

Sophie
Clary

I. Daydreams

He tries, for a few minutes at least, to draw hearts that connect in a single flowing line, but the pencil stumbles. He tries starting in different places but ends up looping over old lines, making a mess of a squiggle. He wishes he weren't so clumsy with this, wishes he knew the secret. He writes, and wishes his writing were less clumsy, too.

My whole body hums when you're near.

The room is dark; dry, hot air blows from a vent below the headboard. He'd be listening to music if he trusted the thickness of the old walls, but he doesn't, so the only sounds are the tapping of his pencil and car engines leaking through the closed window. His mind isn't here, with the soft glow of the lamp, his clammy-cold toes, his itchy shirt tag on his neck, or the pencil gently pockmarking the paper.

Can I borrow a pen? He'd tried to act like he didn't care if she did or not. His heart had sunk when she found her own beneath a notebook. She was always shifting in the seat next to him, so he never quite knew what would be in the next test. Like her legs just couldn't decide whether to be crossed, or wide, or under her, or up on the insufficient chair.

He refocuses his eyes on the paper before him. He's turned to the end of his English class notebook, the pale blue lines on its mostly-empty pages too far apart because they were out of college ruled at the store. She had been doodling in class that day, drawing little chains of hearts without lifting her pen from the paper. Her notebook had narrow lines on one side of the paper and wide on the other, so you could pick which one to write on. She passes him a note with that simple request, folding it carelessly small and reaching out her hand to stow it in his without looking up. He takes a ring from his pocket and hooks it onto his pen. She looks at him, now, smiling – he can't picture her smile, can't quite unblur her face, but he likes the detail – and maybe they're the only people in the room.

My whole body hums when you're near.

It doesn't look right on the paper before him, not filling enough space between the gaping lines, the cardboard showing through, tinging the bleached sheet. Doesn't sound right, either, when he reads it. Despite the warmth blowing behind him, his fingertips and nose are cold. He can picture clearly that ring on her finger, her right hand, the side he sits on. He imagines her hand, her

whole arm so near him, and his left side is lighter with the half-memory. He stops tapping the pencil. It has left countless little graphite dots near the phrase that isn't right. He repeats the hearts, the note, the pen, the ring, the smile, images beyond the grasp of his mind, just out there in front of his forehead.

His eyes hurt with the strain of seeing. He lets them slide over the page and close. The lamplight lingers in the redness on the back of his eyelids. Maybe tomorrow night he'll know the right way to tell her. He'd tell her he likes the ring she always wears, the ring someone else gave her. He'd tell her he likes the shape of the hand that wears it. The chains of hearts that hand draws, without lifting her pen from the page.

II. 24 hours

“Do you think I should go out and check on her? She's been out there for almost an hour. She hasn't eaten anything.”

“It's early.”

Her back is to him as she stands at the sink, hands pink from warm water and red wine as she washes last night's dishes. “She's been singing that same line over again this whole time.”

“It's catchy. She probably doesn't remember the rest.”

“I wasn't saying –”

“Just let her be, okay?”

“You don't have to bite my head off for being concerned.” She places a sauce pan on the drying rack and a soap suds slips off the mottled metal. “Is Sophie up yet?”

“Haven't seen her.” He takes another plate from the dishwasher and stacks it on the counter, slowing it just as it hits the one below so that the knock barely produces a sound.

On the front porch, she stares at the hills. *20, 20, 24 hours to go, I wanna be sedated.* She has snatches of recollection of the rest of the song, but nothing she could string into lyrics. *20, 20, 24 hours to go, I wanna be sedated.* The clouds are moving fast, casting travelling shadows on the patchworked landscape below. She can't escape the feeling of home that wraps itself around her fuzzy mind. Tears form at the back of her eyes but can't make it to her cheeks. Only a candle

flame of anger, or certainty, or grief licks at her chest. *20, 20, 24 hours to go, I wanna be sedated.*

Sophie let the screen door go too soon and it clangs dully, wood frame on frame. She feels Sophie sit on the arm of the Adirondack chair and reaches her nearest hand up. Sophie takes it in both of hers, cradles it on her lap. The sleeve of her terrycloth robe gets caught in the clasp. She can feel Sophie's ring, the metal warming in her hand. She feels Sophie's gaze on her, and the tears at the back of her eyes seem to creep into the corners. She lets her head slip down, leaving the hills to be perfect without her watch. Her free hand scratches absently at the rough denim of her jeans.

They sit for a minute before Sophie crosses her legs. A flash of tenderness runs through her for her inability to sit one way for very long. An inkling of a smile pushes her lips wider. The water in the kitchen behind her turns off. Sophie looks back at the window and sees her girlfriend's mother retreat. She pulls a hand from her grasp and touches her downturned face, her thumb at the corner of her lips, the warm ring brushing her jawbone. *20, 20, 24 hours to go, I wanna be sedated.*

"You were up early. Hilary said you haven't eaten breakfast." She looks up. The words come naturally to her mind, but it's hard to push them through her throat, to ask her lips to form them.

"Do you love it here?" Sophie looks into her eyes, steady gaze and hand meant to soothe her. Her eyebrows dig a little into her forehead as she tries to fathom the question, the scene, the morning and the no breakfast.

"I love you. The hills are beautiful. They're big. So vastly empty." Now, she can't feel the twinge of annoyance, but it's there, tomorrow's comfort. No words come to her. No tears even. Sophie moves to sit in her lap, rests her head on her shoulder, her wet hair smelling like the shampoo that she's used for years. *20, 20, 24 hours to go, I wanna be sedated.* Her numb mind still presents the line like spare change from a vending machine. It's been years since she used a vending machine. She stares at the hills, but they aren't in focus. She feels the weight on her chest and legs and the longing for neither of them to ever need to stand up.

III. Dog person

She's thinking about how lovely this girl is in front of her. She can feel a burning in her chest watching her lick cinnamon sugar off her fingers. She's got cinnamon sugar dotted around her

lips, too, it'd be sweet to kiss her. Her lipstick has faded unevenly after eating dinner. Maybe she's looking too much at her lips. The girl lowers her hand to pick up another churro, and there's a small ring on her ring finger – but the wrong one – on her right hand. She asks about it.

Sophie looks at her. She likes the way she looks at her. She's always flicking her eyes around the room as if worried any object or person might notice and think she's staring. On their last date, their first date, she kept glancing at the television over Sophie's shoulder in the pub. Not because it was anything like as interesting as her, just to be polite. Looking at her is an indulgence, an intrusion. Sophie looks intently and singly, and her eyes at least are present.

“My father bought it for me when I was 12. I had asked him to and he told me to earn the money. When I had, I told him I wanted to go back and buy this ring, and he took the money and gave it to me. I didn't know he had bought it.”

“How did you get the money?”

“Our neighbor had a dog that needed looking after sometimes. A cocker spaniel, really *cute*.” She emphasizes this last word, makes it onomatopoeic.

“I don't like dogs.”

“Why not?”

“Cat person, I suppose. Cats look at you and they might be thinking about how to kill you. They like you on their terms. But dogs are just always there and they don't seem to have much self-respect.” She had made Sophie laugh. The few crystals of sugar on her lips catch light from the bottle-glass lamp, sparkling on a matte-red remnant of lipstick.

“Oh, cats are lovely, too. But a dog loves you on its terms, its terms just so happen to be loving you. And who could resist the way they look at you? Have you ever *met* a golden retriever?”

“Yes. They're very intent. Maybe I'm missing something.” Despite a girlhood fear of dogs, she believes she may indeed have been missing something.

“Maybe you are. Would you let me show you?” Sophie uncrosses her legs and leans onto the table a little, her hands clasped in front of her where her plate was, her necklace chain hanging off her chest.

“Show me what? I have met dogs.”

“Have you ever wanted to pet a stranger's dog?”

“I don’t know. I was afraid of them when I was little.”

“But you’re not now.” She shakes her head. “Then let me teach you how to obsess over dogs.”

The waiter brings a bill on a little metal tray, and a pen, which is longer and threatens to roll off if not for the thumb holding it. She feels a little panic in her belly and awkwardly tugs down on the zipper of the coat pocket behind her. She wants to say, “Let me pay”, wants Sophie to let her, wants the whole thing to be simple, but the zipper is caught and her cheeks get warm. She reaches over her other hand to make the fabric taut and when she’s got her wallet out, Sophie’s taken the little silver tray and let the pen roll off it. She pushes a credit card out and thinks she might say something, but Sophie looks up, and she’s already put a credit card on the tray. She smiles.

“Don’t be silly. You paid last time. I’ll get it.”

“On one condition.” Sophie tilts her head, and she feels flirtatious, knows this is smooth. “You let me take you to a film next week.”

“How about Sunday?”

“That works. I’ll text you.” And she will text her, will agonise for a few minutes over wording and timing, the too much and too soon. She’ll read an entire article in the *New Yorker* about the history of impeachment before sending it, just to make sure she’s got it right. She blinks and notices she’s looking back at her, holding that steady gaze, and feels the proximity of her fidgety feet under the table.