

# When I Met...

By: Peyton Zeigler

It was an early January morning. I sat half-awake in the Portland airport waiting for a voice to say, “group C boarding.” There was a girl who looked my age across from me. She had cool shoes. They were olive Nikes with a long black swoosh sweeping along the side. Her shoes matched the olive undertones of her skin. Her dark brown hair fell around her shoulders while she picked through her phone. She was pretty.

“Group B boarding.”

She got up and slung her black backpack and duffle bag over her shoulder. I was group C. I focused on staying awake. No one should ever be up this early.

“Group C boarding.”

Finally. I stumbled up from the floor with my backpack and trudged to the jetway. I passed the reception desk that read: PDX – MCI. Portland to Kansas City. But Kansas City was not my final destination. It was National Championship today. Well, it was actually the Inaugural College Football Playoff National Championship. Oregon was playing Ohio State in Dallas. This was the second time in five years Oregon had been to the championship game. To get here we had to win the Rose Bowl. It used to be that you’d win the Rose Bowl and your season was over. Not this time. Eleven days ago we beat a good Florida State team. No, we *crushed* the *defending national champions*. We earned this chance to play today. And I was lucky enough to be on my way to see them now.

I stepped onto the plane and squeezed my way down the aisle. I kept my head down making myself invisible. “Hey.” Someone saw through my invisibility. She had cool shoes. “I saved you a seat,” she said. I was skeptical. She looked nice enough and was my age. She was sitting in the middle seat, which meant I got the aisle. And it was my favorite row. “Okay, thanks,” I said surprised. We exchanged names. Malena was a freshman at Oregon, and a year younger than me. She was from Beaverton (Oregon), and her parents worked at Nike. That explained her nice shoes. We had a friend in common: Isaiah. Her credibility was growing. We fell silent and she took out her laptop. I naturally glanced at her screen.

Malena Udani.

*Malena Udani!* I knew this girl. At the time I was a leader of our student section, the Oregon Pit Crew. We were in the middle of hiring three freshman to our team. Our Vice President Dan gave us the names, but only one was unfamiliar to me. Malena. We were tabling outside the Erb Memorial Union when she walked by one day, but I just missed her. And here she was sitting next to me on a flight to Dallas. I didn’t tell her about my epiphany until a few weeks later.

I drifted in and out of sleep for the entire 3 1/2 hours. We landed in Kansas City and got breakfast outside our gate. The place had a true country feel down to the mason jars for water glasses. I learned more about how she got into football. She made a few friends on the team during orientation. The freshman phenom, Royce Freeman, was on that list. I was beginning to think she was too cool for me. Especially with those shoes.

We boarded the second plane for Dallas optimistic and hopeful. We didn't know what would happen that night or after. We shared a cab, but went to our separate hotels and met at the stadium. We stood together. We cheered together. We booed, hoped, and prayed together. We were heartbroken together.

I flew home by myself. It took me a few days to get over the loss.

Honestly, losing sucked. I'm still not really over this loss. It was hard to go home surrounded by OSU fans gloating and giving a slight "I feel your pain, let's be sad together" smile at other Duck fans. Being on campus was somehow worse the next day. The reality that the season's over and the best player ever to play at Oregon was leaving was like a hangover after a night at Taylor's.

But how cool is it that out of that pain came something great.

I didn't see Malena until a week later. I texted her to make sure she got home safely. The loss was tough, but we wouldn't trade the experience for anything, and we both gained a friend that day. Eventually that friendship grew. It grew through basketball season, baseball season, and another football season. It lasted through trips to Spokane, London, Dublin, Edinburgh, Paris, Amsterdam, Seattle, Sacramento, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Phoenix.

I definitely changed after I met Malena on January 12, 2015.

But now, she's not the only one with cool shoes.