

This is What Happened to Us
Anonymous, College of Arts and Science

This is the first time we spoke after six months of complete erasure.

Six months of a sharper and more biting silence that's typical of a breakup. Yes, erasure felt more fitting: an unmitigated refusal to acknowledge that the other person ever mattered, ever had a morsel of power over our hearts. On the rare (perhaps not rare enough) occasions we found ourselves in the same room, we were like shadows to one another, readily dismissed, something in the background, but still there and fully aware.

And yet, here you finally were, sitting across from me face-to-face after months of no eye contact. Your hair was tied up in a high bun I hadn't seen before; your perfume oozed lavender-sweetness like it always did.

The chairs and table were colored a faux-modern gray. We sat among the conversations of surrounding students, facing a sleek hardwood sign that read LOCAL JAVA, Vanderbilt University's very own coffee joint.

With your steaming, frothy cappuccino nestled in your cozy hands, you spoke.

"I'm probably going to have to go soon," you remarked right off the bat, your gaze careful not to meet mine, eyes darting and lost in a jumble of thoughts that weren't quite rooted in the present. To this day, I still have no idea if you actually had to leave. But I understood. And *soon* was enough for me.

"What's up? What have you been up to?" I asked.

We briefly touched on the highlights from the past half a year. For you, a sorority and a prestigious company offer had come into the picture. Your brother was still living his best life in the Northwest. For me, classes came easy and my friends were good. My plans for the next year were finally beginning to take shape. For us, like a dusted-over photograph finally getting cleaned, the picture of the person in front of us was clearing little by little.

We laughed. We sipped on our drinks. We slipped back into familiar patterns.

But as I navigated the complex emotions and sensitive edges of our conversation, it became clear that an opaque wall had built between us. We could make out the general features and outline of the person on the other side, but we no longer allowed each other to see everything.

And as we slowly but surely came to this realization, a lull crept in between us. The elephant in the room, daring us to get real, loomed over our heads. *Why did I ask to meet in the first place?*

We sat there, struggling to find more words and the right topics, the clock ticking down to *soon*.

I knew you weren't going to ask. If the past six months of living like a ghost were any indication, I knew you weren't going to be the first to say something, anything. And as our chat sputtered to a stammering crawl, I knew I would have to initiate.

"Um," I said, flustered. "I don't really know how to say this."

And so, I began.

* * *

Do you remember the day we broke it off?

I sat on the cold and hard linoleum floor of an orange-lit hotel bathroom as I peered into my phone's grainy screen, a shabby portal to where you were and what you were feeling, precariously held together by the Marriott Guest Wi-Fi. Summer had separated us halfway across the world. It was nighttime in Hong Kong, but the sun shone bright on your side.

"So that's it, then," I concluded, feigning indifference.

"I guess so," you conceded, your pixelated cheeks wet and red.

And that's how we ended things: cold and hard, with oceans and a fourteen-hour time difference between us.

Did you know? When chickens get their heads chopped off, they move around and flap their wings, seemingly unaware that what gave them life is already gone.

In the days afterward, I wandered Hong Kong in a foggy haze. The seafood night markets and ancient Buddha statues made this strange land an exciting, alien civilization, yes, but I didn't—couldn't—feel anything. Not wonder, delight, sorrow, or heartbreak. My soul, at its core, was sure of this: if one of the emotions cracked through my armor, all of them would come splintering through. And so, for a while, I flapped my wings and felt nothing.

The truth is, I was devastated.

* * *

Plop! Your ping pong ball landed square in my red Solo cup.

After months of tranquil summer silence, the campus suddenly bustled with the energy of incoherent intoxication. After months of tranquil summer silence, we suddenly found ourselves at opposite ends of the pong table.

The watered-down, wheaty taste of Natural Light seeped past my front teeth. The air reeked of marijuana, cigarette smoke, and Taaka exchanging hands, passed around by our friends eager to celebrate new beginnings.

Plop-SPLOOSH! My ball knocked one of your cups over. More than a few times, I darted my eyes and tried to find yours, tried to find a place where I could ease the tension. But you never made space for me.

Plop! We continued like this, testing and checking the other's limits, but there was no real competition. I left in a fake hurry to an imaginary prior obligation. I could no longer stand to see you like that, dismissing me and what we had like we never existed in the first place.

Later that night, I would punch my hardwood furniture and howl as I wondered aloud how exactly I became the biggest stranger in a room full of people I introduced you to.

I couldn't believe you had erased me.

* * *

I started looking for a distraction.

"This is so cool," Sam said, looking out at the glittery Nashville skyline.

Sam came a couple of months after you and I broke up. Her brunette, shoulder-length hair bobbed up and down as she moved about, her white crop top and light-washed jeans tightly hugging her curves.

She was cute. She was a new beginning. And we were on our first date.

"I can't believe you've never been up here," I teased. "It's a Vandy classic."

With the bright lights of the city behind us, she rolled her eyes at me. The wind—brisk and chilly at the turn of autumn—carried the sounds of a rowdy Broadway in the distance. We decided to lay down there, atop the concrete roof of a building we snuck onto, gazing out into the starry night.

I pointed to another roof nearby. "Over there is the university helicopter pad, so like, police officers are always walking around randomly," I said.

"Uh-huh," she replied, as she got on top of me and pressed her warm lips against mine.

As passion grew and our hands explored, I thanked God that this girl didn't know: this roof was where it all began for you and me, too. Could you blame me? I was looking for something, anything, to soothe the gaping gash in my heart.

With her tongue in my mouth, my heart felt twisted and torn between what I wanted and what I knew was good for me. Like I had decided to give into the sweet, hedonistic pleasure of picking at a wound just beginning to scab, despite knowing more pain would come later.

“Do you want to come back to my place?” she asked.

Though I knew I would never find you, I was looking for you in other people.

* * *

I shifted and fidgeted in my seat. Therapy after four years felt like dangerous territory.

Dr. Cooper tried to make me as comfortable as possible with each session, fully accustomed to the cathartic magic between his office walls. He sat across from me, his hands draped over his tawny-brown armchair, a tissue box strategically placed on the glass coffee table between us.

“Well,” he said, “if you’re open to it, how about we do a roleplaying activity?”

I perked up. This Oxford-educated, big-boned fifty-year-old man, with his graying goatee and ashy knuckles, was offering to roleplay you. “Let’s have a conversation,” he prodded.

And as we continued to chat, a free flow of regret and guilt streaming down my cheeks, hidden pieces from the puzzle of our final months together were finally clicking.

The truth is, Amanda, I was too insecure about who I was to see that you genuinely cared about me. Coming from a childhood of broken homes and stepparents, I questioned your every show of affection, however sincere, however pure.

I didn’t want you to see the scared boy in me. So, I pulled away.

But you, sensing my distance and deathly afraid of being abandoned yet again—the first time by your father, and this time by your boyfriend—started drifting without me noticing. Like a balloon escaping my hands, I didn’t reach for you in time to bring you back to grounded love.

I was completely caught in my own world of hurt. I didn’t realize—no, I chose to ignore—the fact that I was hurting you, too.

I’m sorry.

On that night sitting in my hotel bathroom in Hong Kong, there was more than just time and distance keeping us apart. Our hearts, no matter how hard they reached, were held back by fear and weighed down by unresolved histories. Like two porcupines trying to get close, our thorns stabbed at each other. We hadn’t learned, hadn’t grown enough to put our guards down.

But it takes two people to tell this kind of story. I only know my side of it. And this entire year—walking past each other on campus with our subtle head nods, acknowledging a time before we became strangers, again—I wondered how things looked from where you stood.

So I wanted to ask you.

Is this what happened to us?

* * *

Of course, I didn't say any of this to you.

With so many months gone by and my impending graduation on the horizon, it seemed like I would only be grasping for answers from a time that had already slipped through my fingers. So we stayed on the surface, careful to not venture deeper into uncharted emotional waters. Seeing that you were doing well was the only information I needed.

I raised my nearly empty drink to my lips. Indeed, our time together was up.

I told you how grateful I was to have gotten to know you, despite how things turned out.

The corners of your mouth crinkled. "That makes me really happy," you said.

And as we said our goodbyes and walked away from the coffee shop, blissfully unaware that this would be the last time we spoke before COVID-19 took over the world and whisked us back home, a journal entry from many months ago flashed before my eyes.

September 16, 2019

I tried to work it out with my therapist today (I've been going to therapy, by the way). I told him the truth. I really miss our friendship. I just want things to be normal again so that we can just talk to each other as people and good friends, but I suppose it's just not realistic.

My therapist—believe it or not—walked me through a roleplaying conversation today. I spilled everything I wanted to say to you. He revealed everything you could possibly think about me.

My heart aches as I write this entry: a letter that will likely never be read by your eyes. A letter that serves as a substitute for a proper closure of this chapter. A letter that, although you will never read it, I hope the universe transmits to you its message and intentions.

Amanda Lee.

I really do hope the best for you and your time at Vanderbilt.

I want you to be really, really happy.

I really did care about you. A lot.