

Maybe I Should Have by Latoria Nicole

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The first thing I could remember was the bold smell of coffee; the scent was sweet and warm. Despite all of the intermingled chatter filling the coffee shop, that smell had still broken through, filling me with the comfort I couldn't completely describe. I had been waiting by the delivery portion of the coffee bar, my eyes focusing on my phone as my fingers quickly typed a message to my co-worker to let her know that I'd be at the office soon.

"Turtle latte!" One of the workers called out as he placed a paper coffee cup on the bar in front of me, faint white wisps flowing steadily through the top.

I reached forward to grab my latte, that drink has been my coffee of choice for the past few months, but my fingertips had brushed skin before plastic, startling me. With an embarrassed flush crossing my cheeks, I looked up to see him. After a cluster of bashful laughs and an apology from him, he told me his name was James, and I told him mine was Arya, the coffee being forgotten during our interaction.

At that moment, I had known that he'd either ruin me or make me the happiest I had ever been. There had been something about his bright smile, how he'd brush a hand across the back of his neck when he got shy, and how he made me feel like I was the only one in the room. I wanted to be his world, and he quickly became mine.

The next encounters felt like quick flashes of memories now, but when I had been in those moments, the seconds felt like hours with him. Coffee dates turned into walks in the park and then into late-night dinners in his apartment. I had fallen into him wholeheartedly, letting him comfort me when I abruptly lost my job, allowing him to see pieces of me I had not shown to anyone else. He had been my rock, my ultimate source of stability and happiness until he no longer was.

We met in the coffee shop, two turtle lattes on the table between us. I snapped because of usual nausea and dizziness I had been feeling. He wasn't aware of my symptoms, but it was becoming overwhelming for me to hold inside. I told him I wanted to break up, claiming that he wasn't what I needed or wanted. In reality, he had been everything I could've imagined wanting and needing, but circumstances had changed.

I refused to let him hold my gaze like he used to. I needed him to realize that I was not the only person in his world because soon, I would not have a place in any world. I was afraid that if he stared too long, he would see that my eyes lost their light. I hadn't let him run his fingers

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through my hair because I was afraid he would notice how thin the strands had gotten. I refused to let his heart die as my body succumbed to terminal illness.

So, I let him go, and I had been harsh, scaring him away, shoving him away from me without even explaining the truth of my situation. I had known that he wouldn't leave my side if I had told him the truth. I viewed myself as a ticking bomb, and that last tick would destroy everything and everyone around me. I thought I owed it to everyone, especially him, to isolate myself as my eyes gradually sunk in as my hands grew frail and shaky, and my breathing became weak. He had stolen my breath when we were together. I reveled in the memory of that form of breathlessness. Now, there was no happy glow that replaced the air in my lungs. There was just an empty gap, and I felt like I was drowning in the darkness and emptiness of endless space.

It had been a few months since I dug a scalpel in my chest, cutting him out of my dying heart and leaving the void open. As my senses gradually dulled, I started to long for the sensations I experienced with him. The feeling of his soft hands, the sweet taste of his lips, the melodic sound of his bashful laughter, the sight of his messy hair in the morning, everything turned into memories that I started to have trouble recalling. What was killing me resorted to taking away the only things that brought me some comfort. Those memories were the only things that numbed the pain and discomfort enough for me to fall asleep at night.

A week ago, I found out he moved on, starting a new relationship with someone he probably recently met. I checked his profile on Facebook since I had nothing else to do, and the memory of that first smile had tugged at my heartstrings hard enough to make me just briefly look. Seeing that familiar bright smile in his latest photo with her made something inside of me shatter my composure, crumbling it into a million broken pieces that I could never put back together.

I realized then that the terminal illness that struck me quickly and unfairly wasn't what was killing me the most. I had brought the ax down on what made me feel alive. I cut off my source of happiness and life when I shoved him away so that I could rot in solitude. Maybe I should have let him stay with me. Then, I realized that I didn't want to fall into infinite darkness alone anymore. I wanted at least a hand to help guide me into it before letting go. Telling from the dark fog swallowing my vision, I had known it was only a matter of time.

I called him today from my bed. I explained everything, hot tears rolling down my cheeks, apologies trembling on my dry lips as we spoke.

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After a moment of silence, he told me he'd be right over. He came to my apartment, where he hadn't stepped foot inside in months. He stepped up to my bedside slowly, his breathing was slow, and his expression shattered. He questioned me enough while on the phone. Now, he sat on the edge of my bed next to me, a familiar paper cup coming into view.

I hadn't smelled coffee in so long, a smile formed, it was broken but somewhat still intact, crossing my lips. It was devastatingly ironic how our story began and ended the same way. With what strength I had, I slipped my cold hand into his. Focusing on the warmth of his hold and ignoring the gradual darkening of my vision. I hated not being able to see his face, but the smell of that turtle latte sent me back to that first smile I had seen. Once again, I felt like the only one within his eyes, and I wasn't upset with the fact that he was the last one in mine before they finally shut.