

I'm Sorry about Son Lux

I was halfway up the stairs when I caught strains of something intense and tortured. I stopped and took a deep breath. He listened to Son Lux when he had something to say. Usually, it was something I didn't want to hear.

We'd gone to see them in concert once. It was before they were really anything, and the venue was smaller and stickier and darker than usual. It wasn't a dive bar but it may as well have been, and I stood in the back of the gallery while he swayed and moved up by the stage. It didn't start that way. When we got there, he bought our drinks and we hovered in the back of the GA section, his arm around my waist. But as the show wore on, he kept inching forward. His fingers on my hips slipped away and I don't think he even noticed I wasn't next to him anymore. I watched him for awhile, and then when I lost sight of him, I went upstairs to find a spot by a pillar I could lean against.

It isn't that I don't like Son Lux. I do. But you don't listen to their whole discography to set a light mood. You listen to Son Lux when you feel twisted up and you need something to help you untwist.

To be honest, I'd been finding him and Son Lux together a lot lately.

My key turned in the lock and stuck a little, per usual. I'd tried to fix it a few weeks ago, but when I got the W-40 and headed to the door, he called after me, No! You can't use that! Apparently it makes the lock worse over time, even if it helps initially. So I didn't. I thought he was going to take care of it, since he knew so much about locks all of the sudden, but the lock still stuck.

The hallway fell silent around me. Nothing but echoes and concrete as I gave the key a gentle wrench, but then the lock pulled free of its own accord and the door fell open, my keys dangling. He stood there, his hair a mussed shock of yellow. "Hey," I said. "What's going on?"

"What do you mean?" He moved to the side just slightly. I slid past him. His hand brushed at the small of my back, an answer to a question I didn't ask. He reached around the door and pulled my keys out, hanging them on the hook by his own and closing the door.

"You look like you just got out of bed." I set everything on the floor and began to take off my coat. It was spring – well, it was threatening to be spring – but we may as well still have been in February. The temperature was fine but the humidity was particularly unforgiving. There were buds on the trees and some little nubs of green popping up but I was freezing.

He shook his head. "It was a hard day."

I didn't say anything. I opened the closet door and grabbed a hanger to put my coat away. His was on the floor inside. I picked that up and gave it its own hanger. Maybe he *had* left the apartment. Closing the door, I bent to pick up my bags. I had my purse and my exercise bag. I tried to go to a yoga class at least every other day. I'd skipped it today – on second thought, I decided to leave that bag by the door. I could try again tomorrow. I set my purse on the table, ignoring the pile of mail covering most of its surface.

"Hey," he said, coming to me. His fingers came around my hips, starting at the small of my back and working slowly to my belly. My body responded as he linked his hands loosely below my belly button. "Let's go somewhere tonight."

I craned my neck up at him, and then gave up. "Why don't you just tell me whatever it is you need to say? I don't really want to play a game with you. I don't have the energy."

"What do you mean?"

"You were listening to Son Lux. I know what that means."

He rolled his eyes, pulling away from me as I turned to face him. "Geez, Em, can't anyone just listen to music around you without you reading into it and making a huge deal about it? Can't anybody just *live* around you without you writing out a whole plot in your head? God."

At one point, he would have said *let's go somewhere tonight*, and I would have said, *where* and we would have made a whole plan and gone on some kind of adventure to find the best ramen or maybe even driven up to the border, just to drive and listen and be together and see the place the country ended. We would have gotten home late and fallen asleep fast, my head on his chest and his hand in mine.

Sometimes the romance is the only valuable thing.

I laughed. "Ok. Cool. That's not what's happening. Glad I'm wrong." I moved out of the entry to our bedroom, where the bed was a mess. I made the bed every morning. Even if he was still in it, I made sure to pull the covers up on my side, set the pillows to rights. I didn't realize, when I moved in with him, that I was going to have to give up having a smooth bed to get into at night. I didn't realize then that he spent most of his time in his bed, waking or sleeping. He would live in his bed if he could.

I rerouted to make the bed now. I yanked the covers up on my side, moved to his, and did the same thing. He came to stand in the doorway. "What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" I said, more to the bed than him. I pressed out the wrinkles and grabbed the pillows. "You know I hate getting into a messy bed at night."

"Sorry." He turned to leave but didn't, leaned against the doorframe. "I'm sorry about Son Lux."

I finished the bed and moved to the closet, pulling off my clothes. I wanted to leave them in a pile on the floor, but I hated having to deal with things like that. Much better to put everything away when you take it off, no matter how tired or annoyed you are. I took a breath and folded my jeans and put them on the shelf, pulling my sweatpants off the hook where I kept my loungewear.

"I don't know what you want me to say." I settled my sweatshirt over my shoulders. "The last time – literally *every* time – you start talking about how you're not sure we should be together. So if that's what we need to talk about, fine. But if that's what you have to say, I'm packing right now. I can't live like this."

People say things like *I can't live like this* all the time. They say things like *this is unhealthy for me* and *something has to change*. When they say things like that, they don't know what they want. It's the worst kind of thing to say because you can't make any real plan from a statement like that – you just have to go. You can't make a plan from those phrases, and you can't get what you want because you don't know what you want anymore.

It's a bad place to be. I've heard each one of those phrases from him, usually accompanied by Son Lux. And every time, we've talked it through and I've tried to understand what isn't healthy, what needs to change, what he wants, what he needs. Then we settle for a little while until I come home, or I come into the room, or I borrow his car, and Son Lux is playing, the heavy loneliness of the impossible eventuality of life weighing down everything within a ten mile radius.

I asked my sister what she thought, the last time it happened. I told her what he said, and about the conversation and where we had landed. He just needed more of my time, he said then. Before that, it was that he didn't feel like I respected him. Before that, it was that a joke I'd made had insulted him and he couldn't be in another abusive relationship. Each time, I listened. We talked. I apologized for whatever it was I felt I could grow in.

At first I thought this was just how relationships were. You hurt each other in minor ways and then you tried to figure out how to not do it again. But that hadn't stopped him from listening to Son Lux and making up a reason I was actually bad for him.

"Look, Em. I love you. You know that. I don't see any reason why this can't work."

I went to the kitchen, opened the fridge. Looked for dinner. There wasn't much. I pulled out some Thai leftovers from a few days ago. I didn't bother to see if it was his or mine. I didn't care. "Why are you saying this?"

"Because I'm in love with you. I don't want you to be mad."

"Then trust me."

He said nothing. This was what it came down to, every time. I couldn't help myself, that I'd seen him and what he could be and hoped I could make a space where he could become that man. But it seemed that no matter what I did, no matter how gentle I was, he just...didn't want to. He didn't see it. When I told him what I saw in him, he seemed to be listening. But then a few days later, he would ask me where I'd been with an edge in his voice, or ask me why I didn't like him the way I used to.

I sighed. "I think I should move out." The words came out of my mouth and hung there, not unlike Son Lux, making decisions for everything around them. Had I really just said that?

"What?" His face wrinkled and then smoothed. "What do you mean?" He took a few steps toward me, stopped. "What?"

"I think –" I said the words again, measuring them with time the way I hadn't thought to measure so many things – "I should move out."

"That's ridiculous. Sometimes you are so unreasonable, you know that?"

I shook my head and opened the microwave to retrieve my dinner. "You only tell someone they are unreasonable when you don't understand and you don't want to try. If that's all you have to say right now, I'll take my food and start packing. I'm tired of having to prove myself to you."

He shifted his weight, one foot to the other. Crossed his arms. Uncrossed them. Ran a hand through his hair. He was balding in the back, early, and he was insecure about it, although he'd never come out and said anything. "Come on! That has nothing to do with this."

"Yeah. It does. You're always looking for ways I've failed you. I'm tired of being told I'm neurotic, or unreasonable, or whatever. I'm tired of wondering if you actually understand me or if you think it's fun to try and figure me out but only when it suits you. I'm a person, Clover, not a computer program."

"This is stupid. You're just mad because I was playing Son Lux. You're making a huge deal out of nothing. It's a *song*, Em. Come on."

"Fine." I shook my head. "I told you the last time this happened that it hurt me to have this keep coming up. I need you to grow, and you don't want to. You keep putting the onus on me to change, and I've tried. And I have! I wouldn't be living with you if that weren't the case. I put so many things aside to be with you. But I think you don't really want me here."

He started to speak, and his voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "That's not true."

I shrugged. "Fine. What do you want me to say?" And then I said it, one of those phrases. "I can't do this anymore. Whatever *this* is, that has you questioning

me and then telling me I'm making up stories. I can't." It felt like a relief, to admit my weakness. And then I realized that I couldn't keep carrying it the way I had.

*

It didn't take long to move my things. I went back to my parents' house, which wasn't ideal, but that felt like a relief too, for a few days, anyway, until my dad started ordering me into the kitchen to chop onions and garlic and peppers and called me his sous chef and my mom left me lists of what needed to be done in the yard.

I waited to hear from him. We'd been together for three years. He'd always said he wanted to marry me. That was the only reason I'd agreed to move in with him. I never thought I would live with someone without marrying him first, but the way he posed the question – like it would be fun – and the way we were when he asked me – it seemed like a gift and an adventure, to live with him, together – I bent myself in a way I didn't think I could or wanted to. I didn't know yet if I regretted it.

Days and weeks. Nothing. He texted me once to ask how I was, but that was it. He didn't ask to talk, he didn't call to see if we could follow up. I wanted him to fight for me the way I had fought for him. But he just didn't seem to want to. And I was tired of fighting.

I found an apartment six weeks later, and moved myself and my new plant. My parents helped and said they would miss having me in the house. I smiled and agreed while I waited for them to leave. I didn't realize how quiet it was until they left. I made dinner in the small beige kitchen and watched my plant as it breathed my carbon dioxide.

After awhile, I put on Son Lux. I wanted it to play loud all around me, but now I had neighbors and thin walls again. I put on my headphones and let it play at random, and I cried for the loss of something that had never been mine to begin with.