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Am I a romantic masochist?

The best pain I'd ever known was loving him, knowing he couldn't possibly love me back.

I vividly remember the day we met. It was the first day of ninth grade. He sat near me in our first period English class. They say you'll know when you fall in love, and I was sure I knew. Nothing could convince my stubborn self otherwise.

Falling in love with my high school sweetheart was the cliché I wanted, but it all ended before it even began.

As it turned out, he was straight. Everything that had led to that promising apex of glory came crashing down before me. If I had known what was to come, I would've done some damage control. But I was young and naive. I was lonely. I was in the closet. The prospect of him, no matter how improbable, was what I needed to fill the void of loneliness boiling deep inside of me.

In the end, I set myself up for heartbreak. I clung to hypotheticals: What if I still have a chance? What if I'm just not good enough for him? What if, despite all of the signs suggesting otherwise, he really is gay?

I didn't want to accept that the pain I felt was simply a manifestation of my own internal struggle, my own attachment issues. So I blamed it all on my environment. Virginia was the reason I couldn't find love, and nothing could convince my stubborn self otherwise.

I thought that in moving to California, a place with a queer-friendly community, I would be granted a golden ticket into Willy Wonka's factory of unconditional love. I could finally put all of this unrequited nonsense behind me. There would be plenty of other gay people in the dating pool; I wouldn't need to chase the unattainable anymore.

I thought that flying away to this supposed "liberal paradise" would alleviate all of my insecurities. I fell in love with the idea of a place where I could hold my boyfriend's hand in public without feeling the piercing pang of a stranger's glare on the back of my head. I fell in love with the idea of a place where I could love someone in the same way my parents love each other.

But the harsh reality is that as a gay man, the real struggle for acceptance comes from within. No amount of liberal politics can make me feel comfortable holding my boyfriend's hand in public. No amount of liberal politics can bring a heterosexual dynamic to a homosexual relationship. At the end of the day, I need to find a way to overcome my own insecurities before I can love another man.

This leaves me with one self-evident truth: I'm the reason I can't find love, and nothing can convince my stubborn self otherwise.

My love language is self-sabotage, and it always seems to get the best of me.

The moment someone shows interest, I jump ship. In January, I began dating someone who treated me right. When all that I had ever known were red flags, his green flags seemed disconcerting. He would constantly invite me places, and I would view it as clinginess. I felt suffocated — not because he was too needy, but because I wasn't used to genuine reciprocated interest. Is this what love feels like? If so, why didn't I feel happy?

I'm painfully addicted to the heartbreak. Every time someone hurts me, it draws me in a little bit closer. Every time I feel like I'm getting somewhere, I mumble three lethal words that destroy everything. The mental anguish is a drug, and I can't stop using. I've gotten too good at moving on.

I fall in love with ideas, and they always blow up in my face. My relationships ignite quickly and burn out the moment I lose grip of the idealized images I create. My high school sweetheart was an idea; he doesn't exist. The California I envisioned was an idea; it doesn't exist. Maybe true love is just an idea; maybe it doesn't actually exist.

At times, this newfound self-awareness is more a burden than it is a blessing. Sometimes I get trapped in my own head, and my thoughts send me into an obsessive loop of paranoia. Sometimes the words just pour out, and mindlessness is my downfall.

That being said, self-awareness has also given me new direction. I know what the problem is, so now I can focus on digging up its roots, orienting my romantic future in a way that grounds me in my relationships and opens my heart to the possibility of healthy reciprocation.

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Only time will tell. But one thing is for sure: I've been running from my problems by moving left, and it's gotten me nowhere. I suppose it's time I take the right path for once.

Ryder Mawby writes the Monday column on his transition from the East to West Coast. Contact him at opinion@dailycal.org. LAST UPDATED: December 7, 2020