

Hidden

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I love you.

Three simple words echoed across time. Only it's not simple.

There are so many secret touches in dark rooms, hushed voices, stolen glances in dense crowds - love hidden in the gaps.

You sit in front of me, so close I could reach out and twist a strand of your hair. But your heart is miles away, out of reach. It's only when we're alone that your heart settles into my palm.

You don't look at me in class, you rarely go near me unless you have to. I understand. It's too risky. But I don't mind, I would rather have the teensy scraps you allow me than nothing at all.

The bell rings and everyone settles into their seats, inaudible chatter quieting. You toss your hair back and some of it brushes my nose. I want to grab onto it and hold it to my chest, want to inhale the sweet strawberry smell, want to rub the strands between my fingers until the feel of it is ingrained into my brain. But I don't.

When I walk past your desk at the end of the period you stand up, accidentally brush my arm with your arm and my whole body is engulfed in flames and I have to curl my hands into fists to stop from touching you. You glance at me, quickly, fleetingly, but I know you feel it too. I'll get a text from you next period when I'm sat next to Audrey and I'll have to twist the phone away to hide your name - which is not even your real name. You'll say *oh my god* and I'll say *i know* and you'll say *i wish i could touch you, come over tonight*. So I do.

There's a party tonight. You've texted me a hundred times. I try to match your energy, but I'm not excited to see you drunkenly stumble into guys and flirt with them while I sit on a stained couch nursing a beer.

I arrive in jeans and a tight fitting shirt, the cold nips at my bare arms. There's a guy asleep on the couch next to me, his head hung back unnaturally with drool dripping from the corner of his mouth. I still haven't spotted you. Until I do.

Your hair is draped down your back silkily, and there is so much of your stomach exposed I can't breathe right. Someone's hand is on your back, guiding you somewhere. Trying to shove his hands away, you stumble and slide out of his grasp before he can catch you. Grumbling, you stumble up the stairs. I follow you.

The bathroom door is unlocked.

"Occupied," You slur. The door shuts softly behind me and the world quiets. All I hear is your slow breaths and my wild heart.

"Baby," I whisper and you twist, tears leaking from the corners of your eyes. My hands are suddenly in your hair, my lips pressed against your head, our bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces.

"Oh my God," you whisper. Your nails dig into my back and the pain feels like heaven. I cannot talk. Everything about you is like a drug. Then you're pushing at my chest and telling me to leave.

"What?"

"If someone saw you come in, and they saw me come in-"

"-So I get you for two minutes?"

You turn around, glaring hard. "You think I want this? You think I enjoy talking to people, touching them, while you're right there?" I say nothing. We both stand there, holding our breath, waiting for something.

"It's just," My voice trembles as I talk. "When it's just us like this, the rest of the world, like, zeroes out. It's only us. We're the only people to exist."

You shut your eyes, creases appearing above your brow. You hold your hands out and I take them, absorbing your warmth.

"You are the only person to exist. There is no one else for me." You exhale. "But you have to go." Just like that, we're back to not existing in the same world.

I'm on the couch. You're in the arms of some random guy. The couch dips as someone sits next to me.

He says *hello, my name is Ryder, what's a pretty girl like you doing sitting alone? I think I've*

seen you in school, you don't have a drink, let me get you a drink. I drink the drink. Ryder gets me another. I drink that too, and the next one, and the next one. Soon I can't feel my toes. Then his hand is on my thigh and I go to push it away, but out of the corner of my eye I spot you with your lips latched onto someone's. I let his hand stay there. I let it creep further up. I let him slide his fingers through my hair and push his cold lips into mine. I let it all happen in the hope that you see.

I am not in my body. Since my kiss with Ryder, I feel like a stranger stuck in a skin that isn't my own. You still haven't messaged me back.

I walk through the crowded halls of my peers, my head tucked low.

"Hey," someone shouts. I pull my hood up over my head and continue walking.

"Hey!" Someone shouts again. I twist towards the sound. There you stand, leaning on the group of lockers behind you. Your friends stand beside you, busy on their phones. Some of them glance at you then glance at me. My heart is in my throat.

"I didn't take you for a slut." You say, face completely neutral. The hallway has fallen silent. No one breathes.

Slowly, my love for you has been curdling. With every moment you pretend I don't exist, with every conflicting word you say, the love that used to run so deep begins to drain from me. I turn sour.

"I don't want to do this. You're not worth it." No one else knows what I'm truly saying. But you do.

I walk away, pushing through the dense groups of people.

I'm starting to believe we are not made for each other. The secrecy of us used to be invigorating. I was your own private world. I don't want it anymore.

Something hits the glass of my window. I sit up in bed slowly, my heart rattling in my chest.

The window slips open and you crawl in, not saying a word. Then you're kissing me, scratching your nails against my scalp, scooping my hair out of the way to place two fingers on the pulse throbbing in my neck. You're whispering *I'm sorry, I'm sorry I was jealous, I wanted to make you understand how hurt I was.* Mumbling *it's okay*, I tug you to my bed. We lie together, bodies intertwined. You're the hands and I'm the gloves.

"I don't think we should do this anymore." I whisper so quietly, hoping you don't hear.

"Us?" Panic raises your voice an octave.

"No, hiding."

"People- people wouldn't approve."

"I don't care about other people. I want you."

"I can't do that. You know I can't."

The world stops spinning. I slip away from you, turning on my side. It's so cold over here.

"Then maybe we shouldn't do this anymore." I say.

"Hide?"

"Us. I don't want to be something you love only when it works for you. Only when no one else is around. I want to be loved all the time." You reach for me, touching my shoulder. I flinch. We know it's over.

The weight of the world settles into this very room, hovering over us. I hear you shuffle out of the bed and search for your clothes. You're crying. I don't want to comfort you.

"I'll call you."

"Don't. Please." And just like that, the weight of the world falls on us, crushing us into bits of bone and flesh and dead love.

Rain splatters on the concrete foot path and exposed heads. Hands shoot up to tug hoods over freshly styled hair, umbrellas are shaken out and whipped around. I stand still in the torrent of rain, letting it trickle down my cheeks like tears. Standing in the rain makes me feel alive. It makes me remember that I can feel. You hid me for so long that I forgot what it felt like to stand outside, drinking in the sun with my skin, feeling the tingle of my future beneath my hands.

Maybe one day in the future, everything will fall into place. Maybe we weren't supposed to be together then, maybe the world was telling us it wasn't right. But maybe I'll spot you in the corner of a coffee shop, nestled in your own world. You'll look up and every hurt will wash away like it never existed. We'll sit together and you'll whisper, *do you think you could love me again?*

I'll pause, take a shaky breath and whisper back, *I don't think I ever stopped.*