for her.

When it was my turn to head to college, Katie was ironing out the kinks of her five year plan. She transferred to Chatham, a women's college. She began studying education and English so that she could become a teacher.

Sometimes, it can be painful to see grand people dedicate themselves to something. Watching their strange and alien attempts to assimilate to a level of normalcy that they were never meant to inherit. Yet Katie wore glasses and cardigans and her hair pulled back. She volunteered at the library and was interviewed by the school newspaper. She seemed happy and calm—the first time those two emotions had ever existed in her at once.

I spent my freshman year of college in Italy, casting off the flaky skin of my high school self in favor of the pseudo-glamour of the Florentine outskirts. When I was home for winter break, I saw Katie working at a Target. She was coming down the aisle with a shopping cart full of shiny merchandise to be re-shelved. Something compelled me to turn down the aisle and avoid her. I pretended to look at nail polish as she passed. I still don't understand why I did this. Maybe I was in a hurry or feeling shy and anxious. I also hadn't responded to her Facebook messages in weeks.

On March 11<sup>th</sup>, I arrived back at the Florence campus after spending an extended weekend in Amsterdam. The cafeteria would be closing in 10 minutes and my traveling companions and I eagerly made the most of the remaining limp spaghetti. I took my seat and unearthed my phone, grateful to be back in the realm of wifi. I checked Tumblr. My friend Margaret had sent me a message: "Hey I don't know if you heard, but Katie Walters committed suicide." I hadn't heard.

I excused myself from dinner and went to my room. I called my mom, long-distance charges ignored, and screamed into the phone. I cried until I fell into a raspy sleep, and then I didn't cry again.

My family couldn't afford a ticket so that I could come home and go to the funeral. But I understood. I said my own private prayer in the church of Santa Croce.

I've never visited her grave. I've never called her parents to talk, though I knew them well enough. I don't know anything of the circumstances surrounding her death. Who she was at that moment. For a time I was angry with her. Frustrated by her obsessions with Plath and constant jokes about Virginia Woolf's pockets full of stones. The same selfish frustration as when she'd

covered my bedspread with baguette crumbs. But remaining angry is merely a way to trick oneself.

Recently, I called my dad and talked about her. He loved Katie as I did. Has a perpetual soft spot for the free-willed and the strange. It was her birthday, she would have been 23, and I found myself attempting to recollect every fragment of her existence that I could. But I was overflowing with memories that couldn't be contained. My dad listened and laughed with me. Told me she's the kind of person who deserves to be remembered with warmth.

I hung up the phone and opened Facebook. Her profile lingers, unaltered. Picture of her and another girl named Katie biting into a strawberry at the same time. I took the picture on my back porch. I wrote her a message and felt idiotic and sentimental after. I cried for the first time since 2013. Enough time had passed for me to realize that she was no longer real. Her shadow loomed larger than her body.

I write for her. Or maybe she writes through me. Either way. She suffered, was tortured enough for the both of us. Was too restless for this world. I want to be brilliant enough to make her proud. I want to write like it's just the two of us in a room. She's leaning against the wall wearing a silver cloche hat and pouting like Clara Bow. I'm behind the camera, adjusting the lens, about to capture something beautiful.