

SHE TASTES LIKE STRAWBERRIES

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I am aware of the clichés---all the innocence and sensuality that pop radio musicians love to write songs about. She is strawberry lip gloss and laughing gas and completely unaware that girls like her aren't supposed to go for people like me. I try not to think about it. She giggles and buries her face in my chest, a mess of golden curls, no concept of personal space or the passing of time. She has no idea. That's why I love her. That's why I dread her.

I don't like strawberries. They remind me of the kid I used to be. Twelve years old, so twitchy and anxious I had to be put under anesthesia just so the MRI machine could get a clear image of my inner mistakes. So scrawny, I was sixteen before the doctors could forgo the rubber mask and give me the needle. This was before I met her.

She kisses me and my stomach turns. Suddenly I'm twelve again, lying on a hospital bed with too many blankets in the anesthetic lab. A petite nurse wearing paw print scrubs speaks over the whirring of the machine, "Sorry, buddy. We just have strawberry today."

The yellow lights above me beg my eyes to close, but in my peripheral vision I see the nurse rubbing a tube of fruit lip balm into the mask. (It's supposed to conceal the chemical stench of the anesthetic alone, but it never does.)

"Your neck okay?"

"I'm fine."

"Okay then. Here we go."

The smell reaches my nose long before the mask does. An artificial, old Carmex kind of smell, like the pink paste they clean your teeth with at the dentist. A sickly sweet something that dulls your senses and pulls you under, sticking in your chest long after you wake up.

"Deep breaths."

My mom squeezes my hand, and I pretend to myself that I don't need her reassurance anymore. I hold my breath defiantly for as long as I can, but five seconds in I feel like I'm underwater. Mom's ring of red hair starts to fade into the ceiling. Ten, and the ringing in my ears rises to the volume of tinnitus after a long late-night concert. The atmosphere closes in on me,

suffocating. The drug takes over. Then, before I know it, the MRI is already done. I slowly wake up in a different bed, in a different part of the hospital, and I pray for popsicles that don't taste like strawberries.

My girlfriend loves strawberries. I even got her a box of the chocolate covered ones last Valentine's Day, our first together. ("Want one?" she asked. "I'm good," I said.)

But I haven't told her, and I don't know how.

She doesn't know about the sickly twelve year old who sat, and watched, and waited while their classmates competed in the weekly flag football tournament. The high school senior who had to silently slip away during Disney Grad Night to take a fourth round of pain pills while the others rode the roller coaster for the third time. The weakness in my legs and the cloudiness in my head, and how it's not just when she kisses me, it's every morning when I get out of bed and every night when I wait for the migraines to stop and the sleep to come. The annual MRIs, the neurologists, the surgery talks, my mom's file cabinet full of studies and clinical trials, or the chances of this scarcely-visible curve in my spine paralyzing me from the neck down.

But she is fruit lip gloss, and she is light---not the artificial lamplights above a hospital bed, but the sunshine streaming through an eight-AM classroom window, making those early mornings just a little more bearable. She is golden curls and laughter. She is ever-present, a blonde halo that traverses time and shines through my memories. And knowing nothing about me, the old me, the real me... she picked me first.

So I hold her close, breathe in the scent of her shampoo. (Rainwater and violets. I could learn to love violets.) She smiles into me, oblivious, innocent. I try not to think about the strawberries.