

Ashtray

The ash from his cigarette was warm as he tapped it off onto the back of my hand, brushing grey across my white skin. I let it remain there because moving at all meant admitting that I was part of this scene, that I couldn't just be a spectator, just a stranger in the audience watching him.

His lips pressed so genuinely, so perfectly around the cigarette, like that space at the corner of his mouth where it curved up in an almost-constant unintentional smirk was made specifically for it to fit there. He expelled the smoke with a hum that sounded a lot like defeat or maybe just disinterest, and turned his eyes on me, making it impossible for me to pretend my invisibility and lack of participation. They were the color of coffee, the kind you get in cheap diners, that looks like it's been sitting on the burner too long, and is just a little too bitter to save with sugar and creamer, so you pour so much of both into it that it really seizes to taste like coffee at all.

He smiled. I flinched. "It's been a long day." If his eyes were like coffee, his voice reminded me of a cup of cocoa I had once in Paris, rich and smooth and almost sinful to partake of.

I nodded. I felt like a member of some great audience. He was narrating, not just to me, but to the world. If I spoke, I don't think he'd even have heard me. I was that insignificant in the scheme of his greatness.

He twirled his diminishing Djarum Black between his fingers. He always had to have the best of everything: even those sickeningly sweet clove cigarettes that cost six dollars a pack. Still, it looked so elegant, stark, against his mouth. I couldn't imagine him smoking anything else. Nothing else suited him. Only the best.

"Hey." He was quiet, his face scrunched in an odd way as he tapped his cigarette onto my waiting hand. An ember came with it. I savored the burn. It held metaphors I liked. "Do you think love is real?"

It was such an odd question from a man who had girls constantly praying to be the one he said those three important words to, an odd question from a man who sang songs almost exclusively about love. I could only shrug. How was I supposed to respond? I didn't know myself.

His sigh was heavy, and left my shoulders sagging under its weight. "That seems to be the only answer I can get." He held his cigarette out to me.

I held it carefully between my finger and thumb, taking a long drag from it. It was sweet that way cloves always are, and left that tacky aftertaste tobacco always does. I touched my tongue to the end of it and found it already wet, tangy, the way I always imagined he tasted.

I heard his breath catch beside me, and looked over at him again. He was watching me, his eyes hungry. I offered the cigarette back to him. He pushed my hand down with his fingers on my wrist, leaving them there, cool and gentle, like a washcloth pressed to my forehead.

I said his name as softly as I could, because I didn't want him to hear it, not with the way he was looking at me, like I was scratching his back in just that place he couldn't reach, and then he leaned toward me, his head tilted at just that angle that when our mouths met, the sides of our noses pressed together.

And, as much as my mind could come up with any simile to describe anything, I couldn't think of one that did his kiss justice. It was like free-falling. It was like the steam that pools at the back of your throat when your food is too hot. It was like kicking your socks off under the covers to feel the cool sheets on your feet. It was like the way your palms always start sweating right as someone asks to hold your hand.

It was all I'd ever wanted of him, to kiss me, and now he was, as we sat on the balcony, his hands knotted in my hair, his mouth tasting like cloves and coffee, the cigarette between my fingers burning down to scorch my skin.

Every sensation I felt seemed to be ten times more intense. If I was the ant beneath that magnifying glass, I would've been long since dead.

The parting of our lips was emphasized by our heavy breathing. I felt asthmatic, and wondered vaguely if my inhaler still existed somewhere in our house. The pads of his fingers tapped once against my jaw, his eyes searching mine more openly than he ever had before. "How do you feel?"

"I don't know."

"Like you're in love?"

"Like an ashtray."

"That sounds bad."

"It's not."

"Are you sure?"

I nodded, settling back into my chair, sucking at the cigarette one more time before squelching it on my armrest and flicking it off the balcony. I was okay with being an ashtray, because there was beauty in even the remains of his fire.