

His Love Story

The smell of coffee circles lazily through the cafe as the early morning sun flows through the wide glass windows down onto the caramel wood boards. As the daily college students trickle in, light chatter accompanies the soft lofi music. Vicent, an undergraduate working at the campus cafe, yawns as he reaches for a pitcher of milk and tilts it over the latte.

Tip it, wiggle, pull back, done. He sets the completed latte on a coaster plate.

"What are you doing?"

It was the early spring of senior year in high school, and Vicent was reading at a park in the shade of a tree. There was a runner who Vicent had once seen come through the park. Lightly jogging to a stop at a bag by the bench, the runner would scoop up a water bottle, tipping it so far that the water would run down his neck and blend into the sweat at his collarbone. Since then, Vicent started reading outside, silently hoping to see the runner again.

That day, the runner stopped, leaned against the tree Vicent sat at.

Vicent cocked his head to one side, a sly smile slid from his lips, "What's your name?"

"Tyler," Vicent reads the name on the ordered latte.

The name once brought warmth to his cheeks; the summer air, warm and fuzzy, filled with a chlorine smell, sweat, and adrenaline. Now, it is hollow and empty, like a cherry pit falling in an empty stomach. Vicent hands the mug to Tyler, who stands with a group of his cross country teammates; stoic, athletic, and intimidating. There are no words exchanged, no eye contact, no smiles. Vicent swallows thickly, turns sharply from Tyler, and begins the next order.

We can't be seen together, Tyler's new terms once he started hanging out with the athletes.

Vicent presses the button on the coffee machine and watches the dark brown liquid pour into another mug. He squeezes his eyes closed and lets out a long sigh.

"Everything okay?" His friend and fellow worker, Rosaline asks.

She looks up at him with worried, knitted eyebrows and soft chocolate eyes. Vicent forces a weak smile. Rosaline is far too sweet and caring, always looking out for others and making sure they're okay. She doesn't know about Vicent and Tyler -- nobody knows about the two of them, nobody ever has, and nobody ever will.

"Yeah, I just..." he wonders how miserable he must look, "have a headache."

Taking up the milk pitcher again, he makes a heart and bites his lip. His own heart is heavy and pained; desperately, he wants Tyler to look at him again. *Just a smile.*

"So you go to GDS?" Tyler asked.

Vicent nodded, his cheeks were flushed, and he could barely contain his smile. It was his first date with someone he was interested in. Ever since their first encounter, they kept meeting up at the park until Tyler asked him if he wanted to go downtown that morning. The following afternoon, they sat together on a bench eating ice cream. Silently, Vicent felt like cheering loudly and jumping up and down. His first date felt surreal. Everything went smoothly; things were comfortable between them. It was almost too good to be true.

"Hey, what flavor did you get again?" Tyler smirked.

Vicent's eyes widened as he realized his ice cream was in danger. Before he could react, Tyler had reached over, taking a bite out of his lavender honey ice cream. The spring

temperature was cool, but Vicent was burning. From his neck to the tip of his ears, heat imprinted itself on his face.

Tyler held up his own Thai tea ice cream, licking the purple from his lips, “You can try mine too.”

Everything has changed. Vicent remembers the time he walked the campus with Tyler’s paths memorized. At the beginning of their freshman year, the two had planned out routes between classes for them to meet. Now, Vicent walks a different way. His heart pounds against his chest, wishing for him to turn the other way where he could cross paths with Tyler. *But he won't talk to me.*

At first, crossing paths was romantic; Vicent could slip behind Tyler and surprise him, placing his arms on Tyler’s shoulder and cheek to his hair. It was brief before Tyler started to shrug him off, quickening his pace, and hiding whenever he saw anyone nearby.

Vicent’s shoulders sag. If Tyler could see him, would he ask what was wrong?

He would be too concerned about everyone else to even approach me. Vicent's eyes fall to the ground, and his worn-down converses take slower and slower steps until they stop.

In the back of his mind, he wants to be free of this prolonged heartache. Tyler is already out of his life.

No talking, no texting -- nothing. Vicent takes in a shaky breath; his fists are clenched. He wants to cry. He needs to end this.

The restaurant Tyler chose was a simple family restaurant; nothing fancy, but it was perfect. Vicent arrived with Tyler; their fingers were loosely entangled. The waiter gestured the

two to a corner table with a music player and a window view out to the parking lot. Tyler scooted in the seat across Vicent and leaned in.

“That waiter definitely gave us a suspicious look,” he whispered.

Vicent gave a smile in response, squeezing Tyler’s hand, “It’s okay.”

Maybe that was the first time Vicent had seen Tyler self-conscious about the two of them. Previous dates had consisted of limited public affection, mainly because it was both their first relationship. They had gone to libraries to study, drove to Starbucks, and hiked on trails; sharing quick kisses, touches, and smiles. At the restaurant, Tyler’s hands became sweaty and clammy. The more people who walked by, the tighter he held Vicent’s hand. His smile gave way to lip-biting and unease.

His phone lights up Tyler’s chat on iMessage; they still exchange occasional messages. Late in Vicent’s dorm, his roommate is silently studying at his desk across the room while Vicent lies in bed, back slouched over his pillow. He doesn’t text anything tonight. Instead, he stares at his phone as if he could send a telepathic message to Tyler.

The room seems more empty than usual. It is not the silence between roommates; Vicent doesn’t mind that the only sound he hears is the occasional flipping of pages and the pencil pressing on paper. He just feels alone. The small room filled with nothing but beds and desks has become a void that longs to be filled-- or maybe the void isn't the space he’s in, maybe it's his heart.

“Can we talk?” He types.

The ‘read’ message pops up instantly. Vicent’s heart jumps, *Oh god, he saw it.*

It felt dreadful. He cringes at the sight of his read message. His roommate gives him a look of worry when Vicent lets out an exasperated sigh. His phone vibrates. He takes in a sharp breath before he looks.

It was the heat of the summer. Vicent pushes his hands through the water, twisting and spreading his arms like wings. Kicking his legs together, he pushed himself through the clear pool water. He crashed straight into Tyler's stomach. Breaking the surface, he couldn't help laughing as Tyler buckled down and dipped beneath the surface. But soon, a hand jerked him down as well.

The summer before they went to college felt like a dream. Tyler felt like a dream. Vicent opened his eyes, ignoring the sting and seeing Tyler grinning back at him. Vicent brought his forehead to Tyler's. At the time, he was confident that Tyler was the love of his life. He loved the wisps of light brown hair that floated free in the water; the twinkling blue eyes that gleamed at him; that goofy, lop-sided smile; the toned arms that reached towards him-- he loved Tyler. That moment felt magical. He wished they never had to go back to the surface, back to reality.

Vicent grabs his backpack from the locker room of the cafe and walks out to where Tyler is waiting. They make eye contact. Neither of them smiles. They stopped doing that a long time ago. Vicent shoves his sweaty hands in his pockets.

“Wanna grab a seat?” Tyler’s voice is low and distant. His eyes slide from Vicent’s and scan the cafe.

“Sure, Rosaline will come over with a drink. I already ordered for you.” Vicent says, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

They sit in the corner of the cafe across from the entrance. Vicent looks down at the table. It was a polished mahogany wood. Other than the scratches from computers and numerous cups of coffee, it was smooth and in good condition. Tyler shifts uncomfortably. The air feels tense, and Vicent can barely breathe. He doesn't know when he started to feel anxious with Tyler. All that fills his head are the memories, and the shell of his first love that appears before him. Tyler's confident disposition has shriveled into a stoic, brick wall. They stay quiet for several minutes. Rosaline brings the coffee over, placing the mugs on either end of the table.

"Enjoy," She says politely, her outgoing demeanor hushed into a tense quiet.

Tyler mumbles his thanks. She leaves the two alone.

"I love you," Tyler whispered.

It was midnight, a month into college. The only light in the room was the lamp on Vicent's bedside table. It radiated a soft glow. The rest of the room was dark, but it was comforting. Tyler hummed a soft melody as he stroked Vicent's hair. Laying beside Tyler in the small bedroom, Vicent fell asleep to Tyler's voice and the comfort that, right then and there, they were alone together.

"Are you okay?" Tyler finally manages to ask.

Vicent makes a poor attempt to blink away his tears. He knows what he needs to do, but a pounding pain throbs in his heart. He nearly chokes on his breath. A familiar tanned, calloused hand reaches across the table to him. Vicent meets Tyler's hand and does nothing but lie his hand on top. He misses the warmth.

"I'm sorry," Vicent starts.

“I should be the one who should be sorry,” Tyler interrupts quietly, but his sound echoes clear in Vicent’s ears, “I never meant to hurt you.”

Tyler tilts his head lower to make eye contact. Tears fall when Vicent looks into the warm, ocean blue eyes he first fell in love with. Tyler’s own eyes were brimmed red, eyes sagging, as if he knew what Vicent meant when he texted last night. His tears don’t fall like Vicent’s, but they sit there, the pain flickering across his face.

“I...” Vicent bites his lip, unable to form the words that hurt him the most.

“I’m trying to get better. I still want to try-” Tyler says.

“But it’s too late, isn’t it?” Vicent blurts out.

He inhales sharply, as if it were Tyler who spoke those words. Tyler immediately shuts his mouth, looking down in guilt. His hand curls into a tight fist. The soft overhead light of the cafe reflects off the tears that trickle down his cheeks.

“I’m sorry,” Tyler chokes out, his voice breaking, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry...”

Vicent can’t look at Tyler anymore. There is nothing in the world that he wants more than to start over, to try again, and for things to go how they were before. He squeezes Tyler’s hand weakly and drags his tall frame. It feels agonizing. He’s not ready to leave.

“I’m sorry too,” Vicent says.

His words are true, but it still hurts. Vicent stands and pushes his chair back. His heart screams at him, begging him to stay, shaking his entire body. Its cries throb through his veins. Tears block his vision until he can’t see.

It claws at his chest, crying and sobbing, *but I can’t do this anymore.*

He walks out of the cafe.

And he lets go.