

Evaluate.

It was mid-winter when it ended.

He split suddenly, leaving me with unanswered questions and the aftermath of a cold that I'd caught between kisses during late night cigarette breaks at the Hotel. Every cough left a bad taste in my mouth, and followed with a bittersweet glimpse at a memory that didn't mean much in it's moment.

But here I am alone, slumped against the cold brick, this time strangled by thought rather than smoke. Finding myself in the back alley of a grimy bar I hated to be at without him seems like a fitting end to our story.

"Just a little," I admitted when he asked if the smoke bothered me, but the third beer may have been a bit persuasive. I pulled his scarf closer to my face and declined to return back inside until he finished. My toes curled and tapped in anticipation of the awaiting warmth.

A cigarette lasts an average of about 6 minutes, so Google might say. The kind he smoked lasted a bit longer for some reason (I am too uneducated on the subject to have an explanation for and too uninterested to Google.) I'd wait too patiently for those minutes to tick by, watching silently as he discussed nebbish topics with friends between puffs and sips of scotch, which always extended the time. By the time my fingertips would just about turned purple, I'd scrape my brain anxiously for anything to add to conversation I never really felt a part of.

Although I did thoroughly enjoy the company, I deeply longed for the inside,— to be in a quiet place alone with him where we could talk about something new, and he could show me how his brain world. But even early on I could see how he had kept a part of him locked away, never fully present. For fear of judgement or fear of exploration of himself, I still don't know, and even after three years I still hadn't been able to find the right keys to open him up.

I dismissed this feeling for a long while, the desire to open up his head and tinker around, to bust open his chest and burrow myself inside, because in a way I knew I was similar and that I couldn't force it. Because of this, we felt awkwardly comfortable in each other's presence. I somehow knew that somewhere beyond this outer facade was a person locked away I desperately wanted to know. I tricked myself into believing that the hand he kept on my crossed leg meant he understood.

I am only now aware of just how much it can take for a person to chip away at that exoskeleton to reveal the true me, as I keep a tough exterior hidden behind another thinly layered veil of hope and optimism. The reason for this wasn't mainly because of my trust issues with others (the issue I think being causal to trusting too easily.) The reason I kept these skins on top of skins was not to force others to see how much they cared to take them down, it was to avoid answering questions about myself and who I was or wanted to be.

I had no idea of the answers to these questions at the time of my own internal crisis, but looking back to the moment I recall the prickling, heavy intensity of his hand on my leg, — a constant state of unease, hidden and buried away in avoidance of confronting.

I'll sit a while longer, to consider my own shortcomings and continue with my evaluations as to why it didn't work out like I thought I knew it would. I sit, breathing slowly in my search for comfort, through the skewed flashes of memories where my gut begged to tell me I was oddly out of place. And in all the time spent trying to know who he was, a mutual curiosity and interest in my inner-workings,— what makes my brain tick and heart pound,— was never shared.

But it wasn't the kind of leaving you could hate him for. After all it is, in a way, a retelling of the classic *Romeo & Juliet* story,— a disenchanting version of: "wrong place, wrong time."

Reason hardly matters when I attempt to search for the answer to why there is now a gaping pit in my stomach and my mind is a blank void. It exists all the same, with the abhorrent, sick pain I can only hope the ticking clock can silence.

I just desperately hoped this one would be different.