

“Untitled”

I spent the first week of freshman year at SUNY Purchase lurking alone in the quad with a blanket and my acoustic guitar. I'd realized upon arrival that I did not know how to make friends, and opted to tackle this problem with a venus fly trap sort of method. The first person to approach me trotted up to me mid-song.

"Oh my god, stay there," he said enthusiastically as he half-crouched at the border of my picnic blanket, "I'm gonna get my guitar."

I don't remember his name or what he looked like. I just know I was thrilled to have met someone, and we spent the rest of the day together. Conversation was forced and awkward, and I caught myself looking for excuses to leave. As the sun was setting, he suggested we go into the woods and get high together – he knew a spot – I left quickly, and that was it.

I kept it up in the quad though, strumming softly just outside my building, trying not to pay attention to groups of kids laughing and strolling through campus, or the handful of boys who had gathered with various instruments under an awning nearby.

One of them wandered over to me – this short, unkempt guy with dark, fluffy hair. He tossed his thumb back over his shoulder towards the awning and said, "hey, you should come play with us. We could use a guitar."

I was shocked by the invite, not used to being included by boys. But I reasoned, this is a liberal arts school, not a public high school. Things are going to be different here. So I picked up my guitar, shook out my picnic blanket, and introduced myself. The guy's name was Jack, I think.

There was a semicircle concrete bench facing the awning where they'd set up their gear - various amplifiers, a bass, a drumset, a keyboard on which some guy was playing the opening riff to Jeff Rosenstock's "HELLLLHOOOOLE" - I couldn't believe my ears.

"I love that song!" I chirped, and said something about how I knew it on guitar, thinking this was my in. But he barely responded, and I wondered if I'd spoken too quietly.

I tried and failed again to get a word in among chattering boys, and the realization that it was going to be a challenge to be heard quickly set in as Jack took a seat behind his drumset and left me to fend for myself.

For a few minutes, I sat silently. This wasn't the first time I'd been here, but I still wasn't sure how to handle myself. I hoped some stroke of genius would hit me like a lightning bolt and I'd think of something powerful to say, to make them see what they were doing, and change. But no such thing occurred to me, at least before James showed up.

He was tall. The tallest person I'd ever seen, and louder than I'd ever been brave enough to be. He came up from behind and walked through me, and I couldn't help but envy the amount of space he and his guitar took up. My acoustic shrunk beside his hybrid – even my guitar was too quiet. James jumped seamlessly into conversation with the rest of the guys, and I sank lower.

This group called themselves the "jam band," unofficially. They met daily to play in the quad together, sometimes late into the night, switching out players at random and often drawing a lively crowd. I made friends elsewhere, and we often attended their performances, dancing and shouting out song requests. I was itching to get on stage, but I didn't bother to try to get in with the jam band again.

James was always there, always keeping up with the song. I thought maybe I was impressed by his skills, or his height – I figured I must just think he's cute by the way he'd caught

my attention, but I didn't think so to look at him. I found myself looking out for him outside of the jam band. When my friends and I went to a game of manhunt and he was there too, it was all I could think about. I couldn't place my fascination with him, or name it anything other than a crush.

So it was official, I liked James. It was my first shameful crush since middle school. There was something so embarrassing about telling my friends about him that I couldn't bear to do it. I stole glances at him when he passed my friends and I in the quad – this tall, walking pinnacle of the unattainable – and avoided eye contact during his shows, wondering if he'd seen me sitting beneath him that day under the awning.

But I had what I'd been looking for now. I had people to go out with on weekends – and on one particular weekend, we'd caught wind of an upperclassman party across campus.

We pregame at Belle's dorm and played a drinking game that involved a giant slab of wood she'd painted on and by the time we made it to the party, we were hammered. I broke off from my group immediately and stumbled through a sea of college kids, speaking to randos with a rare, inebriated confidence I reveled in.

A booming voice broke through the noise of drinks and laughter and I looked up to see James and his friends standing in a semicircle, as if the crowd had parted before them. I strode down the aisle between us, planted myself in front of them, and I raised my hand to point at him and exclaim, "you play guitar!"

He smiled and nodded, "I do. You should come see the jam band sometime!"