

Swss, swss, swss of the ceiling fan up above, idly spinning in the dark of my room just as it had been since I first lay down in bed some fifty minutes ago. Usually it took me about that long to fall asleep, quite a bit less if I could already feel the heavy arms of sleepiness dragging me down, but... tonight there was another thought in the back of my mind, stoically pushing that off and keeping it away from me. It was only still Saturday - or at least, it had been 'til about twenty minutes ago, looking at the bright numbers of my clock sitting atop my nightstand - so getting to sleep a bit later wouldn't be too bad tonight.

Tony had already gone to bed, too. I'd made sure to let him know when I got back home, and then we went on talking for a bit about our hanging out today and working a little bit on the other questions of our astronomy project, and then I guess time just got away from us, and next thing I knew he was telling me that he was getting ready for bed.

*"Nice to actually have a bed now, isn't it?"* I'd said. Hell, that persistent scent of grease from the screws of the frame still lingered in the fur around my fingerpads. *"Is it squeaky or anything? I didn't think it was when we were sitting on it earlier, but you never know..."*

*Oh, no*, he responded after a few minutes. At this point in time I was just starting to shut my computer down for the night. *It is fine. :) Thank you for your help today Matt. And for hanging out. I had fun.*

*"Yeah! I did too."* My thumb hovered over the 'send' button of that one for an inordinate amount of time, with the follow-up *'Let me know whenever you wanna do something like that again'* rolling around in my head. To this my first thought was if that'd be too much... and then my second led me to wonder why I was worried about that in the first place.

And that's kind of what led me to where I currently was, just kind of... lying there, paws folded on my chest, eyes repeatedly following the motion of the fanblades for a few cycles, then losing it, then staring into space for a while, and then starting right back up again until it seemed like the world around me was the thing spinning rather than the fan.

So after a while, I closed my eyes, licked my lips, breathed in, breathed out... but found no respite from the roiling thoughts. It wasn't anything bad or worrying, really. Just things I hadn't really thought about before, or at least not in *this* context, about *this* person. And that was Tony, naturally. Antonio Amador, kind-of quiet cheetah, Mexican by heritage, impossible-to-miss accent over a slowly-growing grip on the English language. In two days I'll have known him for one whole week...

...and already he made me feel... well, I hadn't quite figured that out yet. That's the thing. And that's what made me pause and have to think, even if I had neither the energy nor interest to do so. Hell, last time someone had made me feel like this was... was back when-

All of a sudden my phone, facedown and next to my clock, vibrated quite loudly and startled me out of my thoughts, as well as got my heartbeat pounding under the surprise. For a moment I just let it sit, and then, curiosity bubbling in the middle of my chest, reached over to see who it was. Maybe Tony was having trouble sleeping too, or maybe it was just another goddamn weather app update - I really do need to turn those notifications off - or, maybe I'd gotten an email... or, maybe, it was Lexi asking me if I was still awake.

Part of me wanted to ignore it and continue mulling and wondering; I'd *almost* come to something vaguely reminiscent of a conclusion just earlier. But, hey, maybe she could help me out, assuming I'd have the confidence to bring it up with her. Which, let's face it, was a damn huge assumption.

*"Yeah, what's up? Happened along just at the right time, I was having trouble sleeping, lol."*

This time, I kept my phone close to my chest and pushed beneath the covers a bit, so that hopefully it wouldn't startle me as much next time it vibrated. Empty hope: right after I closed my eyes...

*Hey, same, same. I actually wasn't expecting you to answer! I had this whole thing planned out that I was gonna say to you, but I already went and forgot it. Oops. How was your day?*

I could tell her, I could keep it to myself... *"Can't complain. Got a lot of stuff done, had a good dinner, spent some time slacking off. The usual. I have homework I need to do tomorrow, though. You?"*

*Oh me and Ty just went around today. We were planning to binge some video games, but some things fell through...*

My heart dropped down into my stomach. Oh, yeah. We were supposed to hang out this weekend. And I totally forgot. Just as I was whipping up an *"Holy god I'm so sorry lol, I totally forgot"* message, a second one from her came in and overtook the screen in front of me.

*You were hanging out with Tony today, right?*

I had to pause and think back if I'd ever told her. Tyler might've had something to say about that if I did, though, so... of course my somewhat-nervous self went through a variety of responses before finding a good one to send, which ended up being just a simple, boring *"Yeah."*

Her reply came back within the minute. *Do anything fun?*

Well, I mean... *"Hit the mall for a bit, stopped for gelato on our way out, went back to his place. I helped him get moved in... and that's about it. Not a whole lot. Oh, and we're partners for an astronomy thing, so we started on that too."*

*When's it due?*

Shit. *"Idk, a week or two? We've both been putting it off more than we should, but like... it's such an easy class, you know? Got other things to worry about."*

That wasn't a lie. Lexi seemed to be taking her sweet time to respond to that one, so this time I dropped my phone somewhere near my upper thigh beneath the covers and rolled over onto my other side, keeping myself from looking right into those bright numbers of the clock. I'm actually usually a back-sleeper, but during my time with my now-ex Sasha, I found myself often on my side with a warm paw keeping my arm around her and pretty much forcing me to stay in place, even if I got uncomfortable and needed to wriggle a bit. Since we broke up, I realized I roll around a lot more than I used to. Weird.

*Ah. :) You two are getting along pretty well? I forget, do you have any other classes together?*

*"No, but we do both have eighth period free. Usually we just sit around in the library doing homework or helping each other or w/e."* Before hitting send, I thought about when Dad offered to pick me up early... and I ended up telling him no since I wanted to spend more time with Tony. Honestly, that was a bit unusual too, but I just hadn't been thinking about it then: usually when I get off classes, I just wanna get home as soon as possible... during my little pause right here my phone fell asleep, so I had to tap the power button to bring the screen back up.

Once more Lexi's reply came in two pieces, one a minute after the other: *Aww. :) followed by Does he have a girlfriend? I don't remember him mentioning.*

Just like her to come out with what was exactly on my mind - and with no fear or hesitation about it too. That'd really been the one main thing from tonight that had stuck in my head-

*'So, Matt, do you have a girlfriend?'*

*'Well, I-'*

*'Or...'* Mrs. Amador kind of canted her head, pursed her lips, raised her ears. No judgment or distaste in that voice and look. *'Boyfriend, maybe?'* And that's what made me wonder. So easy, so simple for her to broach the subject, like it was nothing. Then there was Tony's reaction, too, which I'd just barely caught out of the edge of my vision, and honestly wasn't completely sure about it. That little tensing-up, how his ears and whiskers perked, how he gripped his fork a bit

tighter. Maybe he was just as surprised as me that his mom had gone there, though; within the second, it had disappeared.

Still, though. I couldn't help but think about it, and the longer I spent on it...

You ever say something, and then don't really realize what you just said until after you've already done it? *"I actually asked his mom! She said he's not in a relationship, but he does like someone. Wouldn't say who."*

Before I could even put my phone back down next to me:

*I think I have an idea. ;) hey, I gotta head to bed, I have a thing with one of my clubs tomorrow. Sleep well, ok?*

So that kept me up for a while longer. Dunno how I hadn't seen it before, or how I hadn't thought of it, but - I *guess* that made sense. It was just... weird to think about, you know? Not something that had ever really crossed my mind before. *Oh, hey, here's a guy, and he might - might... like me...* how was I supposed to feel about that? I knew other kids at school who'd just as soon punch a guy's lights out for having a crush on them, and then some who would approach it kind of awkwardly and try to keep things quiet, and those who would be ecstatic about it... so where along the scale would I fall?

Can't rule out that I might be just plain wrong, though. Can never rule that out. I've never been good with this kind of thing - Sasha was the one who'd asked *me* out, after apparently a month and a half of flirting that I never once picked up on. And once we *did* start, we kind of wasted no time in getting right down to business, if you know what I mean. I was younger then; I didn't mind. That just changed a bit once I started to *actually* grow up, and realized - oh, hey, maybe this relationship isn't that healthy. Maybe it's not what I need right now.

Every now and then when we were together, she'd do something that would give me that little warmth in my chest, that kind of bright, hot spark that you really wanted to grab tight and hold on to. With Sasha it was a fleeting thing, and something that I often had to force myself and really, really try to feel, especially as time went on... until it got to the point where it didn't really bother me that she didn't make me feel like that anymore.

Do you know how that feels? When something you were so naively sure about at its start just kind of trickles away into nothing? The thing is, it's not even a sad feeling. It's just kind of annoying because then you have to deal with figuring out how to get out of it, and more often than that, the other person doesn't feel quite as disconnected as you do.

Finally figuring that I'd be getting no more messages tonight, I reached over, set my phone face-down on my nightstand again, and rolled over, making sure to pull the blankets right up

beneath my chin again... but now I had something *e/se* working me up, something other than the smooth-voiced cheetah who'd occupied my thoughts since I got home tonight.

The whole getting-out-of-it thing? Struggled with that for a whole semester. I tried to break it off once, Sasha was upset of course but then stopped talking to me, and from there I thought it was done... until she turned up at my house, unannounced, and pushed her way in past me. I'd told Tyler about the breakup, but not about that surprise visit or what followed, because within about fifteen minutes, I was - on my back on the bed, pants tugged halfway down my thighs and my ex-girlfriend-or-maybe-not-really bouncing in my lap with her mouth hanging open and tail lashing and breath coming and going just like I'd gotten so used to hearing from her...

So. Uh. Yeah. That was complicated, and we ended up sticking together for another month until I finally got tired of it again, of putting way more effort into the relationship to try to get it to work and still not getting anything in return. She tried that same tactic again the second time, but I just - after all of that, you just kind of lose patience. Thankfully, I haven't heard from her since, though every now and then I do catch sight of her in the halls at school.

The important part of all of this, though, the original little tidbit that got my mind running down this path... as I've said before, it's weird to think about, but that characteristic little pulsing warmth in my chest, that irresistible want or urge to smile and laugh and wag my tail...

...well, I get a little bit of that from Tony. Not that *he* likes *me*. That I... well, that I think I might, or I guess I should say-

Not quite sure how to approach any of this, I swallowed, and balled up the edge of the blanket in my paw for something to squeeze. That would be something to ask him about.

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Funny enough, even after I'd gone through the struggle of falling asleep (which ended up taking another hour and a half or so) and then woke up and got right to my homework for Monday tomorrow, that was one thing that stuck around in the back of my head the loudest. *That's something to ask him about. That's something to ask him about*, over and over. Making sure I had everything in line for creative writing, double-checking to see that there wasn't any extra reading for astronomy... and instead I found myself thinking, over and over, about different ways to phrase the question, or I guess the *inquiry*. Didn't want to be too obvious about it, of course.

Seemed like every five or six minutes I was hit with this urge to reach over and turn my phone screen on, to see if I had any new notifications or messages. I got one from Tyler around noon, which was probably his equivalent of a 'good morning' message, but honestly couldn't really be bothered to check it right now with all these other things on my mind. While checking that, my eyes fell upon Lexi's little contact thing in my messages, and our conversation last night came rushing back. She'd kind of put the whole thing into my head...

...but it wouldn't be right to give her *all* the credit. I mean, I've been aware of that little feeling for a while, maybe since the first time I saw him walking through the halls last Monday when he looked like a lost kitten trying to find where to go (*pequeño gatito*, his mother's voice echoed in my head). It was definitely there back then, and I was kind of vaguely conscious of its presence, but I didn't know what to call it and figured it was just the feeling you get when you make a new friend. I mean, that's true in itself, but... turned out to be more than that.

*Maybe.* At this point, that was all still a rather big maybe. Especially up to the point where I found myself with my phone resting in my two paws, that message typed out and ready to send to Tony right after he'd sent me a *Hi! c: how are you doing today, Matt?* text. I'd hoped that my following response was nice and pleasant, but that it still got across what I wanted to know; after all, I *had* been thinking about it pretty much since I woke up this morning.

*"I'm ok I think! Tired, had trouble getting to sleep last night. Had a lot on my mind. How about you?"*

Okay, maybe it *wasn't* as good as I'd thought. I'll get there, though. It's not something you can just open a conversation with. Even with that, though, the thought of bringing it up with him made my heart pound in my chest, to the point where I couldn't really focus on my homework in front of me.

By the time his next message came in, I'd drawn a perfect little flower around one of the holes along the side of my paper. Hearing my phone vibrate just kicked my heart rate back up again: *I kind of had trouble too actually. I think it was because my mother gave me a bowl of ice cream before bed... What was bothering you?*

Reading that and then thinking about what I'd say to him afterwards gave me this odd kind of feeling I'd never really felt before. A sort of surreal 'am I really doing this?' kind of thing, making me have to pause and think back over everything that had crossed my mind between now and when I'd gotten home last night. Or, hell, maybe even before that when we were still hanging out together. Part of me wondered if I was overreacting; part of me wondered if I should be a little more freaked out about it. Maybe I'd bring it up with Tyler next time I see him; I know I can trust him.

And, then, talk about challenging. I thought it was tough to figure out how to start an essay for school. *"You know that feeling when-"; "Hey, so, what am I supposed to do if I-"; "There's something that's been on my mind for a while-"*... eventually, I just settled on the first idea that had come to my head, the one that I'd shrugged off since I was worried it might hit him the wrong way.

*"Your mom said you like someone, right?"*

Then, instead of sitting around and waiting for his reply to come in - since, let's face it, doing that would make it take a lot longer - I left my phone on my desk and wandered around, peering into the hall closet, slipping into the bathroom to try to take a piss that I didn't need to, then making my way downstairs to see if we still had soda, forgetting what was in the fridge right after I closed the door and thus had to check again. All of that felt like it'd taken more than enough time, so I made my way back upstairs, squeezed past my dad in the hallway ("mornin'; how's running by the grocery store later sound?", "yeah, sure, Dad, lemme finish some more of my homework first though"), plopped back down in my chair, hit the power button on my phone...

...to no new messages. At least, not until I slumped back and closed my eyes, for the sound of vibration to startle me yet again.

Yes. *Why?*

So there were two things keeping me nervous like this: whether *he* likes me, and then whether... well, you know.

*"Cause I think I do, too."* Pause. *"What are you doing about it?"* Pause again. Maybe that was good enough to send. So I did.

And then I waited, trying once more to finish up my homework while my mind remained buzzing with so many different things.