

At Seventeen

(Janis Ian)

[Verse]

I learned the truth at seventeen
That love was meant for beauty
queens
And high school girls with clear-
skinned smiles
Who married young and then retired

The valentines I never knew
The Friday night charades of youth
Were spent on one more beautiful
At seventeen I learned the truth

And those of us with ravaged faces
Lacking in the social graces
Desperately remained at home
Inventing lovers on the phone

Who called to say, "Come dance with
me"
And murmured vague obscenities
It isn't all it seems
At seventeen

A brown-eyed girl in hand-me-downs
Whose name I never could pronounce
Said, "Pity, please, the ones who serve
They only get what they deserve"

And the rich related hometown
queen
Marries into what she needs
With a guarantee of company
And haven for the elderly

Remember those who win the game
Lose the love they sought to gain
In debentures of quality
And dubious integrity

Their small town eyes will gape at you
In dull surprise when payment due
Exceeds accounts received
At seventeen

To those of us who knew the pain
Of valentines that never came
And those whose names were never
called
When choosing sides for basketball

It was long ago and far away
The world was younger than today
When dreams were all they gave for
free
To ugly duckling girls like me

We all play the game and when we
dare
To cheat ourselves at solitaire
Inventing lovers on the phone
Repenting other lives unknown

They call and say, "Come dance with
me"
And murmur vague obscenities
At ugly girls like me
At seventeen

"At Seventeen" is a song by Janis Ian, released in 1975 on *Between the Lines* (her seventh studio album) and as a single. Ian's most successful recording, the song is a commentary on society's beauty standards, adolescent cruelty, the illusion of popularity, and teenage angst, as reflected upon from the maturity of adulthood. It is told from the point of view of a woman who was an "ugly duckling" as a girl and ignored in high school while the popular girls got all the attention.

Janis Ian, then 22, wrote "At Seventeen" in 1973 at her mother's house over the course of three months. In her autobiography *Society's Child*, Ian says that the song was inspired by a newspaper article about a former teenage debutante who learned the hard way that being popular did not solve all her problems. The article included the quote, "I learned the truth at eighteen"; Ian found that the word "seventeen" worked better than "eighteen" when she tried to put this lyric with the bossa nova-style melody she had been composing on guitar. She also says she initially did not want to record or perform the song because she felt it was far too personal to share, but eventually changed her mind after adding the song's final verse ("To those of us who knew the pain/Of Valentines that never came...").

Promoting the song was challenging, as it was longer than most radio hits and packed with lyrics. Along with the promotions team at her record company, Ian decided that their best chance to market the song was to promote it to women, which was no easy task when so many radio stations were controlled by men. Ian did a grueling series of daytime talk shows for six months before she was granted an appearance on *The Tonight Show* where she performed the song and it took off.

"At Seventeen", released as the second single from *Between the Lines*, became Ian's first national hit single since her first hit "Society's Child (Baby I've Been Thinking)" in 1967. The single version omitted the longer instrumental verse and chorus because it was considered too long and it was feared that the radio stations would refuse to play it. It peaked at #1 on the *Billboard* Adult Contemporary chart and at #3 on the *Pop Singles* chart in September 1975. *Billboard* ranked it as the No. 19 song for 1975, and as the No. 2 Adult Contemporary hit of the year behind only Melissa Manchester's "Midnight Blue." It also won a Grammy Award for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance in 1976, beating out the likes of Linda Ronstadt, Olivia Newton-John, and Helen Reddy and was nominated for "Record of the Year" and "Song of the Year".

Ian performed "At Seventeen" as a musical guest on the very first episode of *Saturday Night Live* in October 1975. She also performed the song on *The Old Grey Whistle Test* in 1976, when she held the number one spots on the US album and single charts.

The song's parent album, *Between the Lines*, also hit #1 and earned a platinum certification for sales of one million copies. Another measure of her success is anecdotal — on Valentine's Day 1977, Ian received 461 Valentine cards, having indicated in the lyrics to "At Seventeen" that she never received any as a teenager.