

I don't remember whether it was snowing outside or not. I do know, though, that it was brutally cold – around twenty to thirty degrees even though it was April – and that Zooley had made a habit out of double checking that my jacket was zipped up all the way before we went outside. It was something that he'd done for me when we had first fallen in love, and everything then felt fresh and new and neither one of us knew the extent to which we would affect one another's lives. As far as I was concerned, Zooley was a wonderful kisser, and the chemistry that was imbued within the first kiss we ever shared was the closest I'll ever get to knowing what paradise feels like. Either way, it was a Monday evening, around 9 or 10 PM, and Christopher had just told me that he no longer loved me. I was making good progress getting over him; it had been over a week since that happened, and I had flown to Rochester to see Zooley. He had come to the airport to see me, and my heart had skipped a beat when I first saw him as I was going down the escalator. It had been so long since I'd last seen him, and a month since I last spoke to him.

I had messaged him a simple, "Hey," a couple of days earlier. Zooley told me that when I had messaged him, he was close to very drunk and had locked himself out of some room that he needed to get into. So he had sat down on the floor, with his back facing that door, and pulled out a photo of me and him that we'd taken at LACMA when our hands were tied together for a mini-psychology experiment. He kept it in the leather Cartier wallet that I had gotten for him almost two years ago in Paris. A couple of minutes later, I texted him, and he was so startled that he thought he was just seriously intoxicated and imagining things. When he woke up the next day, at around 2 PM, he realized it wasn't a mirage and messaged me back. Then, within a matter of less than a week, I had flown out to see him, he had come to get me, and now, here we were: I was sitting on a bench outside some building in Rochester, and Zooley was smoking a cigarette, changing positions from standing to squatting and holding my hands in his.

When Christopher first said those words, I was too shocked to cry, and the first thoughts that ran through my head were not that he really didn't love me anymore, but they were instead centered around the question of my value to Christopher, of how a kid like that, of whom I did actually love, could just toss me away in a little over a week. Was I that insubstantial to him? Or was it a question of his value? So while I was dazed and in shock, Zooley helped me put on my jacket, zipped it up, and led me through some underground tunnels that led to outside. It was cold, and I remember that there was snow, but maybe that's because my imagination tends to make my experiences with Zooley even rosier than they already were.

So he sat me down on a bench and asked me how I felt, and I think it was at this point that I began to cry. I muttered out questions that began with the words, "How could he...?" and "What kind of boy...?" The only full, coherent thought I remember getting out was something about whether or not the thirteen or so months I spent with the kid meant anything to him, and I imagine that, because Zooley loved me then and claims to have never stopped since regaining sight of his love for me, it was very hard for him to, for the second time in his life, comfort me over another boy who I had loved. But because he is

the most decent man I will ever have the pleasure of knowing, he did exactly that. He smoked his Dunhill cigarette, of which is one of the only cigarettes that I actually like the scent of, and I watched, with sadness and insecurity clouding my vision, as the smoke from the cigarette disappeared into the night sky. It was a medium grey, but still managed to make itself noticeable against the dark navy blue of the evening.

After he was done, he tossed the cigarette. I don't remember if he stepped on it, but Zooey is a careful, meticulous person, so I imagine that he did.

He then knelt down in front of me, without taking a large breath or heaving any kind of sigh, took my hands into his, and said, "He doesn't know what he's saying. He's a child without any agency. His friends probably told him he doesn't love you anymore, and he probably thought, 'Hey, maybe I don't love Monica anymore.' There is no way in Hell he doesn't love you anymore. Nobody stops loving anyone that quickly, and anyone who claims to do that has no understanding of love in the first place." I kept asking him the same questions over and over again, though, and Zooey kept giving me similar responses, and what he said made sense. He said that the kid would be back for me by the end of the month, he was sure of it, despite whatever I'd done to hurt him, and then finally, he sighed, and he said, "This world doesn't deserve you."

Upon hearing this, I stopped crying a bit, and Zooey told me that he was trying his best to hold back his tears. He stood up for a moment and said something along the lines of, "Nobody makes me feel this much. I haven't felt something in so long, and you come here and almost make me cry just with this." And in that moment, as he waved one of his hands in the air, trying to get me to understand my value, even if it was only in his eyes, a deep realization hit me. I loved Zooey, and it was for this reason. His ability to assure me and make me feel safe, because with him, it felt like nothing else in the world mattered. There could have been monsters or murderers surrounding us, and I wouldn't have felt more than an ounce of fear because Zooey said he'd lay down his life for me if he had to, and I believed him.

The night was chilly and my cheeks were beginning to turn incredibly red, but I couldn't feel the chill. Instead, I could feel Zooey's hands around mine, the warmth of them, the hope of safety and the promise that things would get better dripped from his fingertips and fell into mine, encasing my hands with reassurance, something that nothing else in the entire world could give me.