

Strawberry Vape

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Please note, this work includes content related to self-harm, partner violence, and substance use.

You say it tastes like me, that it subsides your cravings for my fruity Chapstick, that I'm why you do it. You call me a terrible influence and blow smoke in my face when I call you a liar. It's a sickly-sweet smell that consumes me like you consume me and then it's gone and there you are, right near my face. You taste like strawberries. You lick your lips. "You taste like strawberries."

I made a shortcake for my mother's birthday this year. She loved it so much she asked me for my recipe, so I copied one from the internet onto a piece of cardstock and gave it to her, pretending it was my own invention. I thought you'd like that. The whole time I was plagiarizing, I could feel your hand on my back, tracing lazy circles as you call me a fucking liar with the biggest smile on your face. I had to stop myself from turning around.

You stick one headphone in my ear and the cord forces us closer together. I wonder if it's intentional. You play Youth by Daughter, and you tell me it's about us. Loving you is my first act of self-destruction, but I don't care. I put a razor to skin, and you do the same, and we watch each other in an entirely silent but declarative act of mutual masturbation. I beg you to burn me. You tell me not yet.

I guessed the season must have changed because everyone was wearing coats, and my arms were covered in the evidence of a million geese trying to escape my body's binds and head south. Gooseflesh.

I wasn't even cold, though, or at least if I was, I couldn't feel it. This disjunction between myself and the weather used to scare me until I became certain that I would one day die from frostbite, and my unease was eschewed by a future set in concrete. I tried to think of something sad, begging myself to cry so I could wear frozen teardrops like costume jewelry on my cheeks, but all my melancholy got stuck low in my throat. I couldn't cry. It struck me that this, like my thermal ambivalence, should scare me, but I figured frostbite couldn't take too long to kill me at this rate, so there was really no reason to start feeling things again, let alone to figure out why the feeling had stopped in the first place.

"Let's trade shirts." You say it like a fact, like it's already happening, so I take my shirt off at two a.m. to make it true. This is how we work—I make you honest. I hold out my shirt, and I hand you myself. You put it on. You say the neck is too tight to be comfortable and rip it wider. I am torn open and bleeding all over you. You look down—"Sexy, huh?" I can see your bra. I nod. You ask me how your shirt feels, and I realize I haven't put it on. Once I do, your sweat sticks to my armpits, and I tell you it's comfortable. This is how we work—you make me a liar. Is it disappointment that flashes across your face? I don't know how to tell.

I needed to escape. I called an Uber at four p.m. on a Tuesday. I put in my mother's old address—the one to the house she bought before she had money.

I was stuck in an in-between state heading to an in-between place and the car smelled so good because it smelled like you. The driver took a hit from her vape and blew the smoke into the passenger seat. I am in love with you again, or perhaps always isn't the lie I'd thought it was. The windows were closed and the smoke wandered into the backseat, wrapping me in its embrace. I breathed deeply. It held me tighter. It forced its arms down my throat and invaded my lungs, and I couldn't move. It went deeper and filled my stomach, turning heavy and hot. I had to get out. "We're here." My mother's house. I stayed seated. "Turn around. Please. Go back."

You wear your hair long and it sways when you walk. You put it up, and your muscles flex with the motion, and the baby hairs that don't quite fit in the ponytail caress your neck, and I take it all in. I look down and the mood ring you bought me has changed from its usual deep blue to a bright green. I don't remember what this means, but I hide the ring immediately, terrified that you will see and you will know. I wonder if years will pass, and I will think of this moment—if I'll tell you about it or if the green will spread from the ring and cover my whole body. You are looking in the other direction, so I rip it off and break it in half. I stare at the pieces, and they are horrible. I feel myself start to sweat and think for a moment that I am going to pass out, which, if I could land on my hand, would be a good explanation for the broken ring. I position myself, hand out, ready, then you turn around and a chill runs through me. I am healed. I stuff the ring in my jeans pocket by my deepest secrets. I barely notice the small circle of green still surrounding my ring finger.

I've discovered I do my best thinking in the aisles of grocery stores two towns over. There's an uncanny quality to them—they're so familiar, but the cereal's in the wrong place. That's what I was after, the wrongness. I had to stop attending the

store two towns to the East when I realized I knew it too well. On my second trip to the store in the West, my head was so shrouded in fog I was sure I left a cloudy wake wherever I walked. I moved on autopilot, wandering through rows and rows of goods I had no use for (and a few that I needed desperately but would not buy) until I found my feet glued to the floor. There, in front of me, were packages of fruit-flavored Chapstick. In my stupor, I opened one, pulled out the strawberry flavor, and coated my lips in it, pressing with so much force that chunks came off the stick and got stuck between my teeth. I woke up. I dropped the Chapstick to the floor and left the store immediately. In the parking lot, I touched my lips, and they felt like yours.

You don't tell me you love me, but you don't have to. You tell me you bleed for me and carve my initials into your forearm. That feels bigger than love, holier somehow. Once, you offer me your blood in a vial and I drink it, and you laugh. "Grape juice." I never understand your games. I draw you a picture of a cat and you put Xs through its eyes with that big black Sharpie you always carry. "I'm sorry." And I don't know what to believe.

I'd decided two years ago that I would move to Chicago, but I got so caught up in figuring out the logistics of moving that I never got around to actually doing it. I packed some things, though. I littered my living room with half-empty boxes.

You tell me I kissed you first, but I don't remember it, so you say the Mountain Dew we were drinking must have been spiked and I know it's a lie, but I laugh anyway because it doesn't really matter, not to me, not when it's you. I wake up one morning and my lips are dry and your lips aren't and your head is on my shoulder. In a world of rampant inadequacy, fulfillment eludes me, yet when I look at you and smell your sticky, too-sweet breath, all my desires, my compounding needs, fade away. I place my hand on your ribs and feel you breathe.

I imagine how your years of smoking will shallow these breaths, but I don't worry for your health. I only pray my hand will stay right where it is over your lungs, measuring their diminishing power over seconds and minutes, hours and years.

I bought a strawberry vape again. I threw it away in the same trashcan as before—the one right in front of the gas station doors. I decided to move to Utah instead of Chicago because nothing's in

Utah, so maybe life there wouldn't have this terrible shrinking effect. Maybe, amidst all the nothingness, I would feel like a *something*. I began packing again and got a paper cut from the cardboard box. I wished I were made of sturdier material.

You wrap your legs around my waist and blow smoke in my face. I cough. "Take a hit." You hold the vape out to me. I kiss you.