

On “22” by Taylor Swift

Janelle Salanga

When someone mentions middle school, I wince. Images of blonde, curly-haired pop stars pop into my head alongside the reminder that middle school, for me, was a time fraught with tension. Not the cultural, religious, or career questions hounding me for years after, but the ostensibly simpler—though no less pressing—tensions of popularity and personality.

I went to a private Christian school where I graduated eighth grade alongside 15 other students. It was a small-town atmosphere amplified a hundred times over. No one was safe from anyone else's eyes, and as the token "geeky", shy girl, with glasses that would make an old man applaud and current-me cringe, coupled with an overbearing enthusiasm for the *Warriors* books and Pokémon games, I wanted to be everything I wasn't: sought after in parties, part of student council, included in the "big friend group" that, really, was a conglomerate of seven different people who all liked relatively the same things: One Direction, Taylor Swift, puppies, makeup. None of which I found remotely interesting.

Besides the puppies, of course. Everyone likes puppies.

Thinking back, I probably found my coding—or, as I like to call it, the art of Googling—sea legs through developing an alter ego. I stumbled through conversations with my classmates by day, frantically scanning my mind for something, anything interesting about me. The One Thing to propel me into the realm of good conversationalist. By night, I scoured Google, harvesting scraps of information from Wikihow pages like "How to Be Popular" and "How to Convince Your Parents to Let You Wear Makeup."

Alongside my diet of Wikihow, I ravenously consumed the musical albums the "popular" girls sang to in their rooms and talked about at the cafeteria tables: One Direction's *Up All Night* and *Take Me Home*, and Taylor Swift's *Speak Now* and *Fearless*. I stuffed my blue iPod Nano chock full with each album's songs, obsessively listening to five boys and one girl sing about want in several different contexts, mostly romantic, but sometimes familial, sometimes general.

In my own way, I fell in love with Taylor Swift, especially.

The side effect of Taylor Swift musical consumption was the development of my own self-confessional, ranty tendencies. Accompanied by *Fearless*' songs rushing out of the tinny iPod speakers, I had entire dialogues with either my room's magenta-flowered rug or friendly yellow ceiling, where I either resolved to be prettier or less awkward or more socially adept. There was lots of bargaining, and pleading to a God I still wholeheartedly believed in, where I sighed and said I'd be more patient with my parents so maybe I'd wake up and that boy could like me back, that girl could find me interesting. And there were dance parties. Lots of private spastic dance parties, especially when "22" came out. The first time I heard it on the radio, I transformed into limbs on limbs, knocking together while jumping, head banging, little-kid-who-just-had-too-much-sugar excited.

Even after my comprehensive Swiftie and Directioner education, I still felt awkward around my classmates, still grappled for some similarity that would make us experience the magical "friendship click".



Taylor Swift

“22”

Red

10/2012

Big Machine

But I waited patiently.

I told myself, *your time will come*, and looking back on it, I see myself in the same position I've been in many times post-middle school: the anxious performer, fiddling with her split ends and waiting in the wings, about to recite her open mic piece or say her line, anticipating, hating the saying "Patience is a virtue."

Then, in a flash, I got my cue.

We were in eighth grade, working on algebra 1 worksheets. Well, half the class was working, the other half was asking them for the answers. Our teacher's daughter was in our class, and after begging her mom to play her own music, she heaved a huge sigh and inserted a *Red* CD into her CD player. At the sight of the album, the girls erupted in squeals, but as Taylor Swift's shrill voice echoed around the room, everyone fell temporarily silent, gracefully conceding the collective mic to her.

When the rhythmic guitar intro of "22" kicked in, all I could hear was my own ecstasy. I was vibrating with happiness and resolve. Finally, I would fit in. Finally, they'd all see I was one of them, was not some unnatural alien who didn't act like them, was normal.

"Tonight's the night when we forget the heartbreaks, it's time," Taylor Swift reassured over the speakers, crooning, and every girl in the female-dominated classroom—including me—shouted out "I don't know about you, but I'm feeling 22!"

Exhilaration rushed through my veins at every word. I didn't feel weird, or crazy, or shoved to the margins. For three minutes and fifty seconds, I felt like I was having the quintessential Disney, American middle school experience. I felt cool.

I didn't leave middle school with a huge group of best friends, didn't alter my identity to fit within the scope of the "popular girls," but for a moment, I could imagine that I did. And Taylor Swift, with her naive, bubble-gum pop "22", sated my one, grotesque middle school wish—to be just like everyone else.

Long after I entered high school, then college, and Taylor Swift writing about her exes became a tired gimmick, no longer acceptable within the confines of older, harder people's minds, I still see "22" as the epitome of cool and Swift an expert embalmer of "if only's". Not "if only" as a sickening, restrictive framework, if only they liked me back or if only I fit in—"if only" as cotton candy, as dancing like no one's watching you, as singing-screaming with the car windows rolled down and knowing the "if only" is everyone else's: if only they knew you. "You don't know about me, but I bet you want to."