

## RICHARD THORNTON

I stole a name from the wall. I said, "Richard Thornton," like I uttered it all the time, like I whispered, "Richard," in dark back seats on Friday nights. But they were pressing me again, teasing me, asking, "Have you ever even kissed a boy?"

I hadn't. We were on a class trip, standing in front of the Vietnam memorial. I looked up and my eyes found him. "Richard Thornton," I said. "I met him at a mixer at Kennedy Prep."

They didn't believe me, those girls with their peach skin and shiny lips, the curls that fell in perfect ringlets, like they were drawn by an artist. They walked away then, and I stomped my foot, took my soda cup and threw it at the wall.

The passers by glared at me, their eyes wide and angry, so I hurried to pick it up. That's when I noticed the lady staring at me.

"Sorry," I said. "That was so rude of me." I used the sleeve of my sweater to wipe the drops of soda from Richard Thornton.

"Sorry," I mumbled again. I was walking away when she spoke.

"He was mine," she said.

"What?" I turned back.

"Richard," she tapped a slender finger gently against his name. "was my high school boyfriend."

"Oh God, I'm such a jerk. You heard me?"

She nodded her head.

"I didn't mean to," I said.

She laughed then, even though her eyes were sad.

"I think he would've gotten a kick out of you using his name."

I took a step toward her.

"Yeah?"

"He would've said, 'don't let those gals put you down.'"

"Was he a good guy? Was he sweet? Romantic?"

"He was a boy," she said. "He could've been all those things, but I never really found out. He sent me a picture once, of a statue of a dragon by a beautiful body of water. I wrote back, but, well, you know."

"I'm sorry," I said.

She squeezed my hand and walked away, following the length of the wall, which seemed to stretch on and on for miles.