

Love Languages

One day you decide to stop counting down. It used to be so easy. You'd grit your teeth and remind yourself that you'll be in college in two years' time, counting backwards from an indefinite span 'till the day you set foot in an indefinite college every time your sister got under your skin. You've always been the kind of kid who thought, the more instruction, the better—equations were always easier to solve when there was only one variable; tutorials always easier to follow when the steps supplied a visual aid. But somehow, assigning a concrete quantity to the number of days you have left at home has made it harder.

Behind a slammed door, you open your browser and search up "how to be a better sister."

You type as loudly as you can but you can still hear her fuming in the other room. You scroll through the generic instructions— *step one: always be there for her!*— paired with photographs of picturesque white girls hugging beneath a cloudless sky. Somehow the supplementary visuals offer no clarification at all.

You close the tab and enter another link into the search bar. You have a better idea.

She glares at you when you enter the room, expression softening when she sees the laptop in your hand. Maybe she's hoping you'll let her play a few games.

You place your hand on her wrist and she yanks it away. "Stop that."

"I want you to take a test."

"But school just ended!"

You frame it as a personality test of some sort—another form of Meyers-Briggs, of Hogwarts houses, of "Which Disney princess are you most like," the quizzes you bonded over

filling out together when you were both young. Her scowl eases as she scrolls through the site you brought up.

"Love languages? I think mine is French."

"No, not *romance* languages— *love* languages. As in, how do you best show people your love?"

"Sounds stupid. What does that have anything to do with personality?"

"I don't know," you lie. "I'm just curious. It might be fun."

She scoffs, but grudgingly begins.

32%: Quality Time

"That was dumb," she says once she's done. You laugh and tell her that you agree. But you commit her results to memory and shuffle out of the room.

That evening, you pore over your library catalogue and place holds on the movies you used to watch together. You consider checking out more recent releases but nostalgia guides your search to your childhood favorites; memories, now corrupted, that you long to restore. She slips into your room in the middle of your search to plant herself on your swivel chair. "What'cha doing?" she asks, and begins opening and closing all of your drawers.

She rolls over to peer at your screen and you hastily open a new tab, pretending to check your email. She bugs you to open the messages that catch your eye.

Your throat seizes to snap at her like you always do; demand who gave her permission to go through your stuff but then you remember her top love language, remember every time you shoved her out of your room and slammed the door in her face and refused to speak with her for the rest of the day and you stop.

You let her look. Let her eventually get bored and return to the chair to chatter. The next day, you pick up the CDs from the library and come into her room, inviting her to join you at the TV downstairs.

Sometimes while watching movies together, you'd find yourselves drawn to the same pairs of characters. Big brother, little brother; big sister, little sister. There is always one scene that brings you nearly to tears every time.

The music is muted, voices quiet and vulnerable, but this is not a death scene or a funeral, this is a reconciliation. You can see the uncertain optimism in both of their faces. Sometimes they hug. Sometimes they don't, but they grin at each other in suggestion of one, locking eyes like a telepathic embrace.

You almost suggest replaying this clip but then close your mouth and let the movie play. She's focused on the screen as if awaiting the next action sequence, face giving no indication that she was moved. Rewinding right here would make her suspicious; imply that this most subtle scene touched you in some way, and god forbid she draw the connection between the film and how you feel about her.

You turn back to the screen to find it paused. You look around, confused, before seeing the remote in her hand.

"I like this part," she deadpans, and hits *rewind*. She starts the film at the beginning of the scene and you watch it again together. As if saying *I love you*. As if saying *I'm sorry*.

27%: Words of Affirmation

When the movies are over, you both return to your individual rooms in silence. You hear the hum of her sewing machine on the other side of the wall. She, in turn, can hear you typing. Years ago, you'd both be doing the same thing. You signed up for violin in fifth grade, so she

signed up for violin too; you discovered a new favorite book from the juvenile fiction shelf so she discovered it too. You don't remember when your paths began to diverge, only know now what is obvious. But sometimes, you still catch her listening to the song you'd mindlessly hummed the other day.

"See," you'd smirk, "I told you my songs were good."

There comes a point after the two of you are more grown up when you realize that she's better than you at something. But all your life you both had trained yourselves to believe that as the oldest, you're supposed to be the role model, the most experienced—you started playing piano before she did, and continued even after she'd quit. You'd been drawing (albeit with crayon) since before she was even born. Your parents had watched you grow up together; grown used watching her toddle on timid toes while you dashed headfirst into the wind.

After another half-hour of typing, you hear your parents reprimanding her through the wall.

"What do you do up here in your room all day? Come on, stop doing that, you're going to ruin your eyes."

She protests that *you* spend all day in your room, why don't your parents yell at you instead, but they tell her she's busy, she's writing, she's building practical, useful, résumé-polishing things and why can't you be more like your sister. Your hands curl over the keyboard. They think you are working, but today you're just indulging yourself by writing poems no one gets to read.

And you remember years ago when you learned to love writing that they reacted in the exact same way.

Your sister's second love language is words. You are a writer. Words should come easy for you, but it's only the wrong words that slide off your tongue like butter to rub like poison in her face.

When the hallway falls silent but for the sound of her seething, you knock on her door. She doesn't answer, but you enter anyways, just as she's always done with you.

Stashes of fabric and spools of thread litter the ground. But you don't come in to poke through her belongings; rather, you sit on the floor beside her as she steams.

Your elbows touch. She scoots away. Your mind churns as you try and you try to think up something to say, but you can't. All you can muster is, "that's pretty," as you gesture towards the beginnings of her latest project. You can't tell what it is but you tell her you like it anyways. She turns to the side and you get up to go. You spend the next hour on the Internet searching for suitable words of affirmation. *You're brilliant. You're talented. Hey, I just wanted to let you know exactly how much I appreciate you.* You rehearse them in your head, expecting them to ease out of your mouth like a river when you say them aloud, but when you finally do they clog up your gums like a dam.

23%: Acts of Service

"What were you trying to make last night?"

Her lips curl into a crooked smirk. "I thought you knew what it was."

"I said it was pretty. But I can do that without knowing."

"Aren't you supposed to know everything?"

She's still hurt. Still bitter about last night, confused as to why you came into her room to say nothing at all.

"I'm trying to sew a quilt. But I don't have enough fabric."

"It looked like you had a lot of fabric."

"Yeah, but not enough patterns. It's going to look ugly if I only have two patterns."

"Fair."

It is Tuesday. Your parents had taken Mom's car to drive to work together that morning, meaning that you had the whole day and your father's old Honda to yourself. On your phone, you pull up directions to the nearest crafts store and beckon your sister to join you. She rides shotgun for once.

"Where are we going?" she asks.

You drive her to Michael's. "Surprise."

While she scours the fabrics aisle, you make your way to the fine arts shelves, calculating the best way to ration your coupons to yield the most profitable purchase. There's a clearance on canvas so you decide, *why not?* and gather one package into your hands.

You're scouring the paint tubes, deliberating which colors to buy when she materializes at your side.

"How did you know I was here?" you ask.

She rolls her eyes. "This is a crafts store, and you hate most crafts. Where else would you be?"

"You know me too well."

She laughs and you lift your hand to her shoulder but she ducks away.

When you arrive at the checkout line, you pretend to be strangers so that you can pay at separate times. Your parents had taught you this trick when you were very young, splitting your shopping carts to get around the small text by the asterisk. *Only one coupon per purchase.* You hand your sister a twenty and allow her to stand first in line. When you're up to pay, the cashier

raises an eyebrow but doesn't say a word. You are sisters again once he hands you the receipt, supplies in arm and side-by-side and smiling.

16%: Gift Giving

It's been a month since movie night, a month since the craft store haul and you've hardly talked to your sister since. Ever since you gave her the fabrics she's been spending all her free time in her room. When you suggest watching another movie she tells you she's busy.

"What are you working on? Still the quilt?"

"Yeah."

"Wait, isn't it literally just stitching a bunch of squares together? What's taking so long?" She shoots you an impatient look, as if asking, *what do you know about quilting?* so you shut up.

You still haven't made use of the supplies you bought that night. The package of canvases, four six-by-six frames arranged in a single square foot, rests untouched on your desk. You don't know whether you'll ever go through them before college. Maybe you could just give it to your sister—though she was never really a painter, anyway—or maybe you could leave it to gather cobwebs until the next time you come home.

Like the canvases, Project Love Languages—as you've come to call it in your head—gathers cobwebs in the back of your memory. It was fun while it lasted but your sister's shoulder is icy as ever before. You check your calendar, swiping through the weeks on your phone.

There are twenty-six days before you leave for the fall semester. Tomorrow it will be twenty-five. And then twenty-four. The days inch by ever-so-slowly, though you still aren't sure whether you want them to tread faster or take a rest stop altogether.

You sigh and close the app before a notification appears.

You have a new memory

On this day three years ago—

Curious, you open it. And there's a picture of you and her, arm in arm and beaming in front of the cinema. A box of popcorn, half-finished, sits tucked into her left shoulder. Your eyes are still dreamy, slightly disoriented from having spent two hours in another world. You remember this film. It was one of the ones you re-watched in June.

Finally you know what to paint. You rip open the plastic, fingers becoming sticky with dust, and lay out the canvases on your desk.

Nineteen days later, you knock on your sister's bedroom door with a surprise.

2%: Physical Touch

She doesn't answer, but you let yourself in, just as she's always done with you. The lights are dim, sunset projected in elongated orange rectangles on the ground. The floor is still as cluttered as it's always been, and you step around the scattered spools and scraps of fabric to sit beside her in her bed. She lies atop the product of her summer's labor, a checkered spread of coral and teal and lavender, each square with a subtly varied pattern from the last.

"Hey," she says.

"Hey."

A beat.

"I have something for you."

She eyes the present in your hands. Gift-wrapping is the only craft you are good at. "I'll open it later."

"When's later?"

"Sometime."

"I go to college in a week, so it'd better be sometime soon."

You set the gift at the side of your pillow and lie down next to her, casting your eyes towards the ceiling. You wonder what she is thinking, what she is seeing up there in the lines on the wall.

Your sister's last love language is the one that had surprised you the most—not because of its rank; you'd assumed this one would be her least-preferred, but rather because of the percentage it had scraped up. With every other result evening out around one quarter, physical touch added up to only one tap of the shoulder. Maybe you'd expended all your touches pinching and shoving and scratching one another as children.

You let out a breath and gather a portion of the quilt in your fist. "It's pretty," you say. "When did you finish it?"

She pauses. "Just yesterday."

"You got any projects stacked up after this? Another quilt, maybe?"

"Nah. I'm free for the rest of the summer."

"Sounds good," you say.

"Hey. We should watch a movie tomorrow."

"Sounds good," you say.

"But this time, a new one. And we should do it in-theater."

"Sounds good."

She laughs. So do you. Then she rests her head against your chest, wrapping the quilt around herself like a makeshift hug. With the quilt padding her shoulders, she is as soft, as vulnerable as a cocoon—you wait for her to flinch, to tense up, for the softness to shatter and for your sister to sit up and tell you to leave, but she never does.

So, tentatively, you wrap one arm around her. For once she doesn't pull away.