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Can You Hear What I See?

By Anihime

In a silent world, sounds are like vibrations. Every step, every breath, every note vibrates around me. It's subtle enough to let me know there's something close without being overwhelming. This is how it felt to me since birth.

Textbooks clattered on the desk, rattling my own. Students open and close their mouth in conversation, but it's not directed towards me. I stared at the whiteboard, then glanced at the interpreter, their hands moving in fluid motion.

Lessons are over for today. they sign.

I nod, watching the other students leave the classroom, books and bags in hand. I follow suit, careful not to scrape the ground as I gathered my things and stood from the desk. Gentle vibrations this time, no one paid any attention to it.

Good.

It was the last class of the day, hallways crowded as usual. Students made their way to lockers, mouths moving in tandem with their movements. Plans for the weekend, complaints

about homework. Their expressions and body language told me everything I needed to know about high school life and the typical topics surrounding it.

Finding my locker wasn't difficult. It was just around the corner from the math classroom and next door to the heavy vibrations of the music room. After school practice was in session.

I opened my locker, ignoring the pulsing vibrations of nearby lockers opening and closing, placing my textbooks inside and rummage through my jacket for my phone. It vibrated the moment I reached into the soft pockets.

Six text messages sent between five minute intervals, all from one person.

Neil Brighton.

A smile spreads across my face, excitement flourishing within me. Every message Neil sent asked me where I was, growing more impatient with each one. I message back, letting him know I was heading outside. Quick as a flash, he sent another message:

We need to talk.

I didn't pay it any mind. Neil was direct when texting. He probably needs confirmation on our date this weekend. That's what it usually meant whenever he needed to talk.

I make my way to our usual spot behind the school, under the tree near the track field where the vibrations were minimal and calm. Neil was there, dressed in red plaid and tight-fitting jeans, back resting against the trunk.

I waved, but he didn't wave back. His mind was elsewhere, focusing on the new fallen leaves instead. By now, I'm used to this.

Neil turned to me when I approached him, each step I made picked up soft vibrations of the leaves that fell. His smile was small as he waved to me. His hands moved in awkward motions, hesitating mid-sign. Then he turned away.

This change in attitude was foreign to me. Thinking back on it, he had been acting distant lately, occasionally snapping.

I turn his face back to me. He seemed unsure, struggling with his words. Then, he held up his hands to sign.

I need a break. he signed.

My heart sank. Was this what he wanted to talk about?

Why? I signed back. *Did I do something wrong?*

Neil shook his head.

I fumbled with my hand signs, practically begging for an explanation. We were doing fine before now. This Saturday was going to be our half-year anniversary. Why the sudden change?

I don't need to explain myself to you.

Neil glared.

I glared back. *What's your problem, Neil?* I signed. *If you have an issue with our relationship now, then you owe me a—*

Neil grabbed my wrists, his glare cold. No hand signs this time, just the movement of his lips.

“Just shut up and leave me alone, okay?”

With that, he walked off. The once subtle vibrations of crunching leaves now felt like pounding drums.

###

Another school day came and went, two days before the weekend started. I just sat in the classroom during lunch, picking at the homemade cookies my mom made for dessert. She tended

to do that while leaving little notes in my lunch bag almost as if she was ignoring the fact that her little boy was now a teenager on purpose. I rolled my eyes and handed one of the cookies to my friend Elise, who sat at the desk next to me. The cafeteria had many disruptive vibrations that were too much to handle at times; the classroom had steady vibrations that put me at ease, hence why I enjoyed my lunch hours here instead.

Elise kept me company often. We grew up in the same neighborhood and have been going to the same schools since preschool, so we shared almost everything. I enjoyed her company, but right now I was in a foul mood.

Elise was quick to pick up on my frustration as she tapped my shoulder and signed, *Everything okay?*

I shook my head.

Elise swallowed her bite of egg sandwich to properly enunciate her words as she signed.

You and Neil were practically avoiding each other this morning, she signed.

I sighed, then recounted what happened. Elise kept rapt attention on my hands until I reached the end.

Neil has been acting strange lately, I signed. *Now he wants a break, and I don't know why.*

Elise mulled it over, her brows knit together in a peculiar fashion.

Maybe it's because he's moving soon?

My eyes widened, the vibrations from accidentally kicking the desk in front of me followed by the pain that shot up my leg reverberating through me. Neil was moving? Why didn't he say so? How long had he known this?

"It's just a guess, though!" said Elise, sign forgotten.

Still it's no reason to want a break from our relationship.

"True."

I sigh once more, letting the soft vibration roll off me. *If it's true*, I signed. *I want to at least let him know that I love him before he leaves.*

Elise drummed her fingers on the desk, other hand picking at the hem of her skirt. *What if you get him a goodbye gift? Most couples buy gifts, right?*

I nodded.

Elise smiled. "Then what are we waiting for?" she said. "Let's go shopping!"

I smile, then pull out a pen and paper to write a list of ideas. If I want to give something to Neil, I need to make sure it's something special.

###

The school day couldn't have ended any faster. With my gift ideas ready and a plan in motion, Elise and I made our way to the Fashion Valley mall. Quite busy around this time, enthusiastic vibrations of footsteps and idle chatter come over me as I take in the sights. I expected a full day of window shopping until we came across a shop on the list. What I didn't expect was to see Neil there as well.

He tensed up, directing a glare in Elise's direction as we exited her car. I glare at her as well. That knowing smirk on her face told me one thing: we had been tricked.

"Guys, don't be like that," she said. "Whatever's going on between you two can wait. Let's just have fun today, okay?"

Elise was a bit too eager for us to hang out. Neither of us could object, but we weren't ready to discuss what happened yesterday either. How was I supposed to get a gift now?

Neil didn't say a word and stormed inside the building.

What were you thinking, Elise? I signed once Neil was a good distance away.

I know, I know, she signed back. *But we don't know when he's gonna move away, right? I figured we could have one last hang out before he goes.*

Somehow, I couldn't argue with that logic. *You owe me a smoothie if things don't work out.* I signed.

Elise nodded.

We caught up with Neil. He and I kept our distance from one another, and together we walked down the strip, browsing through the shops. The various clothing stores weren't enticing, the styles not to my nor Neil's tastes. I tried subtly getting input from Neil on what he preferred over clothes, but each time I tried, he brushed me off.

The same thing happened when we entered the department store. He avoided eye contact and tried to act like I don't exist. It also happened whenever I pointed out stores that he usually enjoyed browsing through- jewelry stores and Nordstrom, to name a few.

Elise tried to her best to ease the tension, but Neil wasn't making it easy on either of us. He brushed us off, talking only to Elise without interpreting their conversation. I couldn't help but feel excluded.

We walked through the mall for a while, window shopping and awkwardly keeping our distance with Elise in between us the whole time. This was getting us nowhere. Neil was avoiding me now. Did I make him that angry?

Before long, we passed by the craft store. On display in the window was a paint set marked at half price with an easel holding an autumn forest painting beside it. The craft was beautiful, each stroke meant for the canvas. This would be a great gift if I had the money to splurge on art supplies. I have too many as is.

A tap on the shoulder brought me back to my senses as I turn to face Elise.

She frowned, signing, *Distracted?*

I shrugged. *Just thinking, that's all.*

Elise pulled me away from the store, speaking to rest her hands. "I worry about you, you know?" she said.

Why's that?

"This is technically your first fight and you guys haven't talked it out once."

He needs time, I suppose.

Elise rolled her eyes.

"For what?"

I shrugged again.

"Doesn't it bother you that he's refusing to explain himself?" she asked.

Again, I shrugged.

Elise put a hand on my shoulder.

"Can you guys try to talk it out at least?" she asked. "To be honest, I'm worried about Neil too."

My eyebrow rose. *How come?*

Elise stared at me, expressing concern.

She then signed, *You haven't noticed?*

I gave it some thought. Neil had seemed anxious about something. He always seemed distracted nowadays; even today, he was bumping into walls and people without regarding his surroundings. Was it because he was moving or was there something else?

As we approached the food court, I scanned the crowd for Neil. Elise mentioned that he would be waiting for us here, but so far there was no sign of him. We split up to cover more ground. He wasn't in any of the lines nor was he seated at any of the tables. I didn't want to ask around without Elise's help and Neil couldn't have gotten far.

Unless he left—

A sudden bump jolted me out of my panic. I stumbled a few steps, the nearby table catching my fall. Harsh vibrations of someone hitting the ground followed by light clattering vibrations shook the table, drawing my attention to who bumped into me.

It was Neil, on his knees in pain, remnants of a hot caramel latte splattered on the ground. I rushed to him, careful not to slip on the mess, and helped him up. Instead of thanking me, he pushed me away.

He glared, half signing, half speaking.

You did that on purpose!

I glared back.

I was looking for you!

Neil scoffed. "Why bother?"

What's wrong with you?

"You're annoying me, that's what!"

I've had enough of Neil's attitude. It's one thing if he doesn't want to talk to me, but this is too much.

I signed, "*Why are you acting like this, Neil? Is it because you're moving?*"

Neil flinched, hesitating with his signs.

"Who told you?"

“Elise did.”

Neil said nothing. Signed nothing. He glanced around, then looked back at me.

“I just,” he said. “don’t want to do this anymore.”

Panic surged through me. He wasn’t suggesting we break up, was he?

What do you mean, Neil?

Neil hesitated again.

“Life has been hard lately,” he said. “I’m leaving soon. Everything will change when I come back and...”

He looked away, contemplating his words. His eyes were welling up as he turned back to me, struggling with his signs.

And I’m scared.

I approach him, guiding him away from the crowd.

“I’m scared of us not understanding each other,” said Neil. “Of how you’ll think of me. Of how different our lives will be.”

His hands stop signing, caressing my face as tears washed down his.

“I’m afraid I’ll forget you. I-I don’t want to lose you, Darien. I don’t.”

I wiped away his tears. How did I not realize just how anxious he was?

Pulling out my list, I folded it neatly in several sections. In between folds, I signed to Neil.

Even if things are different. Even if you forget me...

I finish folding the creases, placing the finished product in his hand.

I will never forget you. And you won’t lose me, ever. Because I’ll always be there for you, just as you are for me.

Neil looked in his hands, a small smile spreading. In his hands was a origami flower. He kissed my fingertips, tears continuing to fall. His shoulders shook as I held him close and didn't stop until Elise arrived.

We went home without buying anything.

###

It was Friday, one day away from the weekend. Things between Neil and I got better since our talk to the point where we walked to school together holding hands. Elise congratulated us on making up, nudging us both for a thank you for her intervention. We just rolled our eyes, happy as we could be.

We made plans to visit the beach over the weekend. We both enjoyed the beach, so we had no issues there. As I packed for the trip, I noticed that Neil becoming more pensive. He no longer pushed me away, but there was still some strange distance between us that I couldn't wrap my head around.

We worked things out, I reassured him things wouldn't change but the way he looked at me, continued ignoring me whenever I waved at him, the times he continued to get distracted over the smallest things, and the endless staring off into space. Were things really okay between us?

Neil reassured me that everything was fine, but I wasn't convinced. Maybe the weekend will help ease whatever tension we had.

###

By the weekend, Neil and I were ready for the beach. The ocean was cold considering the autumn season, but the gentle vibrations of the waves as they rolled to shore calmed my nerves.

Neil and I opted to walk along the shoreline instead. We held hands, signing our conversations from keeping in contact after he moves to simple small talk.

Things felt normal again.

The water washed over our bare feet; the sand squished between our toes. The vibrations of my laughter shook through me as well as Neil's. He swept me off my feet, nuzzling my forehead. I pulled him close for a kiss.

It was as if time stood still, nothing but us and the lingering vibrations. I tuned out the vibrations. Nothing could distract me from this moment.

As I pulled away, I noticed Neil giving me an odd glance. Confusion twisting into shock, his whole body shook.

Everything okay, babe? I signed.

No response.

I signed the question again.

No response.

Neil put me down, backing up a few steps. His hand shook as he tried to sign. *I have... to go now.*

What's wrong? I signed. *Talk to me!*

Neil held his hands up, shaking his head. Panic was evident in his expression. His hands kept repeating *I have to go.*

Before I could stop him, Neil turned and ran. After spending a whole day fighting and working hard to make it up to him, were we back to square one again? He didn't get far though as a beachgoer shoved past him, causing him to stumble over his steps and trip.

I rushed over to make sure he was okay.

Neil was on the ground, hands covering his face and body contorting in pain. His body was shaking even more now. I pulled his hands away from his face, tears stained his cheeks.

Neil, what happened? I signed.

He didn't sign back. Neil instead gripped my hands; I helped him up. Then he moved his hands up to my face. Fingers traced every inch of my skin, from my cheeks, lips, nose, chin, then finally my hair. The whole time, he didn't look me in the eye, his body continued to shake as more tears fell.

I was puzzled for a while, but then I really thought about it. When he said he was afraid of things changing...

Of losing me...

I finally understood what he meant.

Tears ran down my face as I held him tight, pressing a sign against his chest.

I love you.

That was how our date ended. In silence.

We stayed on that beach for a good hour before I helped him back to the parking lot. I tried to lighten the mood, pressing signs into his palm. Yet he remained quiet, neither speaking nor signing. What else could be said?

I texted Neil's parents, who arrived ten minutes later. Their car was packed with luggage, ready to move. As I help him into the car, we share one last kiss before the car drives off.

All that was left of our time together was the origami flower that now lay in my hands.