

## 7 Eleven Wine in a Hiroshima Studio Apartment

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I'm told that love is big unconditional romantic gestures; it's holding a stereo blasting "your" song outside your bedroom window. It's flash mobs in grand central station. It's getting off a flight to Paris just before take-off. It's going down with the Titanic and then giving up the door. It's singing "I can't take my eyes off of you" in the bleaches in front of the whole school. It's a suicide pact in the demise of families but in the name of passion.

Love is big, love is loud, love is crazy, stupid, irrational, public, all-consuming and sacrificial. Most importantly it's validating; everyone knows you are the chosen one. Numero uno. Eyes only for you. Do anything for you. And I don't care who knows.

But in truth love is quiet. It's subtle. it's softly spoken. It's unspoken.

Little me got fed these falsities, these Hollywood, Disney, soap opera, Shakespearean exaggerations of love and I have spent a long time being confused why everyone doesn't want to shout from the table tops just how much I mean to them. If they don't declare it, stamp it on their forehead, pinkie promise, swear-to-die; is it real?

I am neither old nor wise but the little perspective I have started to appreciate and respect - imperfectly so - is reinforcing that this type of love is nothing more than a story. An unattainable story based around unrealistic validation and movie sales. It's not all bad, nor all false but it's not where my true experiences of love lie. Let me tell you some stories, some beautifully imperfect, quiet love stories.

I'm shown that love is an empty road, a full moon and a story of tragedy. It isn't my tragedy, it's yours. You lived and breathed it. It still scares you. But walking down this road you feel safe to whisper this story to me, to share a fraction of the pain, the burden you still carry in your chest. You tell me the hardest day of your life, the heaviest thing you've borne. It's quiet. The town is sleeping. It is the junction between spring and summer, not quite tourist season, the weather still isn't nice enough to draw the crowds. So it is quiet, peaceful, ours. You tell me softly, you don't cry. I squeeze your hand. The only message that needs to be sent from my body to yours. It doesn't pass through my lips; a subtle current of electricity from my palm to yours. Whispering that you can trust me, I don't think less of you. It's quiet.

I'm shown that love is a fluorescently lit hotel room in a faraway country. I cry, I am defeated, shattered and far from home. I thought I could out run my head, my heartache. Replace my lost soul with lost feet but I can't. I am tired and I need to go home. You call the airline, you use a stern voice. It's not a loud, yelly, annoyed voice but it's quiet and stern. Affirmative and passionate. You are the logic and reason to my chaos and ignorance in this moment. Some days we switch but not today. You organise our flights home and you reassure me we're making the right choice. You take me downstairs for dinner and a drink. We don't talk about my heavy heart. You knew this from the silence, I'm not ready. You asked me would you rather questions and we play cards. The truth I know without you saying; you love me, I love you and you will do this for me without expecting the grandeur of thank you flowers or online public declarations of best friendship. You won't speak of this to those who don't need to know and for that I feel calm. Our vow of silence is loving, secure and raw. Later you turn out the fluorescent lights, tell me you love me and sleep quietly next to me. It's quiet, it's reassuring like the first breath out of the cold water I thought I'd drown in.

I'm shown that love is groceries in a tiny kitchen, cheap champagne in wine glasses we don't have. You smile, cook and tell me about your day. I know you see me, hear the sadness in my eyes, the hurt in my stomach. We will talk later but for now the sweet smell of garlic, chilli and beef are the distraction I've craved. We speak loudly of 90s TV shows, their faults, flaws and failings but we love them anyway. They give us quiet comfort, escapism and

laughter. I feel much the same about you right now. The warmth of food, cheap wine and friends slips from my cup, down my throat and warms my stomach. It fills my body. A flame relit, a light at the end of a tunnel. You never said I love you but your throw together meal and laughter screams it, gives me hope. We sit in bed and chat, not about love, about nothing. Nothing at all. I feel warm.

I'm shown that love is a basement in a home that isn't mine, on the other side of the world. I have siblings and a mother that aren't mine but show me kindness and care in spite of this. The older, second, less flashy TV plays *Stranger Things*. Besides the witty dialogue the room is still, quiet. The kind of quiet you only get in summer, when everyone is just a little bit more relaxed, less bothered and the air is still and thick, warm and heavy like a comforting blanket in the dark. I haven't seen you in 12 months but we share a blanket - and a home - like we are family who have grown together. No one asked you, it is silent and unspoken but it stretches oceans and time zones. I can feel the silent comfort of a good show in the company of kind people envelope me, quietly and softly.

I'm shown that love is cheap 7 Eleven wine in an Hiroshima studio apartment. I sit across from you, the only other person in the room. The only other person in this country I know and so far in this life. We play cards and talk of silliness, topping up each other's wine, getting tipsy, warm and woolly. The world is quiet here in this studio apartment. Our world feels shrunken to this interaction, this moment. I forget my frustrations with who you are becoming, who we are becoming. Apart, different and strange. But tonight in the quiet your love feels familiar, safe and all consuming. The quiet before the storm; how very beautiful. You quietly pour me more wine, deal me another hand of cards and look at me. You smile softly. You don't have to say them, they're there, the words, you've said them before, you've said them for five years. Soon they'll fade but for now, for tonight they're there, hanging in the air, dripping from your smile. I can taste them in this cheap 7 Eleven wine. Later we make love, in the quiet, in the dark and still comfort of our borrowed Hiroshima studio apartment.

What I'm told and shown are opposite, I've been conditioned to crave the vehement, show-offy kind. When I get that I will be whole me thinks. All I need is the gentle, unassuming, kindness of quiet. Love is quiet.